

# MAASAI ODYSSEY

BY VLADIA BAJEROVSKA  
PHOTOGRAPHER AND NARRATOR

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RedTribe



*"The warriors,  
the aristocrats, the lion  
killers, the herdsman,  
the drinkers of blood  
and milk, and the  
carriers of tall spears."*

JOSEPH THOMSON  
1858 - 1895





*Contrary to expectations, the people  
of the Maasai endure...*

I first met members of the Red Tribe in 2013. I remember that encounter well: regal bodies, easy smiles, intricate bead work and the cattle. I heard the story of Loita Hill – the spiritual place where the Maasai laibon, or shaman, presides.

Although Maasai culture might not be as secure as in the past, when they owned the land all the way from northern Kenya down to central Tanzania, when they were the strongest and most feared tribe in the all of East Africa, their pride is still apparent, despite what they've lost.

My reason for coming wasn't for the ceremonies - they have been well documented in the past - or for curiosity about the laibon, or the land issues. What brought me, a photographer, to southern Kenya were the women working for the Red Tribe Project, and the children in the Maasai Academy.

But what I wasn't prepared for was the impact they would have on me, or the unspoken stories I would see.



## *The unspoken stories...*

Both men and women love to adorn themselves with beaded jewellery. Besides beautifying themselves with it, it also plays a very important part in their society.

Certain bead work patterns tell that a husband has passed away, or a child has been born or circumcised. Designs based on geographic location serve as passports within Maasai territory. The various tribes within Maasailand use their own colours and designs to differentiate themselves – it forms part of their tribal identity.

Over the years I've been given beaded necklaces and bracelets by the Maasai women. This collection now tells a story of my personal journey with these exceptionally beautiful people.

## *Inner beauty ...*

I haven't met one man or woman who thinks they have been unfortunately blessed with their looks. No matter how they appear: squint eyes, skew teeth, bad skin they perceive themselves as beautiful.

As old Koko said: "This is the way God created me and I'm perfect in the Creation. I can't go and change that! I accept it."

And that is their way.

It is with this pride and belief in who they are that the women of the Red Tribe have stepped up to provide a bridge between the traditional and the modern. Keeping traditions alive while at the same time educating their youngsters to take their place in the modern world.



# CATTLE

*“One day Enkai (God) called upon Masinta and said to him....”*

For the Maasai cattle hold a place in society comparable to that of gold in the West. An individual's herd carries enormous energy and importance in the minds of people, so much so that many myths and legends include cattle. For example:

