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Journal of Management Inquiry

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The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jmi.sagepub.com/content/14/3/255

Published by:

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http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

Western Academy of Management

>> Version of Record - Aug 3, 2005

What is This?

Meeting the Maasai

Messages for Management

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This article reflects on implications of a brief ethnographic field trip to visit a remote Maasai clan in Northern Kenya. The author, approaching the inquiry from an interest in evolutionary psychology and the study of family business, conducted in-depth interviews with a range of elders, warriors, women, and children, asking questions relating to the intersection of kinship, culture, and organization. The reflections take the form of eight messages for management. These relate to such themes as the relationship between social harmony and the clarity and simplicity of social structure, collectivist values and stewardship models of leadership, the role of mythical beliefs in sustaining cultural integrity, the fragility of strong cultures to certain kinds of change, and the ethical challenges and dilemmas posed by some of the factors that help to sustain them. The article concludes by emphasizing the degree to which one can choose how to configure business cultures to generate outcomes that one regards as desirable and ethical.

Keywords: *leadership; culture; family business; ethnography; evolutionary psychology*

Is it possible to learn anything of value from the study of cultures far removed from contemporary business experience? A positive answer would rest on two ideas. One is the idea that our social systems are the result of implicit choices we make about work and organization, which contrasts can help to highlight. The other is the idea that similarities or parallels between vastly different societies may be pointing toward universals in the forms and functioning of organizations and societies.

It was with these principles in mind that I embarked early in 2004 on a week-long ethnographic field trip to a remote part of Northern Kenya, off the tourist track, to stay with a remote Maasai tribe. My interest was stimulated partly from my work on the new Darwinism—what is called evolutionary psychology—and its application to contemporary business (Nicholson, 1997, 2000). I wanted to see how the same ideas might be relevant to a radically different context. This was also linked with my primary research interest: the study of family firms. The underlying proposition of my work in this area is that family businesses have special qualities arising from the infusion of kinship into organizations and their operations (Nicholson & Björnberg, 2004). Accordingly, my method of inquiry was to study them, the Maasai, as if they were a family business, which in one sense they are, as a kinship and affiliate community centered around a common economic objective: the raising of livestock. The underlying intent was to see by what

stretch one could find parallels with family and other businesses or what one might learn from failing to find any.

In this article, I set out a number of general principles and themes that emerged from this inquiry.

WHO ARE THE MAASAI?

One can divide the primal social systems of world peoples into three broad historical groupings: hunter gatherers, whose way of life has predominated for 99% of human history; pastoralists (often nomadic); and agrarians (farmers). In modern times (i.e., the last 3,000 years), we can add such categories as slave and feudal states, command economies or dictatorships, and latterly, liberal democracies; but it is the first three that have been the way of life for most people for the past 10,000 years (Diamond, 1997; Runciman, 1998). The Maasai fall into the second group: pastoralists who have subsisted on breeding livestock, periodically shifting their grazing across their geographically bounded range—a way of life that has remained pretty much unchanged for 3,000 years. There have been interruptions and incursions in this period, from the spread of farming and later the advent of colonial rule. But now the Maasai are protected in a large conservation area of upland bush veldt and scrub desert, mainly in Northern Kenya and Tanzania.

Their social system revolves around a simple system of production and exchange involving the breeding and herding of cattle and goats. Where they have little contact with the outside world, they are for the most part nonliterate and nonmonetary. Their units of production—animals—are their currency along with other materials and services through barter. Their way of life is intensely communal, consisting of tribes aggregating from regionally networked clans. A key theme in their culture is the cult of the warrior. Warriors form a pivotal segment of their social structure, which forms around the divisions of the age set: 14-year periods that govern the lives, responsibilities, and rights of cohorts of males. The rules governing men and women make a very sharp differentiation between the sexes.

