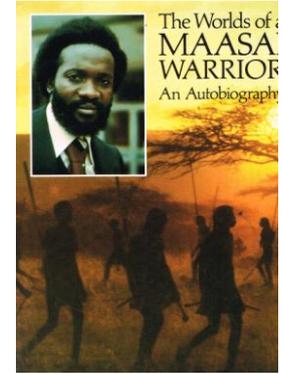


Tepilit ole Saitoti – The Worlds of a Maasai Warrior: An Autobiography

Andre Deutsch 1986

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MY CIRCUMCISION

"TEPILIT, circumcision means a sharp knife cutting into the skin of the most sensitive part of your body. You must not budge; don't move a muscle or even blink. You can face only one direction until the operation is completed. The slightest movement on your part will mean you are a coward, incompetent and unworthy to be a Maasai man. Ours has always been a proud family, and we would like to keep it that way. We will not tolerate unnecessary embarrassment, so you had better be ready. If you are not, tell us now so that we will not proceed. Imagine yourself alone remaining uncircumcised like the water youth [white people]. I hear they are not circumcised. Such a thing is not known in Maasailand; therefore, circumcision will have to take place even if it means holding you down until it is completed."

My father continued to speak and every one of us kept quiet. "The pain you will feel is symbolic. There is a deeper meaning in all this. Circumcision means a break between childhood and adulthood. For the first time in your life, you are regarded as a grownup, a complete man or woman. You will be expected to give and not just to receive. To protect the family always, not just to be protected yourself. And your wise judgment will for the first time be taken into consideration. No family affairs will be discussed without your being consulted. If you are ready for all these responsibilities, tell us now. Coming into manhood is not simply a matter of growth and maturity. It is a heavy load on your shoulders and especially a burden on the mind. Too much of this—I am done. I have said all I wanted to say. Fellows, if you have anything to add, go ahead and tell your brother, because I am through. I have spoken."

After a prolonged silence, one of my half-brothers said awkwardly, "Face it, man . . . it's painful. I won't lie about it, but it is not the end. We all went through it, after all. Only blood will flow, not milk." There was laughter and my father left.

My brother Lellia said, "Men, there are many things we must acquire and preparations we must make before the ceremony, and we will need the Cooperation and help of all of you. Ostrich feathers for the crown and wax for the arrows must be collected."

"Are you *orkirekenyi*?" one of my brothers asked. I quickly replied no, and there was laughter. *Orkirekenyi* is a person who has transgressed sexually. For you must not have sexual intercourse with any circumcised woman before you yourself are circumcised. You must wait until you are circumcised. If you have not waited, you will be fined. Your father, mother, and the circumciser will take a cow from you as punishment.

Just before we departed, one of my closest friends said, "If you kick the knife, you will be in trouble." There was laughter. "By the way, if you have decided to kick the circumciser, do it well. Silence him once and for all." "Do it the way you kick a football in school." "That will fix him," another added, and we all laughed our heads off again as we departed.

The following month was a month of preparation. I and others collected wax, ostrich feathers, honey to be made into honey beer for the elders to drink on the day of circumcision, and all the other required articles.

Three days before the ceremony my head was shaved and I discarded all my belongings, such as my necklaces, garments, spear, and sword. I even had to shave my pubic hair. Circumcision in many ways is similar to Christian baptism. You must put all the sins you have committed during childhood behind and embark as a new person with a different outlook on a new life. 66-67

In two weeks I was able to walk and was taken to join other newly circumcised boys far away from our settlement. By tradition Maasai initiates are required to decorate their headdresses with all kinds of colorful birds they have killed. On our way to the settlement, we hunted birds and teased girls by shooting them with ntr wax blunt arrows. We danced and ate and were well treated wherever we went. We were protected from the cold and rain durilig the healing period. We were not allowed to touch food, as we were regarded as unclean, so whenever we ate meat we had to use specially prepared sticks instead. We remained in this pampered state until our wounds healed and our headdresses were removed. Our heads were shaved, we discarded our black cloaks and bird hcaddresses and embarked as newly shaven warriors, Irkeleani.

As long as I live I will never forget the day my head was shaved and I emerged a man, a Maasai warrior. I felt a sense of control over my destiny so great that no words can accurately describe it. I now stood with confidence, pride, and happiness of being, for all around me I was desired and loved by beautiful, sensuous Maasai iiiaidens. I could now interact with women and even have sex with hem, which I not been allowed before. I was now regarded as a responsible person.

