

Interview Kenny Matampash
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What is this projet about ?

We have a project that we are working on, and this project is about plants, which are found mainly in Masai land, and within different regions of a Masai land. We have arid and semi arid zones, we have medium potential and high potential zones. So we visited all these regions to identify, document and take picture from different plant from these regions

It is an idea that I had for a long time and I have been thinking as a Masai naturalist grown and being raised in the Masai community and also as an academician who went to school and university. I found important that plants are part of the cosmos and we needed to know about them.

Since immemorial times Masai people have always been in touch with nature and they have used all the resources that are found in nature: the forest, the soil, and the mountain for different purposes.

Plants are very special for the Masai people because they are used for different purposes, depending on the different properties the plant has. These have been used for 100 and 100 of years ; and even today these plants are still being used for the same purposes.

These plants are used for medicinal purposes, for human beings and livestock and these plants are used to cure illnesses of different types. It could be stomach ache, head ache rheumatism, back ache, worms, malaria, eye ailments, malaria, removal of jiggers, disease of respiratory system, sinusitis, coughing sore throat, to clean the kidneys. So really these plants are used to cure many types of illnesses. I personally use a number of them when I am sick. I have been taught by my father, grandfather, mother and grandmother. They transmitted this knowledge to me when I was young. I can identify more than one hundred medicinal plants in these regions. And I know their uses. I know the Masai names in my language. We manage to get some of botanical names through reference books, but some have not yet botanical names. But we can still search and find it.

Apart from medicinal purposes, some of these plants and roots and barks are used to prepare concoctions, mixtures of different herbs, roots and barks and herbs which is boiled separately and later used to mix with bone and meat soup. These mixtures are mainly used by young *Illmuran* or warriors in their meat camps, called *olpul*, where young men in groups of ten to 15 sit together in the forest, sometimes in caves for 1 to 2 month and they use these concoctions to get strong, fearless. The same concoctions can be used at homesteads. These concoctions help to heal STD, internal wounds, stomach upsets, backaches and joint aches. Elderly people prepare the same at home to gain more strength.

Some roots and plants are also used to feed young children mixed with milk.

Some of these plants are also edible as wild fruits or tubers and are found in all the regions of Masai land. Most pastoralist children when they are herding livestock in the forest, their only available food for midday is gathering and eating wild fruits and

berries, and fibres since children do not come back for lunch. They leave at 6 in the morning and come back at 7 pm, bringing back the animals. Then they have their dinner. So the all day long they only eat wild fruits and roots and fibres, which are very nutritious and they carry vitamins. Our children are very healthy. Actually it is not only children but all pastoralist that use edible wild plant and fruits.

There are also some poisonous corrosive plants that are known by the Masai. This knowledge is transmitted to children so every body knows. They avoid touching them and eating them. Some are deadly like Olauui. Some are used to prepare poison for arrows (Olmorijioi) for defence against wild animals, predators and even when human beings attack.

A number of roots and herbs are also used for Medicinal also for livestock illness and veterinary purposes. They prepare the concoctions by boiling or soaking some of the plants and they sieve them and they give them to cows or livestock when they have problems (bloat, constipation, indigestion) Some roots are also used when the afterbirth of a cow is delayed. For eye illness, they use some gums from a plant called Olmoshua to grind the gum in powder form and put it directly in the eye of the cow. It really works all these handlings I have done it myself.

Most of the trees and plants are also edible as fodder by livestock for goats and sheep's, cows donkey and they really help during drought time. Most of the acacia family produces pods that are very nutritious for livestock

The Masai people of East Africa, Kenya and Tanzania who are normally pastoralists do not make permanent homes for houses. They make temporary houses that last a maximum of one year or less because of their nomadic system emigration from one place to another looking for pastures and water. They move with the seasons. Construction of their semi permanent homes is done using some special trees. Houses are normally done by women, not men, who go to the forest, identify and select durable and hardy trees or plants that can last for a year to construct their houses. They use them to make poles, which are vertically erected, in a circular form and also branches, which are put horizontally and bound to the poles. They use the green branches and plants in between branches and poles and strengthen the all with more leaves and their smear them with a mixture of cow dung and soil. And then plaster them. Dried trees are also of course used for firewood and for cooking.

