



***“Why do you think there is only one God?”: A study of traditional Maasai believers and Christian Maasai living near Tarangire National Park***

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*One can find both Christian Maasai and traditional Maasai believers living in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park. Most community members agree that Christianity has been on the rise in this area since sometime in the late 1900's. The goal of this paper is to study the impact of this trend on community members through critical analysis of excerpts taken from interviews and focus groups. In total, I collected data from 15 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with a sample of convenience. I found several factors that affect community members' decision to convert to Christianity, including gender and health, fortunetellers and laibons, and famine and disaster. Many community members, both Christian and traditional Maasai, do not believe Christianity has created a conflict in the area. Some informants even believe that there is only one god that both religions worship; therefore, they only see a difference in perspective between religions. However, other community members do perceive a conflict in the community, describing friction between Christian Maasai and traditional Maasai believers. Several Maasai Christians explained that they are able to maintain both Maasai and Christian identities.*

My fellow students and I sat around the campfire in a small Maasai village about an hour away from Arusha. Students and village members of various ages sat together, exchanging questions about one another's culture. With the help of two translators, we asked village members questions about the Maasai age set system, the meaning behind the clothes that they wear, and the purpose behind slaughtering animals. In many of their answers, they stressed the importance to their society of keeping cattle, saying that God had given them cattle to survive.

One student asked a question that seemed to provide a window into Maasai identity. “What would you do if a member of your tribe de-

cided to abandon the Maasai tradition of keeping cattle and went to the city?” The answer was definite. If a member of their village abandoned the traditional way of life, village members would discuss the issue amongst themselves. Then, they would most likely send someone to the city to find him and bring him back to their village.

Prior to beginning my project, my only experience with Maasai culture took place in Engikaret, a rural village about an hour from one of Tanzania’s major cities Arusha. There, I was told that abandoning Maasai tradition was out of the question with regards to cattle. This experience largely shaped my concept of Maasai ideology. The Engikaret community members’ belief that it was the traditional Maasai god who gave them cattle led me to believe that a community member who believed in any god other than the traditional Maasai god would not be considered “Maasai.” However, after conducting only a few initial interviews in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park, hours away from this rural village, I was forced to reexamine my concept of Maasai identity.

I initially planned to interview community members living near Tarangire National Park about traditional Maasai burial rituals. However, I soon realized that most of my participants were actually Christians who follow the Christian burial tradition. Many of my informants described what they knew to be the traditional Maasai style of burial but they also explained that they do not actually follow this tradition. I wondered why the conversion of a Maasai village member to Christianity would not create conflict in the community surrounding Tarangire National Park, since it seemed so important to the inhabitants of Engikaret that members of their community maintain Maasai traditions.

The keeping of cattle and consumption of their milk and blood is central to Maasai identity (Galaty 1979: 807). According to Galaty, “For Maasai, the notion of ‘Maasai’ is a preeminently natural category since it represents an aspect of reality as concrete as geographical features, as biologically distinct as cattle, and as unique in practice as species of wild animals” (1982: 3). Traditionally, Maasai depend on cattle for survival, which are thought to have derived from the divine. “In Maasai thought, the three primordial substances are water, stone (or earth), and fire” (Galaty 1979: 807). Cattle are believed to be a product of water and grass, as it is from these elements that cattle receive their nourishment (Galaty 1979: 807).

In Engikaret, cattle are closely tied with the divine. However, this is not necessarily the case in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park, as the community is composed of both traditional Maasai believers and Christians. Christianity does not possess the strong tie to cattle that is embedded in the traditional Maasai religion. In both Engikaret and the community surrounding Tarangire National Park, cattle are central to subsistence. In Engikaret, village members explained that they rely heavily on the milk and blood of cattle as a

food source. Similarly, many traditional Maasai believers and Christians living in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park said that they either keep cattle or are espoused to someone who keeps cattle.

According to Peter Rigby, the missionization of East African pastoralists has largely been regarded as a failure (Rigby 1981: 99). Most people have attributed this failure to “a generalized pastoral resistance to change, or to some inherent conservatism in pastoral societies” (Rigby 1981: 99). In the past, the Maasai were generally quite friendly towards missionaries; yet, they rejected their ideologies (Rigby 1981: 107). Rigby believes that it was impossible for pastoralists to accept the ideology of Christian missionaries, because missionaries simultaneously imposed Western culture (Rigby 1981: 99). He writes:

“Since the missionaries had already demonstrated their willingness, even eagerness, to act as the harbingers of land alienation, commoditization, and labor exploitation, all antithetical to both pastoralist praxis and discourse, and leading inevitably to their destruction, the only answer was to break off discourse with the missionaries. For the pastoralists this was historically possible, first, because they had already been relegated to the economic margins of the colonial political economy, but more important, because the unity of ideological and economic practice characteristic of their social formation perhaps encouraged an awareness deeper than that attained by their agricultural neighbors” (Rigby 1981: 125).

Rigby believes that, had the missionaries not imposed nineteenth-century European culture on African peoples, Christianity may have been more successful (Rigby 1981: 125).

