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Who Approaches Whom?

Dual leadership structure among the Maasai pastoralists in Tanzania

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Introduction

This paper is based on four years anthropological fieldwork in Tanzania (1997-2001) and is part of my forthcoming thesis titled 'Under the same Shade – Peoples' Perceptions on Political Change in Rural Tanzania'. Even though non-pastoralist groups are included in the thesis, the purpose of this paper is to focus on the Kisongo Maasai pastoralist as one of the marginalized groups in Tanzania, and their customary leadership and its politically elected counterpart.

The customary leadership among the Maasai is not a form of leadership that is based on a paramount and hereditary leadership like the chiefs among the Ndebele, Tswana or Zulu in southern Africa for example. The Maasai do not have one single leader who governs the whole Maasai community. They have rather several categories of customary leaders whose positions are intimately connected to the social fabric of the Maasai and are part of peoples' daily life. What is fundamental is that the customary leaders among the Maasai are closely connected to the basic organisational structure of men's age-set system in the society. People are well aware of what the customary leaders' duties and responsibilities are and they also know how to relate to them. However, despite strong identification with the customary leaders, the Maasai also have to elect their political representatives like sub-village chairperson, village chairperson, ward councilor and Member of Parliament. Hence, in this paper I will concentrate on the central aspect of the 'dual leadership structure' consisting of the customary and political leaders and the system of (s)electing them. Herein lies the key to who is regarded to become a good leader. The Maasai customary leader relevant in connection to political leadership is *olaiquenani* (pl. *ilaiquenak*, often referred to as age-set spokesman). I must however, include elders as a category since they play an important role in appointing customary leaders, in village decision-making, in guarding Maasai traditions and customs and in sharing their knowledge about Maasai life to younger generations. Elders who are considered wise and respected are asked for advice, guidance in how to solve

the problem at hand. They can give examples from similar problems and how these were solved previously. In this way, there is continued connection to the past, their culture and history, which is important for the continuation of Maasai way of life. Although all elders, both women and men are respected in Maasai society, in this paper when I talk about elders I refer to elder men. Thus, the paper discusses the dual political structure and how the Maasai men and women relate to these leaders for their individual and communal benefit.

How to qualify as customary and political leader

The 'leader' concept has many different meanings and can be of various categories and on different levels in the society. Leaders can be customary¹, religious, political or representing trade unions and NGOs for example. The position can be hereditary, eligible, usurped or it can be a position one is appointed to by fellow group members or outside actors. When the British administered their colonies in East and West Africa, they used the indirect rule as a system where identified indigenous leaders would be appointed by them to act as middle-men in their administrative structure. The indigenous leaders – chiefs – would have responsibilities for some local decision-making and retain some judicial power in the local courts. However, the main issue for the British was that their decisions would more easily be implemented through local leaders. Assuming the Maasai social and political organisation was based on the leadership of a single leader, the British in Tanganyika wrongly identified the Maasai prophet, diviner and religious leader *oloiboni* as the paramount leader for the Maasai. Since *oloiboni* is a person who demands great respect² among the Maasai and plays an important role in their society, added to the fact that the position being hereditary, the British thought this important 'leader' could hold a key role in the administration of

¹ The term 'traditional' leader is easily put together with 'modern' and therefore giving a picture of something being obsolete or primitive. I will therefore use the term customary.

² The concept respect have different meanings and definitions given by respondents are that a leader might be respected because he fills this position or is a person who has more responsibilities in the society than others. Respect can also be gained through the amount of cows one person has. Still, it is considered by many respondents that respect has to be mutual between leadership and people. Respect further involves to follow traditions and customs and proper behaviour in relation to elders, like correct way of greetings and behaviour. Respect can also be filled with fear of punishment by the leader if one dares to go against the leader.

the Maasai through the indirect rule. Following this line, *oloiboni* Parrit (a famous and great Kisongo *oloiboni*) was appointed 'Chief of Tanganyika Masai' (Ndagala 1992:p49) and he was to travel with the District Commissioner explaining government policies.

