

YACHAY WASI Sacred Sites Event - Submission 5 - TANZANIA & KENYA -
Received April 20, 2006
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The Case of *Endoinyo oo-rmorwak* (Hill of the Elders) Of the Maasai Tribe of Tanzania and Kenya

1. The Maasai people of Tanzania and Kenya

The Maasai indigenous people live across the border of Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa. They are mainly pastoralists, originally roaming the plains with their livestock until recent years when governments of both countries and global influences somehow contained their free mobility of pursuit of pastures and water for both people and livestock. The threat of land enactment for wildlife conservation and land grabbing from local and international investors has put the livelihoods of the Maasai at a very high risk.

2. The culture and significance of age grouping among the Maasai

The stages of life of a male Maasai are very formally coordinated in a linear scale, starting from the childhood stage, known as "*alayani*", a period that lasts up until circumcision at around the age of fifteen to eighteen, then the period of warrior hood known as "*ormurani*", a period mostly lasting between fifteen and twenty years after circumcision, and finally, graduation to elder hood, "*orpayan*", a period that does not have clear-cut boundaries between junior and senior elders but for the natural wear and tear of the lined up elders of the different age groups.

The graduation from one stage to the next is usually a very significant landmark for the individual, the family, the respective age group and the whole tribe.

At all these stages, there is a respective attached role one is expected to play as an individual person and as a part of the larger community. Normally, women identify with the age group of their husbands.

3. Endoinyo oo-rmorwak (Hill of the Elders) – a sacred site of the Maasai

▪ Location

Endoinyo oo-rmorwak, literally meaning the "Hill of the Elders", is a sacred hill of the indigenous Maasai people living across the border of Tanzania and Kenya in East Africa. The hill is situated in Tanzania on the Sanya plains mid way between Mountains Kilimanjaro (Africa's highest) and Meru (Africa's third highest). It is in between two running

rivers and both of them, and the two great mountains, are removed bits but significant elements of the rituals that take place at the sacred hill.

The area where the hill is located is in the Maasai heartland, but in a narrow area where other ethnic and agricultural groups border them to the east at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro, and to the west, at the foot of Mount Meru. This location is also a point midway between the cities of Arusha and Moshi, fast growing metropolitan centers.

- **Sacredness through the “*orng’eherr*” rituals**

“*Orng’eherr*” rituals are the essence of the sacredness of this hill. They are the traditional rituals the age groups undergo at the hill in the ceremonies where they symbolically and formally graduate from warrior hood to elder hood. The occasion is coordinated tribe wide and this has been the official location for the purpose for as long as the Maasai can remember. These occasions take place on average every twelve to fifteen years.

- **Environmental essence of spirituality**

The rituals that take place during the formal graduation ceremonies at the Endoinyo oo-rmorwak nearly all use some form of biodiversity sector, ranging from the hill itself, some specific tree or part of it, to grass, water, the adjacent rivers and mountains, even to the direction the wind blows.

The conservation of a particular biodiversity sector on the hill is an integral part of the sacredness. They have ancestral connotations attached to their naturality, and that cannot be replicated on exotically.

It is not possible to imagine how else the Maasai would undertake their rituals minus any of the biodiversity sectors that are required and abundant at the hill.

- **Threats**

- ***Environmental threats***

As it has been indicated, the hill is located in a narrow plain in between two great mountains, and also two growing cities. The Kilimanjaro International Airport is on the same plain not too far to the south of the hill. The population growth and human activities around the adjacent great mountains and cities have put the hill at a high pressure and at risk of developments. These developments are destabilizing the environment and thus the relevance of the sacredness that is greatly attached to the natural environment.

Human activities are eroding the environment around the hill, through agriculture and settlements. The area is no longer a monopoly of the Maasai. Pieces of land at the foot of the hill

are being converted to agriculture and more of it is continuously being encroached at.

o ***Legal ownership and access***

There is a big conflict of interest between the Ministry of Education and Culture of the government of Tanzania, supposedly the self proclaimed guardian of the site (calling it a historical site!), the traditional leaders of the Maasai indigenous people, (their strategy not properly coordinated), local Maasai NGOs, fighting each other to gain control of the hill (only when they hear each other talk about it, otherwise they all forget for spells of time), and political personalities of Maasai tribe, wanting to capitalize politically from the tag of war, all have left the site almost as nobody's land.

The Maasai people are at a loss as to who is or should be the competent and trusted authority and guardian of the site.

As a result of the confusion of ownership and management of the site, with nobody really responsible, the environment around the hill is being destroyed by developments taking place making it a conflict zone between the Maasai indigenous people and the invading developers. Those who do not subscribe to it are eroding the feel of sacredness of the hill.

4. Opportunities / Recommendations

- Trace, collect, analyze, organize and preserve all available literature on this sacred site.
- Reclaiming and restoration to its natural form, of all lost land around the hill.
- Institute appropriate categorization of the site, protection and management locally, nationally and internationally,
- Indigenous users play the key role to gain maximum satisfaction of genuine sacredness and naturalness of the environment of the hill.
- Establish a museum of Maasai culture at the periphery of the hill that will become a clearinghouse of Maasai culture.