In *Christianity and Colonialism in South Africa*, Jean and John Comaroff describe the failure of missionization of the Tshidi people of South Africa (Comaroff 1985). Similar to the Maasai, the Tshidi live in a cattle-based society (Comaroff 1985: 11). “Men represented themselves and communal values through the pliable medium of cattle, which served as both a currency and an icon of politico-economic relations” (Comaroff 1985: 11). Missionaries entered this world, imposing Western ideals (Comaroff 1985: 12-13). They denounced African traditions, such as polygamy, traditional African styles of dress, and traditional African homes, imposing Western equivalents (Comaroff 1985: 13-15). Additionally, missionaries promoted agriculture and the use of the plow (Comaroff 1985: 13). The plow required the use of animals, and since “females were precluded from handling cattle, the prime repository of male value, men assumed direct control over plow cultivation” (Comaroff 1985: 13). This put women in a place of inferiority, as they no longer had influence over the disposal of crops, and instead were given the “devalued tasks of tending and reaping” (Comaroff 1985: 13).

In *The Church of Women*, Dorothy Hodgson provides a detailed ac-

count of the effects missionization has had on the gender relations of the Maasai (Hodgson 2005). She points out that, despite the attempts of missionaries, men resisted conversion. Whereas, women had to actively seek Christianity. “Maasai women were restricted from attending school, tolerated but not encouraged to attend homestead instruction and services, and dissuaded from holding formal leadership positions in church” (Hodgson 2005: 1). To the dismay of missionaries, women accepted Christianity, while men rejected it. Hodgson “credits Catholicism’s appeal for Maasai women not to the missionary strategy of inculturation but to the implicit inculturation carried out by Maasai believers” (Kollman 2010: 122). She argues that Christianity gives Maasai women power. Hodgson explains that missionary interventions have “expanded the spiritual dimension of female roles in Maasailand,” by providing them a “platform from which to launch their critiques of men” (Hodgson 2005: 256).

Jon Kirby, a missionary in Ghana, has conducted research about the general effects of Christianity on African peoples (Kirby 1994). In the earliest phases of missionary work in Africa, Kirby argues that missionaries did not see the value in African culture, condemning any customs that deviated from Western culture (Kirby 1994: 59). Settlers did not try to learn native languages or adapt to native cultures (Kirby 1994: 59). “On the whole, missionaries knew very little of the culture, traditional values, and religious beliefs of the people” (Kirby 1994: 59). It was not until the pre-Independence, pre-Vatican II period that missionaries began to allow their converts to retain some aspects of traditional African custom (Kirby 1994: 61). “Polygamy was outlawed, but bridewealth was allowed, and in some areas mortuary practices were allowed in addition to the Christian rites” (Kirby 1994: 61). Since this period, African traditions have been “gradually reevaluated” (Kirby 1994: 65).

According to Kirby, many missionaries are beginning to realize that missionization in Africa will only be effective if there is continuity between African traditional religions and Christianity. “Indeed, the new can be really grasped only in terms of old forms” (Kirby 1994: 67). To him, a mixture of African culture and Christianity is necessary in order for missionization to be effective. Kirby asks, “Cannot a group change aspects of its culture without changing its central religious beliefs or philosophy?” (Kirby 1994: 67). Kirby believes that in the past twenty years, the Catholic Church has been able to incorporate more aspects of African culture into their worship (Kirby 1994: 67). “Youthful Christians are thus freer to revitalize old symbols and use them in new and creative ways” (Kirby 1994: 67). This raises the question: To what degree can traditional and Christian identities be combined?

Paul Kolmann finds several inadequacies with anthropological literature concerning Christianity in Africa. For example, he believes anthropology has not “substantially addressed” the semiotic ideology, or “the relationship believers have with religious signs and practices” of African Christians (Kolmann 2010). He believes anthropologists should begin to understand how and why Africans choose Christianity and “how they have harnessed

it” (Kolmann 2010: 132). Furthermore, Kolmann suggests a “generations-based approach,” which would produce comparable studies (Kolmann 132).

As I changed my research question from one pertaining to burial rituals to one which examines the shift of Maasai peoples to Christianity, I formulated several sub-questions, including: Why did members of this community convert to Christianity? How do members of the community who still follow the traditional Maasai belief system perceive Christian Maasai? How do Christian Maasai feel about traditional Maasai believers? How are Christian Maasai able to simultaneously maintain Maasai and Christian identities? How does the variety of religious beliefs in the community affect traditional ceremonies? The goal of this paper is to study the impact that Christianity has had on the people living near Tarangire National Park through critical analysis of excerpts taken from interviews and focus groups. This requires an understanding of how Christianity has been integrated into traditional Maasai custom, how integration or lack thereof has affected identity, and why members have been drawn to either Christianity or the traditional religion.

There are clear ideological differences between the small Maasai village that I first encountered and the area surrounding Tarangire National Park. In Joseph Thomson’s study of the Maasai, he speaks of one informant, Moran, who “believed in the existence of a Supreme Being, and yet had not the faintest conception of an after-life” (1887: 259). Similarly, when students asked village members from Engikaret about their religious beliefs, they explained that they do not believe in an afterlife. Their “Supreme Being” contrasts sharply with the Christian god who promises heaven. According to Paul Spencer, “the closest that the Maasai have to any belief in immortality is the establishment of a family and ultimately an agnatic group that survives the father (or mother) and prospers” (1988: 240). The traditional Maasai religion focuses on the continuation of one’s bloodline by acquiring cattle, while Christianity focuses on the afterlife. This dichotomy sets the stage for discussion about the differences between Maasai who still follow the traditional religion, like those living in Engikaret, and Maasai who have converted to Christianity, like many people in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park.