To seek legitimacy and approval from the Maasai for appointing *oloiboni* Parrit, the British send out a letter to all the localities seeking people's support for this maneuver. While it was said that elders in Mfereji locality accepted the appointment, there were other elders who were more suspicious about this since according to the role and responsibilities of *oloiboni*, it is not customary for him to leave his homestead. His place is in his homestead where he can attend to people. Still, the British were determined to use *oloiboni* in administrative matters and the administrative headquarter was even moved to Monduli in order to be close to the home of *oloiboni* hoping they could influence him and rest of the Maasai in this way. However, this did not succeed since the British failed to understand that *oloiboni* does not have any executive powers (Ndagala 1992:p49). He receives his respect in his role as a diviner and a prophet, as the religious leader who decided when to start and stop circumcision periods and who guides and performs blessings over ceremonies. Hence, the role of *oloiboni* in the administrative system was a failure and the idea had to be abandoned by the British.

When studying the customary – and political leadership systems, there are different formal and non-formal qualifications to be filled. The formal qualifications for political positions in Tanzania are following:

- Resident in the village (local politicians)
- Tanzanian citizen and 21 years of age
- Be able to read and write Kiswahili or English
- Have a legal income sufficient for making a living
- Does not owe any money to the village or national government

- Not to have been sentenced in any court in Tanzania or served in prison for six months or more for criminal activity
- Party member
- Has no mental disorder

Most of the non-Maasai people fill these qualifications but what usually is the stumbling block for the Maasai is that the majority of the Maasai cannot read and write Kiswahili and this has some consequences for the Maasai political leadership. Customary leaders and elders who are respected and are highly valued in their society usually lack formal education and the qualifications for national political positions. Education, however, is something younger generations have. Ndagala (1992) says that those who would not be suitable for customary leadership can due to their education get access to leadership positions through the ‘modern’ political system. As most Maasai and especially women are illiterate and do not know Kiswahili very well, they remain with few, young, mostly male political candidates that might not be respected in the community. This means that those who contest for political positions might not have full support and respect from people in the community while those who have respect might lack education and competence to deal with national political institutions (Ndagala 1992:120). An elder respondent expresses similar opinion. He does not trust the present political system since it is enough to know to read and write and one can seek political positions, which later on can be misused (MaaME.Eng). Still, the Maasai need to elect political leaders as well.

The customary leaders do not have to fulfil the formal qualifications above but there are some defined procedures and qualifications for who might be considered for customary leadership. First of all, *oloiboni*, as mentioned above, is a position that is hereditary and only those who are from *Ilaiser* clan can be *oloiboni*. Secondly, *olaiquenani* is appointed before the circumcision period by men in the age-set next-but-one above the age-set to

be initiated³. However, his age-mates are also discussing who might be a good leader for their age-set and these discussions are taken to the elders as well. The elders judge the *olaiquenani* by looking at the boy's family, his father and grandfather, how they have behaved in the community, if they are of good character, 'pure' Maasai or not (i.e. there are no ancestors from other ethnic groups in their lineage) and if they have lot of cattle or not. He must also be a good listener and orator, (two of the most referred qualities by the respondents) be particularly brave, polite, generous, and be able to give good advice and to know about Maasai traditions. In short, he must distinguish himself from others (Saitoti 1980:58). Regarding the customary leadership; it is a position appointed *for life* and there are no direct monetary benefits involved but through long and careful selection of the customary leader the importance of this position is indicated. Hence, the qualifications deemed necessary for this particular position are extensive as to produce the best possible customary leader for the community.

Considering the Maasai society being an oral society where the ability to put forth ones' opinions in a clear and understandable way a 'good speaker' ⁴ is of course highly valued. Walter J. Ong (1991:47-55) says that in order to memorise in an oral culture one has to think or speak thoughts that are remembered, and a good speaker can do this. A good speaker is one who knows to arrange his speech in a good way, in a well-structured manner that enables people to understand clearly what his intentions are. He should not speak about irrelevant issues and should not become angry when discussing with others. In contrast, there are those who do not have the qualities of well-articulated sentences and a clear thought pattern, and only '*speaking and you do not know what they have said*' (MaaW3Loo). It is therefore

³ One boy is first selected even before the circumcision period has started to become *olaiquenani*. He will later on officially be appointed where he will change his brown stick he has had to a black one marking his status as *olaiquenani*.