In my interviews, my companions and I spoke to four groups: children, women, warriors, and elders. I was one of a party of four Europeans supported by two local men with tents and four-wheel drives to enable us to live among the people in their home area. We were also accompanied by a Turkana,[1] a native of the northern desert area of the Maasai range, who was a freelance journalist fluent in local dialects and who acted as translator and cultural interpreter for us. At the end of our trip, in Nairobi, we also interviewed a prominent Maasai scholar and writer, currently publishing an authoritative series of monographs on Maasai life and customs, to check key facts and impressions.[2] Interviews were semistructured and, in most cases, recorded on videotape. Various sources were consulted for background intelligence to ensure that we did not waste time uncovering what is already known about the Maasai. Our desire was to understand their experience of life and work and how it might relate to the challenges, tasks, and roles we see in working organizations in the West.

This article is based on field notes from our interviews and observations. Each day for 6 days, we conducted intensive interviews throughout the day and some evenings with individuals and groups of Laikipiak tribespeople in a region to the north of Nairobi, in the foothills of Mount Kenya.[3] In each location, we camped just outside the *boma*, the thorn enclosure that surrounds a *manyatta*. The manyatta—literally, "warrior village"—is actually a small collection of mud and wattle huts, usually no more than a dozen per enclosure. Each of these villages houses kinship groups of women, children, and elders (men in age sets superior to the warriors, i.e., from around 30 upwards). The boma acts as a nighttime enclosure protecting livestock from predators (lions and hyenas, principally).

Our interviews took place within the manyattas as well as in the field—wherever we came across warriors, children, women, and elders willing to talk. They almost always were very happy to stop and answer our inquiries. They were almost as interested in us as we in them, and we gave them small gifts of pens, pocketknives, and Polaroid prints of themselves as tokens of appreciation. In content, the schedule of interview questions covered issues of kinship, family life, work, leadership, decision making, and community, including the following topics:

- the roles and responsibilities of specific demographic groups
- leadership role expectations
- governance and decision-making structures
- cultural mores, norms, and taboos
- leadership succession practices
- ownership and wealth management
- critical incidents and everyday problem solving
- conflict management and difficult relationships

- crime and punishment
- health and well-being
- change, especially the incursion of education, money, and other forms of modernity into their way of life

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

My first impression was of a society as far removed from my own as it is possible to imagine. The absence of electricity, running water, consumer goods, written material, and any kind of mechanization, including transport, provide an immediate and visible contrast with any developed economy. You know you are in another world. The physical appearance of the Maasai sends the same message. Most are attired traditionally, wearing the bright red shawl, or *shuka*, that is emblematic of their identity. Unwed girls and warriors are intensely decorated with elaborate beaded necklaces, circlets, jewelry, and headgear. Many have dyed and braided hair. Male warriors typically carry spears and clubs—ceremonial emblems of their status. In the locality of our inquiry, there was an evident passion for headgear incorporating plastic flowers, a small sign of how materials from other cultures can be imported and absorbed without disturbance to the culture. Elders and married women are more plainly attired, with the only swathes of color being that of their shawls and shukas, especially featuring the famous Maasai crimson. Children, especially boys, are more conventionally ragged urchins in appearance.

The demeanor of people is gentle, self-confident, and positive. Around the boma, one encounters women, infants, and elders during the day. The women are mainly engaged in tending the very young livestock, keeping the fires going, maintaining the enclosure, and doing other local domestic labors. The elders sit around in groups, mainly gossiping and story telling. The women do much the same when not otherwise engaged, for in times of plenty, as we found them after they had experienced the unexpected bonus of unseasonal rain, this is an undemanding lifestyle. At times of drought or other extremity, life is harder in the struggle to preserve dwindling stock, but during our sojourn, we observed a pace of life that was leisurely and decidedly unpressured. Around the village, warriors tend to come and go in twos and threes; hang out for a while, talking to the women and elders; and then wander off. When we went walking in the bush, it was these proud and gaudy young men we would mostly encounter out on their patrol duties.

The cycle of the day follows the rhythm of herding. Early repast is followed by the animals being led out of the boma for grazing (keeping young livestock separate from their mothers to preserve their milk supply). They are brought back in at dusk, at which time the women and children do the milking. Evenings are a quiet time for these groups, though warrior groups are given to communal chanting and dancing. In their dance, warriors and unmarried girls set up a hypnotic rhythm of vocalizing and dancing. The men display their agility and athleticism in the famous vertical springing action[4] often featured on travelogue films of the region, whereas the girls rock their bodies in rhythm—a motion visually amplified by the exaggerated sway of their broad flat neckbands. No such evening celebration takes place if the pattern of normalcy has been disturbed, such as when an animal has gone astray during the day's grazing. Then, searching replaces partying. The Maasai have much larger periodic gatherings and ceremonials to mark the major life events and transitions of the tribe—the most important being age-set succession: the passing of the warrior age-set into elderhood and the initiation of an entering cohort.