Geological setting may, in part, determine the ideological differences between communities. In general, Maasai have gained more attention than other ethnic groups, because of “a long history of intense scrutiny and celebration in traveler’s tales, coffee-table books, and now, tourist propaganda” (Hodgson 2002: 1087). The community surrounding Tarangire National Park is predominately inhabited by Maasai, who benefit from their proximity to the park, as a community. In recent years, there have been many new developments in the community, due, in part, to money brought in by tourism. For example, money from the park has helped fund the erection of a primary, secondary, and high school—all in the past ten years. Tourism around the park has most certainly exposed community members to Western culture more than most Tanzanian communities of its size.

Many of my informants described a slow trend away from the tradi-

tional Maasai belief system toward Christianity sometime in the past one hundred years. Informants gave several reasons for their community's movement towards Christianity. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with traditional Maasai healers and fortunetellers. Famine and other recent disasters have affected members of the community differently—some expressed that disasters have caused them to be more steadfast in their Christianity and have caused many to convert to Christianity, while other participants said it has not affected their faith. Few informants believed that famine and other disasters have actually damaged their faith.

Some participants explained that there is no conflict between Christian Maasai and traditional Maasai believers; they simply respect one another's beliefs. However, several participants *did* describe a conflict between Christianity and the traditional Maasai religion. A few traditional Maasai participants believe that Maasai Christians have abandoned their heritage, and that Christianity has disturbed Maasai traditional ceremonies. Community members have varying ideas about the possibility of maintaining Maasai and Christian identities.

## Methods

I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with a sample of convenience. In total, I spoke with 27 people, 16 men and 11 women. I interviewed only adults, with informants varying in age from a 20 year-old woman to a man well into his 80's.

A semi-structured interview is "open ended, but follows a general script and covers a list of topics" (Bernard 2006: 210). By asking questions from an interview guide, I sought answers that were comparable across interviews, and yet would allow my participants to explain concepts thoroughly. In total, I used three interview guides: an interview guide that I used for my preliminary research about Maasai burial rituals (see Appendix A), an interview guide for traditional Maasai believers (see Appendix B), and an interview guide for non-traditional Maasai believers (see Appendix C). I read my questions to my translator, and he translated them into Maa or Swahili, depending on the preference of the interviewee. Then, the translator listened to my informant's answer and translated it into English.

My translator often acted as an informant himself as he explained cultural concepts to me. This was helpful because he was able to extrapolate on my informants' answers in order to explain concepts that were foreign to me but were often implied in my informants' answers. His explanations may have affected my data, since he was inferring meaning in my interviewees' responses and necessarily imposing his perspective on their answers. Translation may also have affected the amount of detail I was able to obtain from informants. For example, an informant might talk at great length about a subject, and I could tell she was using a lot of description in her reply. However, because my translator was required to wait for her to finish her answer, he would

often summarize her reply. In this process, I may have lost description that I would have had, had I knowledge of Maa and Swahili. I edited excerpts from interview and focus group transcripts so that they flow with the narrative of my paper, in terms of tense and point of view.

“Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between research participants in order to generate data” (Kitzinger 1995: 311). The goal of a focus group is to encourage group discussion that challenges individuals to explain and clarify their views (Kitzinger 1995: 311). One problem I had with these focus groups was also related to translation. Normally, focus groups are beneficial because the interviewer is able to hear discussion between informants. However, because of the language barrier, I lost a great deal of what was being said by informants. For example, after the members of a focus group discussed the question at hand, my translator would often summarize what the participants had discussed. Rather than hearing individual opinions, I heard a singular voice.

I found that one voice often dominated the focus group. This may have been due to a cultural difference because, according to my translator, traditionally, Maasai tend to make decisions together. However, the disparity between informants’ contributions to the discussion may have been due to the fact that “the articulation of group norms may silence individual voices of dissent” (Kitzinger 1995: 311). Despite this setback, focus groups yielded a great deal of valuable information, even if they were not representative of all members of the group.

My informants were put at minimal risk by participating in my study. However, they did risk experiencing shame or painful memories when talking about friction between traditional Maasai and Christian Maasai. I took several steps to ensure the safety and anonymity of my informants. With the help of my translator, I ensured my participants that I would use pseudonyms rather than their real names. I asked my translator to read the informed consent form aloud (see Appendix D). We agreed that it would be most culturally appropriate to obtain verbal consent, since many of my informants cannot read or write. I let my informants know that they were free to stop the interview at any point.

Obtaining consent proved to be difficult at times because I was not talking directly with the informants. I left it up to the discretion of my translator to simplify my informed consent form as he deemed appropriate. However, I did stress that informants give me permission to use a tape recorder and that they were aware that I would not use their names in the project. I tried to make sure my informants were comfortable by letting them know they were able to ask questions at any point. These attempts at minimizing discomfort were generally successful. However, when I asked one participant if she had any questions, she asked, “What do you want from me?” It appeared as though my meaning did not get across to my informant, because she seemed frightened and unsure of the purpose of my project. On the other hand, I did have the translator ask this particular informant if she was comfortable several times, and she said “yes.” In the future, I would ask my translator to take am-

ple time to explain what the project was about and to make sure that informants were interested in participating.

If I was to do future research on the topic, I would observe church services, using participant observation, or “a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people,” in order to learn about the complexities of their culture” (DeWalt 2002: 1). I realized too late into the project that this was something I wanted to do, and I was not able to arrange a trip to a church with a translator. Participant observation would have been a good addition to my methods, because it would have provided me with an outsider’s perspective on how certain churches incorporate or do not incorporate Maasai traditions into their services. Although interviewing was helpful in discerning community members’ opinions about their own churches, it would have been helpful to have a more objective view.