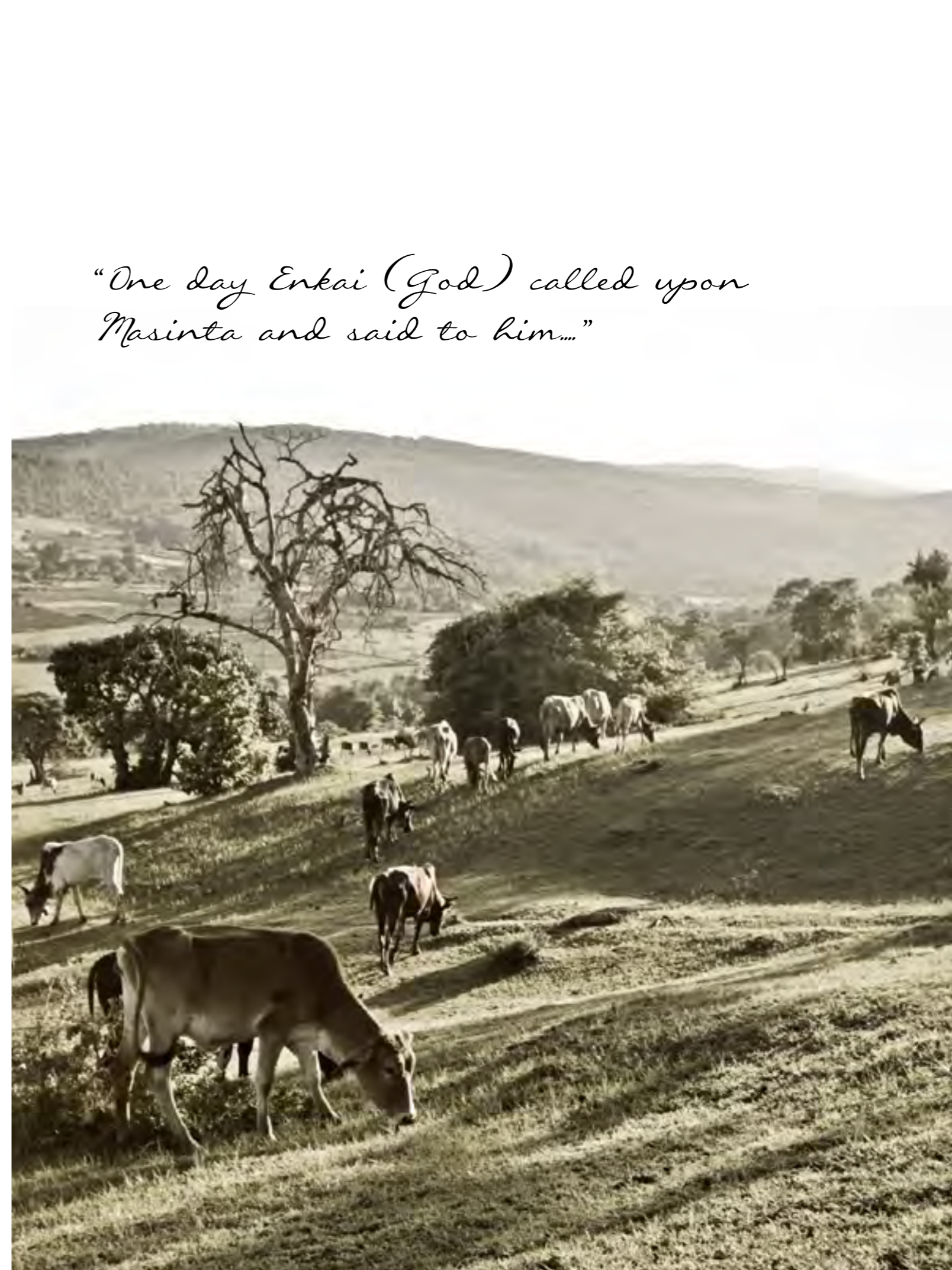
“One day Enkai (God) called upon Masinta and said to him: “I want you to build a large enclosure, and when you have done so, come back and inform me.” Masinta, who was the first of the Maasai, went and did as he was instructed and then returning to Enkai, told him what he had done. Pleased, Enkai said to him: “Tomorrow, very early in the morning, I want you to go and stand against the outside wall of your house for I will give you something called cattle. But when you see or hear anything, do not be alarmed. Keep silent.”

Very early the next morning Masinta awoke and did as Enkai had instructed. He went to the outside wall of his house and waited for what was to be given to him by Enkai. Soon Masinta heard the approaching sound of rolling thunder as

Enkai released a long leather thong from the heavens upon the earth and cattle descended down the thong into the enclosure. Violently the earth shook to the point that Maasinta's house nearly fell down. Masinta was gripped with fear but did not make any sound nor did he make any movement.

While cattle descended from the heavens Dorobo, a house-mate of Maasinta, was suddenly awoken from his sleep. In a state of confusion and panic he ran outside and upon seeing the countless cattle coming down the leather thong, he shouted “Ayeyieyie!”, for Dorobo was in a state of utter shock! Upon hearing this, Enkai quickly pulled back the thong. No more cattle descended from above and once again the earth fell silent. Thinking it was Maasinta who had cried out, Enkai said to him: “Is it that these cattle are enough for you? So be it, for I shall never again do this for you, and therefore you had better love these cattle in the same way as I love you.” It is for this reason that the Maasai love their cattle so dearly and believe that all cattle are theirs.

ADAPTATION BASED ON THE WRITINGS OF NAOMI KIPURY



# MAASAI LEGEND

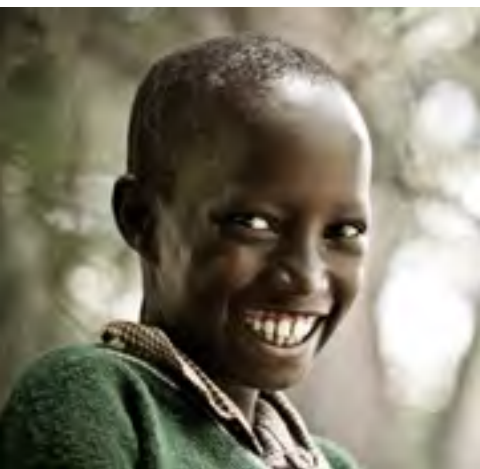
## BIRTH OF THE TRIBES

*...and Enkai gave to his first child the gift of an arrow and said "go out and be a hunter."  
and to his second, the gift of a hoe and said  
"go out and dig the land and grow crops."  
While to his third child, Engai gave the gift of the  
stick and said "go out and herd cattle..."*

- ADAPTATION BASED ON THE WRITINGS OF NAOMI KIPURY



# THE MAASAI ACADEMY



Established in 2008 with the desire to see their children educated, Florence Simpano, Philip Keiwa, and Amos Nayla began the Maasai Academy to educate the under-privileged children of Olorte, a cluster of villages in southern Kenya.