⁴ The Maasai have even a sort of competition between Ilmurran (warriors) in the art of storytelling. These stories or songs as they are called, are for example about when Ilmurran are taking their cattle to grazing areas far away and everything that happens on their journey. Since these songs are very popular, a skilful Olmurrani gain prestige in the Maasai society in his way of telling a story, not to mention popularity among the girls.

necessary to have a technique that is based on repetition of well-articulated sentences according to an easily remembered ‘thought pattern’.

Knowledge in an oral society, as the Maasai, is difficult to acquire but is highly valued, hence the respect for elders and those who know much about the Maasai society and their traditions. These elders are as ‘living files’ who are keeping ‘records’ of Maasai customs and when there is need to seek guidance in the past, they recollect what has been said and done in similar circumstances previously. It is therefore not just important *what* you say, but equally important is *how* you say it. Further, a good speaker is considered to be an honest person. He does not have any hidden agendas, rather the opposite. He speaks in a way that everybody understands. This person and his qualities are highly regarded and he is also very much wanted as a mediator in conflicts since he is honest and is not afraid of speaking the truth. The respondents say that if they would choose a boy whose parents and grandparents have at some point misbehaved according to Maasai customs, there is a chance the boy have inherited similar behaviour and would not therefore have the above mentioned qualities and be a suitable as customary leader.

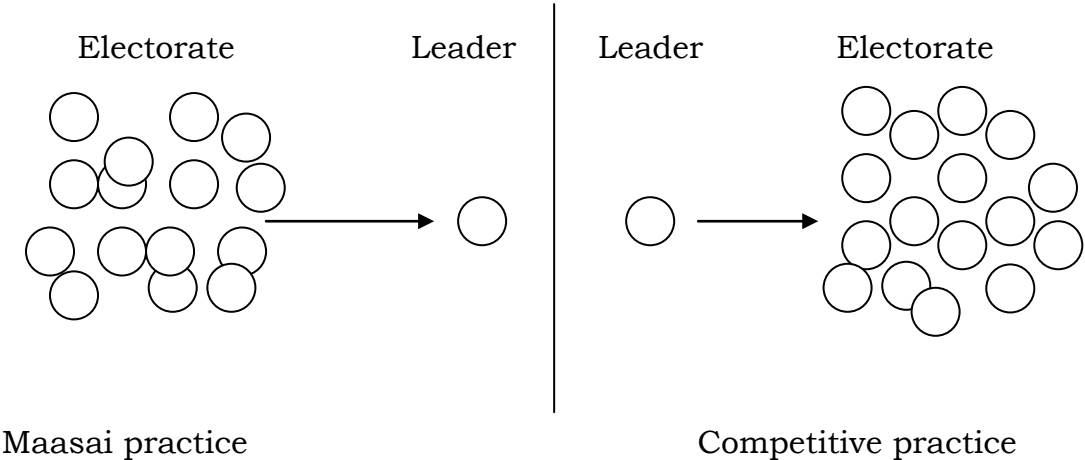
Politicians are not scrutinized in the same way for obvious reasons. First of all, they are nominated by their political party and its members and not by the community (i.e men in the community); secondly, politicians can be from another ethnic group than Maasai, making it impossible to scrutinize politicians on the same premises as customary leaders; and thirdly, political leadership opens up the door for women as well to seek out leadership positions. One can therefore speculate that politicians for these reasons do not have the same legitimacy as customary leaders. Still, the qualifications for customary leaders are relevant for political leaders as well and it is an advantage for a politician, for many reasons, to be a good speaker, good listener and be rich in cows. Then again, all the other qualifications mentioned cannot be adhered to since politicians make an individual choice to compete for political positions. It is therefore not certain that those who

strive for political positions will have the support and have peoples' respect just as Ndagala points out. In addition, what might be a disadvantage for the legitimacy of a politician is that they usually are talking about issues that are 'outside' peoples' ordinary life. The concepts they use, the language they use are unfamiliar. Further, the politicians are part of an organisational and administrative structure that can be alien to many (especially women) and therefore not understood. These issues make Maasai feel inferior in relation to the politician in comparison to the customary leader. However, the political leader can in certain cases use the force of police to arrest people who would refuse to pay taxes for example. When people therefore say they respect the political leader, it implicitly means that they know he has this power to utilise the police to imprison people and put them in jail if they go against the authorities. The customary leader has also the power to punish people who break traditional Maasai laws. The punishment is generally fines paid in cows instead of imprisonment, which is considered more acceptable.