## **Discussion**

### *Shift to Christianity*

When I asked informants whether they had seen a change in religious beliefs during their lifetime, almost all of them expressed that there had been a trend towards Christianity in their community. Participants differed in their opinions about when this shift began. One man shared:

Before 1975, all people were traditional Maasai. They believed in the Maa God. Thereafter 1977, the Christians came, like the Lutheran church, the Catholic Church, the Evangelist church [...] so, that’s how the evolution came about.

In contrast, another woman said that, “since 1993, people slowly have been changing from traditional Maasai beliefs to Christianity.” Despite this discrepancy in timeline, it is clear that there has been a movement from traditional Maasai beliefs to Christianity in this community since sometime in the late 1900’s.

Now, most of the people are in church. And, there are a lot of branches of Christianity that came in with them, so people are moving from one place to another. Like, moving from Lutheran to Evangelistic church. Others move from Catholic to Lutheran. Things of that nature...

According to this female participant, most people in the community



have converted to Christianity, and people are now shifting from one denomination to another. Despite this woman's conviction that Christianity is the leading religion in the community, a few informants expressed that the shift to Christianity has been a slow process and will continue to be slow. One woman observed:

Now, it seems that most people are going to church [...] most people are going to Christianity. But, Maasai are changing slowly. Like, the evolution from traditional Maasai to Christianity, which is a common one, is going slowly. People are moving; sometimes people are coming back, moving...it's very slow.

Although this informant believes the process will be gradual, her assumption is that the trend towards Christianity will continue, as more and more community members convert to Christianity.

In comparison with participants from the area surrounding Tarangire National Park, village members from Engikaret seem homogenous with regards to religion. The inhabitants of Engikaret were clear that all members of their village are expected to follow Maasai traditions. Whereas, in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park, informants described the diversity of religious beliefs present in their community as commonplace. In fact, the area has been trending towards Christianity for so many years that community members do not remember exactly when the movement began.

### *Gender and Health*

Several participants informed me that women attend church more often than men, because pastoral male Maasai must follow their cattle, sometimes far away from churches, while women have time to attend church. The Lutheran pastor that I interviewed echoed this statement:

Most Maasai are not Christian usually. The only Christians are women and people who are affected by mental illness. And, then they come to church and they pray for them. They recover. Most of Maasai are traditional.

According to him, those with mental illness attend church in order to seek a cure for their diseases. Several participants confirmed the minister's assertion that people suffering from mental illness tend towards Christianity more than other members of the community. One woman mentioned her own mental illness:

Translator: She says that she just likes to go to church. Sometime, when she was young, she was sick. Like, she was sick like [...] she became crazy.

A: Like, a mental illness?

Translator: Mhm. So, she decided to go to church and they prayed for her and she is now okay. And that is why she keeps going to church.

This woman believes that church has helped heal her mental illness, and this has strengthened her faith in Christianity. So, she continues to attend church. According to the Lutheran minister, experiencing Christianity in a personal way, such as this woman's experience with mental illness, is one of the only ways that traditional Maasai can be convinced to convert to Christianity:

Maasai are...First of all, Maasai people are very transparent. If they don't want something, then they just say, "No, we don't need this." So, it needs a lot of convincing sometimes to teach them and make them understand that they need to change from traditional Maasai to Christianity. They are changing slowly, slowly to Christianity. But, they need a lot of energy. Maybe disasters or diseases, then they will go to their magic healer. And, when those fail, they know they can come seek help from pastors. They get help from churches, and now they have an interest in coming to church. But, that happens personally. Everybody wants to get an instance himself or herself to believe.

The minister describes traditional Maasai believers in the community as almost being stubborn, saying that it takes a lot of work "to teach them and make them understand."

Gender and health are both factors that affect community members' decision to convert to Christianity, as women and those suffering from mental disease are the main constituents of churches in the area. Several participants claimed that women attended church more often than men. One explanation for this is that women do not have the time commitment of tending to cattle that men have. There are also a high proportion of people suffering from mental illness who attend church in the area. Many explained that those suffering from mental illness seek ministers in an effort to cure their diseases. If their diseases are cured, their personal positive experiences will likely increase their chances of converting to Christianity.

### *Fortunetellers and Laibons*

Before seeking ministers, community members suffering from mental illness often seek Maasai fortunetellers or traditional healers. “Diviners are held to possess extraordinary mystical powers of perceiving the unknown, providing ritual protection, and influencing the future for good or ill” (Galaty 1979: 806). “Diviners,” as Galaty calls them, are set apart from other members of the Maasai community, because the community fears them. Many people who attend church in the area surrounding the Tarangerie National Park have experienced firsthand dissatisfaction with “diviners,” also known as fortunetellers or *laibons* (traditional healers). For example, one man stated:

In the traditional Maasai religion, if you have a problem you have to go to a fortuneteller. And, when you hear from those people, they mention to God. And, they need money. But, when you go to church, there is no need of money to go there. They call the same God. So, that made him change from believing those fortunetellers, who act as the leaders of the traditional Maasai religion. And, made him come into church, where there is only the pastor saying, “You need to believe God, not him.”

This man is skeptical of fortunetellers because they require monetary compensation for their services. This dissatisfaction has caused him to seek help from ministers because they do not ask for money; they ask for his belief in god. Similarly, a woman explains that some people believe they are healed in churches and this causes them to convert to Christianity:

There is, sometimes that’s why people are moving from Maasai religion to Christian. And, then within Christianity, moving from one branch to another because of pastor. You know, before going to church, they are going to different fortunetellers and magic healers. And, if somebody’s sick, moving around those places. And, then they come back to churches and pray here. Not recover, pray here, not recover, pray here. And, then you reach a point where you recovered, and you say, “This is a good church.”