These and other practices are extensively documented elsewhere (D. M. Anderson, 1995; Spear & Waller, 1993) and will not detain us here, for the aim here is rather to extract lessons of wider relevance from observations of how the Maasai see themselves, the world around them, and the prospect of change.

These can be distilled around themes and points of contrast between their world and ours, which I shall summarize here as eight messages for management.

EIGHT MESSAGES FOR MANAGEMENT

Clarity and Uniformity
Define a Strong Culture

In interviewing the Maasai, one encounters a confidence that is born of clarity. No one seems in any doubt about his or her role, purpose, and responsibilities. The parameters of their world are secure. Within our party, Anthony Willoughby and Jo Owen[5] are practitioners in a territory-mapping technique that engages people from all kinds of societies in the figurative portrayal of their worlds and the tensions within them and in the ways forward to solving problems. In societies such as the Maasai there is not just absolute clarity but uniformity of view. What they

draw on their maps repeatedly depicts a focus on the constant priorities of their existence: their livestock, water supply, and grazing and their community and the potential threat to its boundaries by raiders.

Transpose to the Western corporation, and you have as many worldviews as you do people. The maps that business people draw show a yearning for strong cultures but an experience that consists of coalitions of fragmented (often quasi-tribal) subcultures. How can one hope to build community under such circumstances? The inconsistent perceptions that the mapping technique exposes in our businesses show how far we are from a communitarian ideal, by virtue of an absence of shared experience and common perspectives. When family firms draw their territory maps, it appears that the sense of true community is less of a problem than in other types of business, partly as a function of reduced size and complexity, strong cultural values, and secure identity. How much does the Maasai clarity depend on small size and short lines of communication? Probably not much. The Maasai people are populous, but their people are dispersed in small groups, linked by almost no modern communication technologies—bush telegraph is literally practiced here—yet our experience of the Maasai was not idiosyncratic. What we observed corresponds to what can be read in the scholarly works on the people.

Does clarity for our business communities depend on size? It does to the extent that evolutionary psychology tells us (Dunbar, 1996) that above the size 150, it is hard to maintain what the 19th-century sociologist Tonnies (1887/1957) called *gemeinschaft*—the feeling of true community. Large firms do it by maintaining viable subgroups of these dimensions, linking them by weak ties (Burt, 1992; Nicholson, 2000). Additionally, the experience of large family firms seems to suggest that you can spread a "family feeling" through a community by consistency and clarity of vision and values.

The lesson we can derive from Maasai experience here is that clarity matters, and we would do well to ruthlessly expose incongruence and confusion in people's views of the organization and its environment to understand what it would take to move toward greater consistency. But perhaps consistency is not what we want. We love our diversity and revel in our individuality. If we are not prepared to forgo these qualities, then we need to realize that they may impose substantial costs on our capacity to work together. Family firms may supply examples of where some of these costs can be circumvented by cultural

integration, for within them, the natural diversity of human types in the firm are, at their best, brought together in a powerful and rich weave of themes around a clear business focus (Tagiuri & Davis, 1996). At their worst, the family mix is explosive and destroys the business—a risk that seems absent among the Maasai.