Although the pastoralist Masai are not sculptors, they carve some special hardwood, trees or plants to make walking sticks, herding and fighting sticks (clubs) to defend themselves against wild animals and ceremonial sticks like the black stick of connection. They also make chief black staff used by anointed leaders of the community. They carve also the 3 legged stool which is used for elders, important people to sit on and for special ceremonies of initiation from warrior ship to junior elders. When you are given a stool you are qualified as junior elder and you can perform some duties and decision making.

There are some seeds that are very hard that women use to make necklaces and before the coming of the beads mainly from India, Masai women were using wild seeds from Oloponi and others to make beads, and still are doing to day. Some plants are used by young children to carve toys like small cows, puppets, from soft trunks like Empalua Calabashes and gourds are also made from special plants that produce big seed. When dried you make a gourd and calabashes out of it. For milk and preparing local brews. They also carved long wooden troughs where cows drink water and have the salt.

Other plants like ~~Otukai~~ (bamboo), which are commonly found in medium and high potential zones of Masai land, are also carved to make tobacco holders or arrow shafts. Some special trees are also carved to make arrow rods and bows. Others are used to make mats for sitting, temporary homes for people and shelters for goat kids. At the olpul meat camp Ilmurran use special soft leaves from special selected plants with good scent to prepare mattresses (like Olgilai, Olelesua)

There are also plants roots barks that have very good scent and are used to make perfume for young men and women. They grind them in powder form and sprinkle them in their hair and also make necklaces of them and they smoke their bodies with the scented smoke.

Some special plants and trees are used to light a fire by friction of 2 sticks, a flat one and a rod. Friction is done and the spark of fire comes out which is captured by using the dry sheet of e donkey crushed in powder form. These trees are known by all the Maasai people and this kind of process of making fires used during initiation ceremonies. Ilmurran are in the bush camps, when they do not have matches, they make their own fire with the sticks.

During initiation ceremonies, especially circumcisions, elders who are the godfathers of that generation have to make fire with these sticks. It is a special ritual.

The Masai spirituality is driven from the nature and the cosmos. We believe that the spirit is invisible it is within the nature itself, plants, insects, and trees... And since forest is the habitat of most plants, birds, insects, forest are sacred and holy places for the Maasai. Some of the plants, trees are used for spirituality and initiations ceremonies, rituals, sacrifices and any other spiritual happeningsFor example the Olive tree (Oloiren) and the Fig tree (Oreteti) are the most sacred trees that are used for almost all ceremonies and initiation rituals of the Misaim people. The Oseki tree is also a sacred tree. It is used for peace making and reconciliation. Another plant Enkaiteteyiai with lovely little blue flowers is also very sacred and holy and used for most fertility ceremonies and to bless, to drive away bad omen and to clear the way during journeys away of home ...

Traditional brews and wines that are used for imitation ceremonies and rituals by elders are made from concoction of roots of special plants like the wild Aloe Vera roots, Oldarpoi, mixed with honey to ferment and sealed in calabashes.

During the rituals and imitation ceremonies, this wine is used for blessing by elders who sprinkle the content and bless and utter prayers for these occasions.

The witch doctors also use some of the herbs and fruits to perform rituals to foresee the future.

So really plants have multiple uses and purposes within the Masai community. It is part and parcel of their life.

Why it is important to document the plants now?