Their conversion does not necessarily have any connection to a doctrinal preference between the traditional Maasai religion and Christianity. It is because they believe that the pastor or the Christian God has cured them that they believe they have first-hand evidence that Christianity is the truth.

Dissatisfaction with fortunetellers and *laibons* may relate to an earlier idea that community members’ decision to convert to Christianity is affected

by personal experience. When some members of the community sought the help of “diviners,” they were dissatisfied. A few informants complained that they were asked for money and felt cheated, while other participants were disappointed when they did not receive the cure they were hoping for. Due to these negative experiences with “diviners” and subsequent positive experiences with Christian leaders, several informants converted to Christianity.

### *Famine and Disaster*

Over the past century, Maasai have experienced severe loss of land and drought refuges for their cattle which has led to increased “vulnerability among the Maasai to ecological change and drought” (Nightingale and Western: 4). This is significant, as Maasai move their livestock in order to maximize “herd size, milk yields and meat production for human consumption” in the context of the erratic rainfalls of the savanna (Nightingale and Western: 2). The recent famine has amplified this issue, causing many Maasai to become discouraged, as they move in search of water and food sources. One woman explained that Christianity has given her a source of hope in the face of hardships:

One of the things that brings people to Christianity, just in these recent years, is there have been a lot of disasters, like famine. Like, we saw a lot of diseases. And, people can sometimes be frustrated. Like, frustration. So, people [...] their thought changed when preachers come to their villages and tell them that they see God in this way and in this. Like, most of the people are interested in that part of Christianity, rather than being traditional Maasai.

When preachers tell her to “see God” in certain areas of life, she is encouraged to see the “good” in the face of adversity. From her perspective, being introduced to Christianity at a time when Maasai are generally feeling frustrated by drought and disaster, makes Christianity appealing.

One man explained that the drought has encouraged people to pray more, due to the nature of their increasingly mobile lifestyle:

Famine, drought, and all the other disasters are improving our faith. Because, there was a shift. For example, in the case of drought. Usually men shift from the *bomas* to the place where there is enough pasture and water. While they are shifting from one place to another, they always pray. And, the women there at home pray for them. So, it is improving our faith.

Many participants agreed that the famine had caused them to seek God more in

their lives. A few people even said that the drought is a sign that the end of the world is coming. So, people are fleeing to churches in order to pray for Jesus' return:

Disasters encouraged them to pray more. People are going to church. You know that they believe that with all these disasters, like famine, the climate change... They believe that the end of the world is now approaching. So, people need to pray. That's how the Bible tells it. Even I believe that. So, we need to pray for Jesus to come back.

Other informants believe that their faith has not been affected by disasters. One man described the nature of his faith as something that cannot be shaken by famine or other disasters:

Faith is like a strong feeling. Faith is one of the [...] what can I call it? Faith is [...] you know drought and disaster have not affected the way we believe. Because, faith is something that you do from a feeling. I don't know how to explain about it, I'm sorry [...] like, you know [...] it's like people are going to church from their hearts. So, they don't care about disasters. They just go to church, even if there is famine, if there is war. They just go.

Very few participants feel that the famine has actually harmed their faith. However, one woman explained that the drought has kept men away from Christianity.

Drought, for example, and famine, sometimes makes people become busy. Because, their livestock is sometimes far away from churches. Sometimes there's no access to church. Sometimes, famine makes people very busy in search of food. So, it has a negative effect on church in that.

Similar to the explanation for why females attend church more often than males, this issue is concerned with the demands of the pastoral lifestyle. The drought has caused members of the community to wander far away from having access to churches. So, they are physically unable to attend.

Overall, it is difficult to say whether famine and other recent disasters have accelerated the trend towards Christianity in the community or slowed it. Many participants explained that hardships brought upon by the famine and other recent disasters have encouraged their faith in Christianity, as Christianity encourages them to find hope that they do not find in the traditional Maasai religion. Others explained that their faith is too strong to be affected by disas-

ter. Still, other participants claimed that the famine has decreased the number of people who attend church, as male herders are forced to follow their cattle far from churches.

### *No Conflict*

My initial hypothesis that Christianity probably brought conflict to the area was not borne out by the interviews. Many informants indicated that Christians and traditional Maasai believers live together harmoniously. For example, when I asked one traditional Maasai believer how she feels about people who have strayed from the traditional belief system, she said, “There’s no problem. We love each other and perceive each other positively. There’s no problem.” One man even said there is only one thing keeping Maasai from converting to Christianity—time:

To go to church is good. Everybody likes to go. The problem is time. People don’t have time to go there. But, whether you are in church or not, nobody perceives you negatively. People just say, “You go to church? It’s okay. You don’t go to church, it’s okay.”

This male warrior believes that all members of the community would probably go to church if they had time. However, he expressed that Maasai males do not typically attend church because they are responsible for tending to the cattle. Especially in the current drought environment, Maasai warriors must be very mobile in order to follow their herds to the nearest source of food and water.

Despite the fact that many informants do not perceive a conflict between traditional Maasai believers and Christians, many Christians still expressed hope that traditional Maasai believers will convert to Christianity, and vice versa. When I asked one Christian woman how she feels traditional believers perceive her, she replied:

There is no negative aspect on each other. What we do is just pray for them to come to church. And, those who are Maasai pray for the other part so that they can come back to them. So, we pray to each other. So, there is no problem.”