Minimalism Yields Harmony

One theme of our interrogations was a search for the dynamics driving adaptation and development in the Maasai, as one might seek it in a business, through the sources of creative tension, difference, and conflict resolution. This proved to be difficult. We uncovered accounts of small disputes and everyday jealousies, but we found few signs of significant conflicts, even through indirect inquiries we made to assess whether our hosts were concealing a more turbulent reality from us. By every account we received, this was plainly not the case. We had entered a society where, despite evident privations, there was uniformity, contentment, and harmony among people. The men, women, and children we spoke with expressed in word and manner an unaffected happiness and contentment with life. "We all love each other," we were told. "We are all one family." When we asked them about threats to their existence, they were strongly resistant to the idea, expressing great confidence in their values and continuity. Anthropologists are wise to be cautious of the gloss that is given to accounts of everyday life given by people flattered by the unusual attention of ethnographic inquiry. We prefer to accept our impressions as genuine for three reasons. First, we were not so exotic to them as they were to us; they had mostly seen White people before,[6] though they had not been questioned in this manner. Second, our impressions were corroborated across more than one group, independently. Third, we tested all our impressions with our Turkana interpreter and subsequently in discussions after the trip with a Maasai scholar. As the former, our translator affirmed, "No, they are not romancing. People here don't carry baggage. They have no word for 'sorry.'" However, in other respects, we did find quite a lot of romancing about their existence, as we shall see. Some of the facts of people's reports were quite far removed from their lived reality.

The chief point here, however, is that it would appear that the real peace and amity we observed was delivered partly by virtue of the extreme undemand and simplicity of their way of life. This does not mean

they are immune from struggles for existence or crises at intervals. Nor does it mean that their emotional life is impoverished. But their life is very simple in its structures, rhythms, and demands. There is no growth as we would see it in developed economies. Change for the community fluctuates on a rhythmic cycle of seasons and the changing fortunes of their times. At a personal level, expectations are progressive, however. Parents give livestock to their children in the rational hope of their growing an increasing herd, which they, in turn, will distribute to their own offspring. This leads to overgrazing, such that people are used to a cycle of plenty and impoverishment. Within these expectations, the pattern of life retains its main elements and forms, quite unchanged.

Is it simplicity that creates harmony? It certainly is an element, inasmuch as one can abstract one theme from several that characterize the culture and way of life. The simplicity of the Maasai existence contributes through the fact that what befalls one individual or group generally befalls others—drought and plenty being the most important. The structure and culture also dictate a sharing of everyday life events. In visiting a chief's wife in her hut, I asked her if there is anything she would like to know about the way of life of my people. She asked me about the construction and disposition of our houses. I explained that we often lived in large communities where we did not know our neighbors very well. She was perplexed: "How do you build your houses, then, without neighbors to help you?"

Does this conjunction of simplicity and harmony hold any parallels for business life? It is hard to find organizations that have such a simple existence, though one could identify perhaps agricultural smallholdings or mom and pop stores that live just on passing trade: businesses that seek no major market growth—just sufficient benefits to pass on to the next generation. The quality of life is indeed often happy and harmonious in such situations, though the intrusion of the market, public planning, squeezes on wealth, and the like make them neither secure enough nor free from worry to emulate the Maasai. Yet these organizations, such as the Maasai, can exemplify the principle espoused by philosophers that one recipe for a contented life is to hold modest expectations.

On this principle, perhaps there is an exemplary point, for organizational life does face a future challenge of how to reverse the escalating growth expectations that market capitalism creates. The cottage industry alternative of simple, no-growth businesses

is made to look attractive by the Maasai example, but is it a model in any sense for the development of the business community? Not in general, for the imperative of globalization is moving us inexorably in the opposite direction. However, increasingly at the margin, there are groups in society who seek to opt out of the rat race and migrate into this kind of harmonious equilibrium. The message here is that this can be done only to the extent that one can keep it simple. Most observable trends are in the reverse direction.

Collectivism Has to Be Culturally Reinforced

Cross-cultural scholars write much about individualism and collectivism as a key dimension of cultural difference, contrasting, for example, the preference of the developing world for group collaboration and consensus versus the Anglo-Saxon bias toward individualistic, competitive striving and the cult of the personality (Hofstede, 1998). The most primitive and enduring form of collectivism is food sharing (Ridley, 1996)—one of the fundamental processes in every kind of society. In the West, our food sharing (e.g., distribution of wealth and resources) is grossly unequal and inequitable.

The Maasai represent an opposite extreme on this continuum, intensively collectivist not only in their ethos of sharing but also in their treatment of individual differences. Contemporary behavior genetics notes that in every society, people differ on the base of heritable features of personality, ability, cognitive style, and physical appearance (Plomin, 1994). But even the most inborn of traits passes through the filter of experience. A person's genes to be tall require an environment that will nurture their potential through sufficiency of nutrition and freedom from disease or accident. It is also possible for cultural values and practices, via socialization, to overlay individual differences in character to minimize or to accentuate them. In our society, the military does the former, drama school the latter.