In the old days, warriors were like gods, and women and men wanted only to be the parent of a warrior. Everything else would he taken care of as a result. When a poor family had a warrior, t hey ceased to be poor. The warrior would go on

raids and bring cattle back. The warrior would defend the family against all odds. When a society respects the individual and displays confidence in his way, the way the Maasai do their warriors, the individual can grow in his fullest potential. Whenever there was a task requiring physical strength or bravery, the Maasai would call upon their warriors. They hardly ever fall short of what is demanded of them and so are characterized by pride, confidence, and an extreme sense of freedom. But there is an old saying in Maasai: "You are never a free man until your father dies." In other words, your father is paramount while he is alive and you are obligated to respect him. My father took advantage of this principle and held a tight grip on all his warriors, including myself. He always wanted to know where we all were at any given time. We fought against his restrictions, but without success. I, being the youngest of my father's five warriors, tried even harder to get loose repeatedly, but each time I was punished severely.

p71

New Yorkers seldom talk to one another. They seem scared of one another. New Yorkers have everything, so nothing fascinates them. p 117

BOSTON

I had always been a responsible and keen herder when I was growing up. The same discipline went into my schoolwork now. Reading became my obsession, a pleasure, and a revelation. I did most of my homework while at work, and found time for extra reading. I think I learned more from my independent reading than from the books that were required for my courses. I delved especially into black writers. Their analogies were relevant to my own experiences, and I understood them better for that. I had what I regarded as my prayer books next to my bed. I would start my day by reading a poem or two from them before I had tea. I read Claude McKay, Chinua Achebe, the famous Martinique writer Aime Cesaire, and Frantz Fanon, among others.

I bought and read any book I came across about Africa. Through reading, I rediscovered Africa. The British curriculum had taught us more about the Europeans than about ourselves. Who could have imagined that I would learn more about Africa and the Africans in America than I did in Africa? In addition to my regular studies, I audited any courses about Africa offered. I followed African current affairs as best I could by reading periodicals bought in Harvard Square and listening to whatever news was reported by the American media. I soon learned how to read between the lines of articles in American newspapers about developments they were not in favor of or others they wished to sensationalize.

The former Portuguese colonies were then fighting for national independence and in fact were winning. American propaganda against the MPLA had reached its peak. To correct lies that had been printed about the struggle for independence in Angola, I helped start a democratic student body of Africans at Harvard with a Ph.D. student from Kenya named Ahmed Issa. We worked closely with a Zairean professor, a former minister in the first government of Patrice Lumumba. After coming in contact with a seasoned African politician, I became a nationalist.

I attended Harvard University summer school, maintaining a B average. By then I had come face to face with the painful realities of knowledge. One who understands is freer in the head but sadder in the heart. It is sad to know that there is so much wrong in our world, and for the most part we are helpless to do anything about it.

In my junior year at college, I wondered where I was headed and why. Freshman year I had had to prove to John Blackwell and myself that I would do what I had set out to do. Sophomore year I maintained the required grades. The first two years in an American college are fairly easy. The junior and senior years are more demanding.

In a way I was repeating the night of initiation I had gone through. College was similar to treading the rigorous path of achieving manhood in Maasailand. I compared where I was to where I had come from. I had underestimated the loneliness of one who leaves behind his home, people, and culture. I had left home many times before, but never for such a long time, and never to go so far away. Would my prolonged stay in America influence me to such a degree that I would not be able to fit in at home when I returned? If I could master Western ways, would that make me forget Maasailand? Would I want to? I was becoming a cultural half-breed, knowledgeable in both cultures but living between them. So many questions flooded my mind. Was what I was getting worth what I was forgetting? Was it worthwhile to have betrayed my father in the airport in Nairobi by leaving without his permission? How did I feel about straddling two cultures? Like it or not, the two worlds belong to me and I to them. But could I make the best of both? I wondered: who is luckier—my brothers, who had never gone to school, or me?

Western education had opened up so many vistas for me, and made me aware of so many complications. It confronted me with the broader spectrum of things within which I now live. My brothers live according to seasons and accept death and rebirth as normal. They are spared the anguish and the failures I sometimes experience.

Are my brothers ready to face the technological future advancing toward them, like it or not? No, for that they are not prepared. pp128-29