Although this woman’s comment does not portray a direct conflict between the two religions, it does reveal friction between traditional Maasai believers and Christians. If both of the groups felt neutral about one another’s beliefs, they would not pray for one another to convert.

### *One God*

A: Okay. Does she see any similarities or differences between her traditional Maasai religion and Christianity?

Translator: She's saying, "Why do you think there is only one God?"

A: Wait, she thinks there is only one god?

Translator: It's a matter of perspectives and understanding. But, God is only one. Whether you are Maasai following the traditional Maasai religion, whether you are following Christianity, whether you are Muslim [...] God is only one. That is why I don't even bother to go to church.

Many participants explained that there is no conflict between the traditional Maa belief system and Christianity because they are both ways of worshipping the same god. One elder woman sees no difference between religious beliefs, only a difference in perspectives. A similar view was expressed in my interview with a Lutheran pastor from the area:

There is only one God. The only way of following Him and praying to Him is different from different people, like culture. What all of Christianity is is just to teach people the right way of following the rules and regulations, so that one day, they go to see Him.

This pastor expressed that although there is only one God, he knows the "right way" to follow this god. It is his responsibility to make sure that others are informed about the Bible, so that they will be afforded an afterlife.

### *Negative Perceptions*

Although many participants do not perceive a conflict between traditional believers and Christians, some informants did express a tension between the two religions. For example, one Christian woman stated that, because she abandoned her traditions, "the Maasai believe that she'll kill her husband [...] she's going to destroy her husband." This young woman abandoned the traditional beaded jewelry that Maasai women typically wear. She also refuses to go to the *laibon*, or traditional healer. Some members of the community perceive these behaviors as shunning Maasai traditions, which they believe will result in the demise of her family. One man described the lack of cooperation

between Christians and traditional Maasai believers:

Those in church are ignored negatively, because it's like they are wasting their time, because they are following something that they do not understand. But, those who are in church ignore those who are not in church. Because they believe that in this world, there is nothing but God.

This excerpt reveals mutual resistance between Christian Maasai and traditional Maasai believers. One woman even described an asymmetrical relationship, in which the younger, and often Christian, members of society bully the older, and often times traditional, believers into converting to Christianity:

Those who are Christian are less cooperative with those who are Maasai traditional. Like, if they are doing their traditional practices of like [...] slaughtering sometimes [...] those Christians will not participate in that ceremony. But for them, traditionals, they are cooperative with them. Even if they are baptizing children, they can come and celebrate together.

She explains a tactic used by young Christians to convince older members of society to convert to Christianity. If elders want the support of the youth in the community, it is in their best interest to convert to Christianity, in that regard. However, she describes traditional Maasai believers as being supportive of Christians.

#### *Traditional Ceremonies*

In Maasai culture, ceremonies are performed for different age sets, which “‘foreground’ the passage between stages of the lifecycle through ceremonial acts,” such as circumcision, consumption of blood and meat, and sacrifice (Galaty 1995: 193). Because many Christians do not take part in such aspects of Maasai tradition, both traditional Maasai believers and Christians have noticed a change to ceremonies. For example, one Catholic man commented:

Traditional culture is now affected by this religion. Most of all [...] you know Maasai have an age-set system. And, every age system is going to another age set by doing [...] circumcision. So, now that does not exist, because of Christianity. So, the age set is broken now.



Because many Maasai in the community have converted to Christianity, the fluidity of the age-set system has been compromised. Circumcision is not performed on Christian members of the community; therefore, only traditional Maasai believers are able to pass on to the next age-set.

Although Christians and Maasai do not directly participate in one another's ceremonies spiritually, they are still able to show their physical support for one another. A young woman described this distinction:

So, participating on ceremonies, but you know, you can participate like physically. But, for example somebody dies in traditional Maasai, they just participate physically [...] that we are there and support that person physically. But, not spiritually the way they do. You see? And, the same applies to them. If somebody in Christian died, those traditional Maasai come and support them, but not doing spiritual things. Like, the burial process. And, it has an effect, because there are things done in Christianity that are not done in Maasai.

This type of relationship reflects understanding between the members of the two religions. Community members show respect for one another's religious traditions, but still respect their own beliefs by not participating spiritually in the ceremonies.

Following the typical Maasai tradition, the body would be covered in animal fat before burial. In Merker's study of the Maasai, he reports that bodies being buried were covered with a bovine's skin covered in animal fat, and that the grave was trodden down with earth and stone in order to prevent the body from being eaten by hyenas (1910: 265). My early interviews concerning burial practices corroborate Merker's statement. Participants explained that if a traditional Maasai man dies, Maasai typically slaughter a large steer. When a woman dies, they typically slaughter a large sheep. Then, they cover the body with the animal fat.

Many informants described that in the case of burial in their community, they respect the deceased person's religious beliefs. If the deceased person was Christian, she will be buried according to the Christian traditions. If the person was a traditional Maasai believer, the mourners follow the traditional Maasai ceremony of slaughtering an animal and covering the body with animal fat. Although the community of mourners may be a mixed group in terms of religion, people are still able to support one another with their presence. In this sense, the change to traditional ceremonies has not necessarily been negative.