I find it extremely important to document and transmit this knowledge of plants to the young and middle-aged generations of the maa community and other communities around the world. For this reason, this book will be published into maa and English. So that they know and share and appreciate this knowledge that the Mother Earth, nature and the cosmos provide us freely to use reasonably as co creators

It is also evident that this kind of information has never been documented and if so very thinly and scanty. As a Masai naturalist and traditionalist who went through the western education to the level of university, I find this incredibly important that this knowledge be documented and further research may be done by scholars and that the young generations of today may learn and know that there is a lot that we can get from nature. This knowledge and experience of nature is known and experienced by the Masai before and presently. Scientists, researchers and botanists have done a tremendous job of study of plants of East Africa which is very valuable, but **scanty**. Our study is going further from just botanical medicinal knowledge to a deeper practical and functional knowledge of these plants, e.g. the spiritual properties, the nutritional etc. The uniqueness of this project is that it originates from the Masai community itself and is meant for transmission to the further Masai generations. We do not have the pretensions to have the totality of knowledge we just want to give a lively image coming from the experience of life and not the university.

The new land tenure system where land is now owned and privatized, is an alien concept to the pastoralists. Past and present regimes have supported and introduced privatisation of land even within pastoralist areas, which are ASALs. To a point whereby the pastoral lands are diminishing and yet the population is rising so there is high demand for land, and crop production and other agro business. This new development of land privatization threatens the nature and the eco systems to a point where some of these valuable plants are disappearing due to cultivation, urbanization and crop and agro business production replacing pastoralist which is the most conducive environmental friendly ecosystem. Since this change is inevitable it is very important that this knowledge is documented now so that preservation mechanisms and conservation of these valuable resources nature be safeguarded by all means. For example the rampant and indiscriminate destruction of acacia trees for charcoal burning is a threat to livestock fodder during drought and also extreme degradation of environment. It is not only a threat to livestock but also to wild life, e.g. the elephants whose ecosystem and habitat are determined by the vegetation of the acacia species that are now disappearing. There is now a move by trader's herbalists to commercialize medicinal plants and this will further lead to more destruction.

The aim of this project and documentation is also to create a critical consciousness among the Masai community, the Masai scholars and other scientists of the need to preserve and protect this heritage for the generations to come.

This study is also helpful to document and transmit this knowledge to young children who no longer know the use of the plants even their names in their own language, leave alone botanical names. If this information is available in the Masai community, young people will start getting interest to know more about these plants which are available in their neighbourhood and they will help to protect and preserve them.

And it is my hope that this study will be used in our local schools from primary, secondary to university levels.

This plant research is part of a bigger project of documentation of the Masai culture and values. Can you tell us more about it? And why it is so important to document these culture and values?

This project is important in many aspects. First because very little has been done in documentation of Masai culture, language. That's why I feel the Masai oral traditions that are very rich in many aspects of life need to be documented now.

Because there is nothing written from the point of view of a Masai himself telling his stories and experiences. Of course a lot of research have been done by anthropologists, historians, botanists and so on. It is also evident that in most books there are seen old and new, looks are concentrated on a Masai people as beautiful people wearing beautiful attire. There are many beautiful pictures of the Masai in books. There is a kind of romantizing about them and probably for touristic consumption. While that is not bad, I think we need to go deeper and tell the other side of the Masai people, not the touristic side of it but rather the inner side. Because Masai are people with a culture and who are very strong in protecting, holding and treasuring their custom and traditions . They have got a **plight of dignity**. It is not a plight to show of. It is a dignified plight. They have also a very close attachment and relationship with nature itself. And they could reach a rich culture that is based on basic human values. These values are expressed in different forms. The values of generosity, sharing, being concerned with others, being in relations with others and also being in direct communication with nature itself and the cosmos. They have also the value of humility, love, patience, acceptance and having the feel of belonging to a community in communion with others . They are never egocentric. That s why we say : you never walk alone. You can have, without being obliged to give back. It is free. All these values are not documented anywhere. The only transmission of these values is through the oral tradition of passing the information from father to child, grandfather to children. This has worked so well before western education and modernization, before this age of Internet and IT, which I think though necessary for the present time. There is now less and less transmission of these values through oral tradition . Therefore it is important that we document theses values and knowledge and that these can be shared even through internet and all other modern communication tools. It seems that there is a contradiction in between westernization and modernization vis à vis traditions. Though westernization and modernization are inevitable and overwhelming, we feel there must be a sense of belonging. Not hanging in between tradition and modernity. You can have both and there is no contradiction. In fact, you can become the link in between the 2.