

A Scandal in Maasailand that Cheats both Communities and Tourists

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A visit to a traditional Maasai village is as coveted by safari tourists as seeing Kenya's 'Big 5.' But just as the impact of tourism can degrade the natural environment, it can also play a devastating role in exploiting native Kenyans. Upon arrival, a typical tourist books a package with a tour operator for a visit to a cultural manyatta. She is charged a steep ksh2000 as an entrance fee, but her driver explains that the money goes to local schools for Maasai education. After being welcomed at the village she sees the poor conditions of the school- lacking adequate classrooms, textbooks, and even enough teachers. A woman cradling a sick baby asking for any help, just a few dollars, approaches her. "They just kept asking me for money, after I had already given them so much at the gate," she explains, exasperated, back at the lodge, "what's wrong with these people?"

On the other side of this interaction a Maasai mother sits up at night in her boma to finish a row of beaded bracelets. When the van of tourists arrive the next morning she has already set out her jewelry, but her potential clients shuffle past her without even taking notice. They stand feet away and snap flash photographs, but do not attempt conversation. She has seen no improvement in schools or medical care for her children since the tourists started coming to her home- walking through her kitchen, staring at her clothing, recording her song and dance on film. "They don't even have the respect to buy a few necklaces," she sighs, "when that's the only way I have to take care of my family."

The discrepancies between these experiences are not dramatized. They are the consequences of severe and shrouded exploitation of the Maasai people through an organized scam taking place in cultural bomas across Kenya; a reality that may shock tourists and Kenyans alike and warrants their immediate attention.

Such visits to Maasai villages by tourists were not always fraught with such misconduct, in fact, the concept of cultural bomas was created by Maasai leaders to help villages share in the benefits of Kenya's tourism industry. In the early 1990's leaders in Kajaiido District came together and formed what they referred to as a 'cultural manyatta,' or warrior village, in a group ranch around Amboseli National Park (ANP). "This was to educate tourists about the actual Maasai practices," says Daniel Laturesh, chairman of a group ranch outside of ANP. The idea was to allow tourists to come to the warrior village and get a glimpse of Maasai life and establish ethical photograph opportunities. In return, the Maasai who lived there would receive a more steady income from entrance fees and goods sold in their markets.

Laturesh's village became the first warrior village created in the region. One family was selected from almost every village in Laturesh's group ranch and moved into the new manyatta. "The men's job was to manage the facility, take entrance fees, and distribute the funds amongst the village, while the women's job was to sell their jewelry," says Joseph Sayialel, a current member of the Kajaiido County Council and one of the co-founders of this concept. Originally, entrance fees were ksh2000 per vehicle (roughly 26

USD). The village would split the fee with the drivers and receive a net income of ksh1000.

In 1999 things shifted when tour drivers started encouraging Maasai to create more villages, now referred to as cultural bomas. Tour drivers claimed that there were too many tourists and not enough space. They also claimed that the Maasai would generate more revenue for their people if they had more bomas. Now there are approximately 6 cultural bomas in Laturesh's group ranch and countless more in Masai Mara. In fact, every village in the area surrounding Masai Mara National Reserve now takes visitors. These developments have opened up competition between bomas and given tour operators an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. By the year 2000, tour drivers started demanding lower rates for their entrance fees threatening to take their clients to other villages if they were not appeased. That same year Laturesh withdrew his village from mass tour visits. He now only allows access from two tour companies (Wildland Adventures and Micato Tours), which he knows to be ethical.

As of 2005 tour drivers are exploiting the cultural bomas for everything they have. According to Laturesh and Sayaiel, Maasai villages are so desperate for business they are allowing the tour drivers to take almost all of their profits. Tourists now pay an average of 20USD per person at the boma entrance, but at the end of the day the village is forced to give all but ksh300 (3.5USD) to the tour driver.

The middle-men abuse more than just the entrance fee exchange. Many drivers tell their clients it is more expensive to purchase jewelry at the bomas than to purchase it from a roadside curio shop. Drivers take their clients to the curio shops where they have arranged a deal with shop-owners and receive a percentage of sales made, again diverting funds from the cultural villages. At Amboseli Sarena Lodge a tourist wearing Maasai jewelry reported that she had bought it from a curio shop because "it was too expensive in the village." When asked the price of certain items in the village she didn't have a definite answer and replied only "it was just too expensive so we went some place else." She also confirmed that she was charged 20 USD.

On the same day Meitamei Olol Dapash, founder of the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition (MERC), approached a few Maasai warriors who were outside Sarena Lodge soliciting for visits to the bomas. Assuming he was a tour operator, the men offered him a tour for ksh300. "ksh300?" Olol Dapash repeated aloud in English in front of a group of US students. "Shh, shh," the men said, "that's ksh300 to us- you charge them whatever you like."

Unfortunately, this is not the only method of solicitation. Councilor Sayaiel says that men from the cultural bomas will come to the lodges and bargain with tour drivers to come to their village by purchasing them a beer. The average cost of a beer at most lodges is roughly ksh200. This means that if the village received only one tour that day, no tourists purchased jewelry, and they solicited for more drivers to return the next day then the village made only ksh100. This is the cash income a village must then use for social services such as schools and medical facilities.

Villages are obviously feeling this strain, but attempts to organize against the cultural boma scam have been undermined. In both Kajaiido and Narok districts, tour operators have threatened villages that their boma will be blacklisted and business will be diverted to either the Mara or Amboseli, respectively. Councilor Sayaiel believes this to

be a bluff and is currently rallying the council to take authority in regulating tour operations.

Although this is a complex situation, there are viable solutions. If tour operators were completely shut down the loss of business would be devastating to the Maasai economy. This is not a likely answer because of the high demand from tourists to experience Maasai culture. “The tour drivers are already paid by their clients who book the tours,” Olol Dapash says, “they [the drivers] are required to take the tourists where they are asked.” Instead Sayail and others are drafting plans to establish a more equitable financial exchange.

The potential solutions are contingent on collaborative relationships between the cultural bomas, tourists, and other tourism stakeholders. The Kajaido County Council is using the Olonanna boma outside of MMNR as an example. Olonanna has partnered with a nearby lodge and developed a voucher system wherein the lodge collects entrance fees from their guests and then gives the vouchers to the driver to be delivered to the village. Only a villager can then redeem the vouchers at the lodge. Leaders in ANP believe this has been a successful arrangement so far and are working to implement the same plan with Amboseli Sarena Lodge. A meeting is set for August 2005 between Councilor Sayail and Sarena management to discuss possibilities.

All other bomas surrounding MMNR are still vulnerable to mistreatment; a dilemma exemplifying the exploitation of Maasai people by the tourism industry in general. Hopefully tourists will be made aware of this scandal before the Maasai are stigmatized as backward and incapable of managing money. When our interviewed tourist was told that, despite witnessing the money exchange hands, none of her dollars went to support the villagers her eyes welled with tears. “Oh god,” she put her hand to her mouth, “that explains why that mother still needed money to feed her child.”

Both tourists and Maasais suffer from the false perception of one another created through this exploitation. At the end of a visit to cultural bomas both parties have been pushed the corners, left asking, “What’s wrong with these people?” Ultimately, this rift results in Maasai people being used and grossly under-compensated for their critical contribution to Kenya’s tourism industry.