### *Maintaining Maasai Identity*

The fact that many Maasai do not see a conflict in their traditional ceremonies is indicative of their beliefs about what it means to “be Maasai.” Many informants explained that being Maasai and being Christian are entirely separate from one another. One man explained that there is no dilemma in trying to maintain both Maasai and Christian identities. To him, the changes to tradition have not negatively affected the community:

Traditional Maasai, like the way they wear, the way they live [...] it’s just a system of life. But, in front of God, what is mentioned is what [...] you know spirit? God only cares about the spirit of somebody. He doesn’t care how you put your clothes, the way you are living, the way you do whatever [...] Faith is all about what you believe. You believe in God, it’s okay.

To this man, it seems that culture is not related to religion. One’s conviction in his religion has importance, but his style of dress does not. Another Christian man explained the Maasai culture as something separate from religion.

A: How are you able to maintain your Maasai identity while at the same time maintaining your Christian identity?

Translator: He says that even Christianity cannot change you from being a Maasai. You can just be a Maasai and be a Christian. You can be from the U.S. and be a Christian. So, yea.

He describes “Maasai” as an ethnicity, not an all-encompassing identity. To him, ethnicity and religion are independent of one another.

Some participants explained that there is a difference in the way that different denominations of Christianity treat Maasai traditions. One woman explained that her church incorporates traditional songs into its services:

A: How are you able to maintain a Maasai identity at the same time as a Christian identity?

Translator: She says in church especially, there is sometimes praise, singing, and they like to use traditional identity sometimes singing. So, for them it’s possible to maintain dignity of Maasai, while being Christian.

A: Does she think that's typical of all churches, or is her-church special?

Translator: She says also that there are churches that don't like that. But, most of Maasai aren't going to those churches.

A: So some churches discourage tradition.

Translator: Mhm. For example, Roman Catholic.

Many informants mentioned that the Lutheran church and certain Catholic churches actively incorporate aspects of Maasai tradition into their services. For example, one woman noted that they use the traditional Maasai stool and brush in Catholic baptism services. The Pentecostal Church is not very well-liked by some Maasai Christians in the community because it discourages their cultural traditions.

Although most Maasai Christians explained that they have no problem maintaining both their Christian and Maasai identities, a few traditional Maasai believers remain skeptical:

A: How does he feel about people who believe they can maintain a Maasai identity and also a Christian identity?

Translator: He's saying it's very difficult sometimes. Because, there are things that the church does not allow you to do. So, he does not think it is possible to maintain the Maasai dignity while you are Christian.

When this informant says, "there are things that the church does not allow you to do," one can assume he is referring to traditional ceremonies, such as circumcision and animal slaughtering. To him, traditional ceremonies are an intrinsic part of Maasai identity; without the ability to perform such ceremonies, one has lost at least a part of this identity.

## **Conclusion**

There are several factors that affect community members' religious choices in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park, including: gender, health, past experiences with *laibons* and fortunetellers, and the degree to which they have been affected by drought. Many informants described a mixture of Christianity and the traditional Maasai religion in their community; most participants described a trend towards Christianity and away from the

traditional Maasai religion. Community members have varying ideas about whether this blend of religious beliefs has a positive or negative effect on the community. Most participants described a shared respect for one another's religious beliefs in the community. Several participants also explained that they believe all religions worship the same god; different religions simply have different rules and regulations for the correct way of prayer. Therefore, it does not matter that people have religious differences. Both traditional Maasai believers and Christians have noticed a change to traditional ceremonies since Christians cannot participate in several Maasai rites, such as circumcision and animal slaughtering. However, not all community members view this change negatively. Hybrids of traditional ceremonies are also created in some churches as some elements of Maasai culture are incorporated into church services. This is a strong attraction for many community members.

Some traditional Maasai believers do not approve of Maasai Christians because they feel they have abandoned their traditions. Many Maasai Christians perceive this disapproval. However, most Maasai Christians who I interviewed believe that they are able to maintain both identities—Christian and Maasai. Many explained that their Maasai identity is completely separate from their religious identity. It does not matter if they are Christian or Hindu or Buddhist; a Maasai person will always be “Maasai.” To those Christians and traditional Maasai believers who believe it is possible to maintain both Christian and Maasai identities, it appears that ethnicity and religion are separate entities. To them, “Maasai” is simply a culture or ethnicity; one does not necessarily have to follow the traditional religion in order to “be Maasai.” Whereas, to a few traditional believers in the community, “being Maasai” necessarily means taking part in traditional rites of passage, such as circumcision. Because Christians cannot take part in certain traditional ceremonies, they cannot “be Maasai.”

When I first began my project, I was shocked by the religious diversity I found in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park. I thought that all (or at least most) Maasai villages were homogenous in ideology, similar to Engikaret, the small Maasai village that I first visited. I initially assumed that the blend of religious beliefs in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park would be a source of conflict in the community. I had learned that keeping cattle is central to Maasai ideology and is closely tied to the divine, according to the traditional Maasai belief system. Therefore, I assumed that Christianity would upset Maasai traditions, as well as traditional Maasai believers in the community. To a certain extent, this is true. Some members of the community are unhappy about the introduction of Christianity into their society. They do not believe that Christian Maasai can still “be Maasai” because they cannot participate in many Maasai traditional ceremonies. However, the majority of my participants described a peaceful coexistence between traditional Maasai believers and Maasai Christians. On the whole, the trend towards Christianity is seen as a part of life in this community. Community members are generally willing to work together to create situations in which both traditional Maasai believers and Christian Maasai can live peacefully together, by respecting one

another's religious beliefs, as well as their own religious beliefs. In addition, many Maasai Christians are able to maintain both Maasai and Christian identities, because they see "Maasai" as an ethnicity, a culture, rather than an entire identity.