Another difference is that the appointment of *olaiquenani* follows the circumcision periods and is occurring with a changeable interval. The time period between the two last age-sets initiated have been 8 and 11 years respectively and it is only during the forming of new age-sets *olaiquenani* is appointed. A political leader, on the other hand, is elected formally for five years and there are usually some monetary benefits attached to the position (e.g. allowances), besides any form of power the position might give the individual. Nevertheless, the most important difference between customary and political leadership categories is the prolonged and extensive scrutinizing of the customary leaders personal and family character. Also, it is the community as such, even though it is the elder men and *oloiboni* who are most active, that approaches the unaware individual who is to be appointed. Since, the customary leader among the Maasai is *appointed* after prolonged considerations, he is never campaigning. Even if these positions gives respect in the community and are associated with great honour, these are not positions one strives for. *Olaiquenani* I interviewed was appointed in 1983 and he felt heavy responsibility to lead all people and he was a little bit

afraid because if he failed to fulfil his role correctly, people might be angry with him. However, he felt also comfort in that he could ask his father and other elders for advice, those who know much about Maasai traditions and decision-making.

When it comes to a political leader, the process is quite the opposite. The politician approaches the community and tries to convince the community to elect him, that *he* is a good leader and *he* can really assist the community. This behaviour to lift up your own qualities, to promote oneself is opposite of how customary leaders behave. It is somehow presumptuous for the Maasai to put yourself above all others and say that you are the one who can help the community. This behaviour is not in accordance with the leadership norms in Maasai society.



Different approaches in relation to leaders.

Responsibilities

The dual leadership structure gives the Maasai the benefit of having the customary leader; who guides the Maasai communities’ internal affairs, customs, traditions and laws, together with the political leader who is there to help the community with ‘modern’ assistance in form of healthcare, school and water and is responsible for implementing governmental policies. These implements are, so to speak, from the *outside* and are the responsibility of

the politician while the customary leader deals with issues *within* the Maasai society. The customary leader is nevertheless involved in the decision-making process when discussing what improvements the village needs and if and how to contribute to these implementations. The customary leadership is also often involved in political matters in discussions and meetings with politicians since political decisions affect the community and some decisions taken at district level are more easily implemented, according to the village chairperson, if customary leaders and influential elders approve them also. This can be an issue of money contributions or as workforce by the villagers for development projects, school-buildings, desks or road constructions. Hence, the politician is depending on the customary leader in the execution of government policies.

The intermediary link customary leaders and elders fill between the community and politicians, can on the other hand be used to exercise political influence over people. For example, before the 2000 General Election, politicians from different parties approached customary leaders and elders with the intention of gaining their trust and in this way get access to their influence over members in the community. Voting is not an individual issue; it is based on the principle of consensus and is therefore a communal one. Politicians who get support from homestead elders will without question get support from all eligible voters in that homestead. Elders and customary leaders will simply convey the message that they all should vote for a particular politician or a party since the Maasai community is seen as *one person* and like some respondents' say: '*one cannot walk two paths at the same time*'. They cannot as Maasai belong to different parties and tend therefore to favour the same political party while political leaders who misbehave can be altered.

Women and Dual Leadership

Being one of the marginalised groups in Tanzania with many societal changes happening in and around Maasai communities, it has become

important for the Maasai that implementations from 'outside' are discussed and harmonized into Maasai society without destroying or changing basic values of their culture. As a result, the co-operation between politicians, customary leaders and elders is beneficial for the community. But according to cultural norms, decision-making in the Maasai community is within the male domain that excludes women and it is taboo for women to participate in traditional meetings together with men, or to '*sit under the same shade*' as men. Even if it is not prohibited for women to attend political meetings, the taboo still has had an effect on their attendance in political meetings as well. However, clans, patrilineage, affinal connections, local groups (one or several homesteads for example) and other interest groups where women are included, are all social units that act politically on different levels in Maasai society where questions to be discussed can be generated. Hence, even if women are not attending these traditional meetings, they can get second hand information and discuss matters with their husbands in their homes.