Classes were first held at the local Catholic Church and in one year attendance grew from three to twenty. Presently the school has 120 children. The vision is to grow to eight grades (180 children) to complete the primary education. Most children rely on external sponsorship as the running cost per child is about US\$17 per month. The Academy also provides food. For many children this is their only balanced meal a day.

The long-term goal is to provide vocational training for the older children. Presently there is no funding for secondary education.

However, having built both a kitchen and a nursery school, the next objective for the Academy is to build and stock a library.

In order to help educate future generations of Maasai ten percent from the sale of all photographs, including a gift pack of postcards which is available on [www.vladia.org](http://www.vladia.org), will be donated to the Maasai Academy.



## THE ANSWER IS EDUCATION

Every year children of both sexes die in botched circumcision rites. In a world with the advanced medical technologies that we have this shouldn't happen at all.

Through the Maasai Academy girls develop a sense of their self-worth which reduces a societal belief ingrained from birth that they are inferior to men. In turn the boys at the Academy are exposed to girls who are their equals. It is our hope that through this process Maasai girls will grow up confident in their worth, without fear of having their bodies, livelihood and value harmed by these rituals and that, over time, they will have the full support of the boys of their generation and those who will come after.

Another issue is feminine sanitary care. Many hours of schooling and work are lost during menstrual cycles as they do not have access to feminine hygiene products. The design and manufacturing of reusable and washable sanitary pads for girls is in process.

# COMMUNITY

Maasai women have an innate power. Spending time with them not only have I learned about their culture, but also about our own western society, and myself. It has been a journey of self-discovery on many levels. The major misconception one can have when judging rural people in Africa is that we think that we know better than them, that we are coming to save them, and teach them how to live their lives.

What most of us forget is that lifestyles and priorities differ tremendously. I have had many opportunities to support different projects while travelling in Africa but there are only a few that I'll support – those that show respect for the dreams and diversity of the people they serve with transparency around funding. The Red Tribe project struck me, not because they are a famous Maasai tribe, but because of the ethos. All the projects are run through community initiative and the local Maasai themselves. Nothing is imposed on them. The Red Tribe project always asks the Maasai: what do they need? In my opinion this is crucial to the success and sustainability of any project in Africa or anywhere else in the world.

## *Energy exchange...*

From my own experience, not just from the perspective of taking photographs of these beautiful people, but actually being there and sitting with them, sharing stories and life experiences, I realise that we have so much to learn from one another despite our cultures being so vastly different. We all have our joys and laughs. We all have our fears and tears. We all have our struggles. At the core though we are the same women facing the same fundamental issues that we have for millennia.

What I am offering here is a snapshot of my experience with real people in Africa and their hopes that their children will be able to balance the influence of the West with their heritage.

My hope is that we can continue to respect one another and to exchange the wisdom and energy of both worlds for the good of all.





## VLADIA BAJEROVSKA

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Originally from Slovakia, Vladia travelled in Europe and the Far East before settling in South Africa. She is an award winning photographer with recognition from: Judge's Favourite in the International Travel Photographer 2005. In 2006 she was placed in the top three of the Commonwealth Photographic Award in UK and in 2007 was one of the selected finalists in the Photographer of the Year (UK) Travel Portfolio Section.

"The work being done at the Maasai Academy holds a special place in my heart. Education is an integral part of sustainability and the importance of these efforts cannot be overstated. Many of the people I met during my time with the Maasai were through parties involved with the Maasai Academy. Without their help my task would have been far more challenging and the results less worthwhile. As a token of my appreciation and in support of the work they are doing at the Academy, 10% from the sale of these photographs will be donated to the Maasai Academy to continue empowering the next generation with the necessary skills to survive in an ever changing world."



*"The destiny of a once powerful and yet ever proud nation bears its full weight on the shoulders of the next generation"*



**CREDITS**

PHOTOGRAPHY

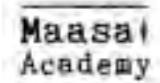
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MAASAI ACADEMY

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