Further research is needed in order to determine the degree to which different churches are able to incorporate Maasai traditions into their services. This could be done through participant observation in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park, as well as in other Maasai communities. It would be interesting to see if there are any trends in the way that certain African churches attempt to incorporate Maasai traditions into their services. Furthermore, research needs to be done in different areas of Tanzania and Kenya in order to determine the effects of Islam on Maasai, and the way that they view Maasai traditions. Similar research on Maasai living in more rural areas is needed in order to determine the effects of tourism on Maasai living near Tarangire National Park who presumably would have more exposure to Western culture. Additionally, a similar study of other African herding tribes, such as the Hadza, could be useful in determining whether there may be widespread application of the findings in this article, and how this pertains to the wider picture of religious conversion in Africa.

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**Appendix A**  
**Traditional Maasai Burial Rituals (Initial Interview Guide)**

1. What typically happens when a member of your tribe dies?
2. What rituals, if any, typically follow the death of a tribe member?
3. What is the meaning of these rituals?
4. How are these rituals different for men, women, and children (if at all)?
5. What is the reason for these differences (if there are any differences)?
6. How long does the grieving process typically take?
7. What does the grieving process typically entail?
8. How does status/gender typically affect the length of the grieving process, if at all?
9. What is the reason for these differences (if there are any differences)?



**Appendix B**  
**Interview Guide for Non-traditional Maasai Believers**

1. What is your religion?
  
2. Would you say that most people in your village are traditional Maasai, or a different religion?
  
3. How do you feel people who still follow the traditional Maasai belief system perceive you?
  
4. How would you describe the changes in beliefs of people living in your village during your lifetime (if there have been any changes)?
  
5. What do you think is the reason for these changes (if there have been any changes)?
  
6. How have the famine and other recent disasters affected your faith, if at all?
  
7. Why did you decide to stray from the traditional Maasai belief system? (If you were raised according to the traditional Maasai belief system)
  
8. How does the variety of religious beliefs in your community affect traditional ceremonies, such as burial (if at all)?
  
9. How do you feel you are able to maintain a Maasai identity while at the same time maintaining a Christian identity, if at all? (If participant has a religious belief other than Christianity, replace with that religious belief.)
  
10. Do you see any similarities between the traditional Maasai religion and your religion (e.g. Christianity)? Please explain.

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Guide for Traditional Maasai**

1. What is your religion?
2. Would you say that most people in your village are traditional Maasai or a different religion?
3. How do you feel about people who have strayed from the traditional Maasai belief system?
4. How would you describe the changes in beliefs of people living in your village during your lifetime (if there has been a change)?
5. What do you think is the reason for these changes (if there has been a change)?
6. How have the famine and other recent disasters affected your faith, if at all?
7. Do you think that the changes in religious beliefs in your community are similar or different than that of other Maasai communities (if there have been changes)?
8. How, if at all, has the variety of religious beliefs in your community affected traditional ceremonies?
9. Do you think it is possible for a Christian to maintain both a Maasai and a Christian identity? Please explain.
10. What similarities or differences, if any, are there between Christianity and the traditional Maasai belief system?

## **Appendix D**

### **Research Participant Information and Consent Form**

Ethnography of Maasai living near Tarangire National Park

You are invited to be in a research study of the Maasai living near Tarangire National Park. You were selected as a possible participant because you reside in close proximity to Tarangire National Park. Please listen to me read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Abigail Beneke, student in James Godde's Research Methods class.

#### **Background information:**

The purpose of this study is to understand the religious diversity in the area surrounding Tarangire National Park. I hope to learn about the trend towards Christianity in this community, the reasons for this trend, and how community members feel about it. I want to know if Maasai Christians are able to partake in traditional Maasai ceremonies, and to what extent Christian Maasai are able to maintain their Maasai identities.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this part of my study, the interview will last one-two hours. The interviews will feel like a conversation, where you will be asked some questions, and then encouraged to talk for as long as you like. With your permission I would like to audio record our conversation. I will be the only person to hear the recording. A code will be used in place of your name to label the data.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions about loved ones who have passed away, your religious beliefs, and burial rituals.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Participation:**

I do not anticipate any risks associated with your involvement in my study. However, you may feel that some questions are private. You are free to not answer any question. You do not have to talk about a topic unless you want to. You may stop the interview at any time. There may be no direct benefit for you for taking part in this study. There are no risks or loss of privileges or rights if the participant refuses to participate or withdraws from the study.

**Confidentiality:**

Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records. I will transcribe the audio recording of your interview, changing your name in the transcript and any written report so that no one can identify you. The recording will then be deleted at the end of my study. No information will be included in the written report that would make it possible to identify individual participants.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions and are free to withdraw from participating at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher directing this study is: Abigail Beneke. You may contact her if you have any questions at 711 E Boldtway SPC 190 Appleton, WI 54911 or (068) 620-9187 or [abigail.j.beneke@lawrence.edu](mailto:abigail.j.beneke@lawrence.edu). You may also contact James Godde, Abigail's research supervisor at [jgodde@monmouthcollege.edu](mailto:jgodde@monmouthcollege.edu) or (068) 842-5667. If you have questions about your rights, you may contact the Chair of the Lawrence University IRB, Dr. William Skinner (920) 993-6025 or [irb@lawrence.edu](mailto:irb@lawrence.edu).

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I am at least 18 years of age. If I had questions, I asked them and received answers to them. I consent to participate in the study.