The main advantage of political leadership is that it makes it possible for women to be involved more actively in political affairs of the community. Still, women do not have the same possibilities to influence decision-making as men for many reasons. As said above, women are not usually participating in meetings together with men and even if they from time to time can have common meetings, women's liberty to express themselves is not acknowledged and opinions are ridiculed or are simply neglected. Still, the political system gives women the opportunity to take active part in village matters by having the possibility of being elected and be able to elect political leaders of their choice to village government and to the different village committees. Women's participation in politics is further supported in law by setting aside one third of the political positions for women. Thus, party politics is a prerequisite and the only channel for women's involvement and their influence in decision-making. It would be detrimental for women to only have to rely on customary leadership since the appointing of *olaiquenani* is purely men's business and women have little say in what has been decided, let alone be positioned to a decision-making post.

Hence, the political system works in favour for women and give women more opportunities to express their views in matters what normally has been considered men's domain. The political meetings give women another arena away from customs and traditions. Yet, even though the political arena/the meeting arena has changed and elder women participate more frequently in 'modern' political meetings together with men; young women are still being excluded to some degree. It is still not considered appropriate according to cultural norms for a young woman to stand in front of her father and elders to express opinions or to criticise political leaders. This can however be done by younger men but still, their views might not bear the same weight as views held by older men. Often the dominance of elders and the acknowledgement of verbal prowess play an important role and elders are frequently correcting views of younger speakers who are not well conversant or are inexperienced.

Reflections

Relating the theme of this panel: African leadership – any alternatives, to the theme of this paper; the dual leadership structure among the Maasai, it can be safe to say that there are definite *pros* and *cons* for the Maasai to have a dual leadership structure. First of all, on the negative side to only have customary leadership would not be beneficial for Maasai women since they do not have any dealings in appointing them. Even if women benefit from this arrangement as community members, their fundamental human rights – the possibility to choose one's leaders and to be elected - would be denied. Then again, to only have politically elected leaders would indicate a breakdown of Maasai social organisation and culture, something no Maasai would want. In addition, to be subjected to a political leader from another ethnic group who has no 'co-operational obligation' to the customary leaders and elders is no perfect situation either. This leads to less information being transferred to the Maasai (due to illiteracy) which in turn leads to diminished influence over village matters.

I think the customary leaders will continue to have a large role to play in Maasai society thanks to the respect they have and in the way they are appointed and being what fundamentally is their own non-party leader. The honour given by the community and the responsibilities of the position are two explanations to why there are no or at least very few customary leaders seeking political offices. To combine these two positions would involve too heavy workload and would possibly render similar response as the elders above had regarding *oloiboni* travelling together with the district commissioner. Since the two leadership categories cover different spheres of the society they complement each other well i.e. traditional leaders internal and purely Maasai business in contrast to the political leaders' external affairs with district authority and other ethnic groups. What I find interesting and unique is that this duality seems to function well at local level, which drives the community in one direction. Since there cannot be two Maasai leaders who are of different opinions and who want to implement different ideas in the community, decisions are in this way anchored in the community. The whole issue is about harmony, unity and peace. If there would be major differences, they could lead to disagreements and possible fights within the Maasai community. This is something the Maasai want to avoid. Therefore, to have a political leader who is Maasai and who would not co-operate with customary leaders and elders is a rather unlikely scenario. Yet, I do not think this dual system would work at higher societal level in Tanzania due to the multi-ethnic society, with different cultural traits, languages and social organisations. But as a form of leadership structure at local and village level, I think it may function as a way to strengthen marginalised peoples' democratic rights. The traditional leaders give the society a form of stability in a changing world. At the same time, the political leadership gives women the right to vote and be elected and become part of a larger societal context with all the advantages that comes with it.

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COMPARISON OF CUSTOMARY LEADER AND POLITICAL LEADER

Leader	Way to reach position	Appointed/ elected	By whom	Qualifications	Responsibility	Relationship	Benefits	Legitimacy
Customary	Appointed at intervals	For life	By men in the Community. Not an individual choice	Good speaker, good listener, knows about Maasai traditions, rich in cows, from a good Maasai family	Customs, tradition, politics, solve conflicts	Within community	Prestige, respect	Very high
Political	Elected in regular elections	At five years intervals	By the electorate. Individual choice to run for position	Literate in Swahili, member of political party, no criminal record etc.	Responsible for development, to get resources to the village, solve conflicts	Outwards towards district,	Allowances, Salary, respect	Low