In the Maasai, the cult of the collective is extreme. When I asked a local chief, "What do you do when you have someone who has exceptional talent in some skill, such as musical ability?" his answer was disapproving: "We don't like it. He would not be a good *murran* (warrior)." Further examination revealed that the most valued abilities are those perceived to be economically useful to the collective, such as the skill to make spears, though the individuals who possess such talents are not overtly celebrated for their

achievements. Likewise, whatever it takes to become a good witchdoctor—intelligence, memory, and self-belief—is discovered and employed rather than venerated or allowed to become the subject of acclamation. It was also apparent that the ability to tell stories is highly valued. Good narrators' and gossips' company may be often sought after, but without any conspicuous personal recognition. Apart from these individual differences, it seemed that other distinguishing personal qualities would be regarded as a distraction. In another locality, we asked the same question and got a different answer. Here, where the group was closer to the tourist trail and where the clan occasionally performed entertainment for cash, musical talent was valued as instrumental to the ability to purchase materials for decoration and ritual. This variation serves to underline the rule that utility to the collective is the criterion for valuing individual differentiation.

The implication is that how much individuality is displayed is a matter of collective choice. To maintain a high degree of collectivism requires a highly structured, ritualized, and normative culture. In our organizations, we achieve uniformity less by power of enculturation and more by self-selection. It is "elective affinity"—people choosing to join groups of like-minded individuals and quitting those where they feel uncomfortably different—that results in the apparent narrow bandwidth of character that segments our society horizontally. It leads to the within-group homogeneity and between-group heterogeneity of the accounting firm, the law practice, the advertising agency, and many other kinds of business (Chatman, 1991; Schneider, 1987). But within all of these sectors, individuals are striving to distinguish themselves to be valued and rewarded—a far cry from the Maasai world. Business organizations can choose to reinforce uniformity of dress and conduct—Japanese corporations built a good deal of strength through this model (Yoshimura & Anderson, 1997)—but the trends worldwide in business culture are still migrating in the opposite direction, toward the recognition of individual contribution.

A Service Ideal Can Be Cultivated at All Levels of a Social System

It was apparent, in interview after interview, that service to the collective is an overriding value. We asked every group what they would see as the exemplar of a good warrior, wife, elder, and even child. The most striking factor in responses was their uniformity.

Moreover, there was a remarkable intersection with questions about what gave people greatest pleasure. A group of women spoke about the joy of being good at caring for husband, children, and animals. The good warrior is one who looks after animals. The good elder provides for his family and does not go out and get drunk. Good people, we were told, do not complain.

The Maasai scholar who we interviewed in Nairobi to check our field impressions reiterated the theme. The word *respect* was much used to summate the estimation of the service ideal. This is earned by "proper" and "correct" behaviors, which amount to modesty, nonviolence toward others, deference to age, and service to others.

One of the most illuminating in-depth interviews was conducted with a warrior chief—a man of extraordinary presence, around 6 ft 4 in. tall, with a lean, handsome face and body and finely braided, colored hair, possessing a deep, dark voice, leavened by a brilliant smile of large white teeth, and with alert, penetrating, yet sparkling eyes. Here was a living exemplar of the much-misused word *charisma*. This man had presence. His answers also revealed him to be a person of high intelligence. His acumen had earned him the responsibility for managing the financial transactions of his community. Here was someone who one felt would be trusted, followed, and revered. He probably was, but his answers betrayed no hint of leadership in the sense of exercised authority; rather, every answer to our probing just elaborated an extended concept of stewardship. His responsibility was to serve his community. Similar responses came from all our other questioning of wives and elders about what was important to them, how they saw their roles and responsibilities, and what they regarded as deviance. They too echoed the themes of "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 1991).

I also asked about how they dealt with mental illness and examples of people who display extremes of irrational, unpredictable, and dangerous emotions. These were reported to be quite rare but were owned as a community responsibility and source of guilt and were to be treated by the ministrations of witchdoctors. Their collectivist ethos leads the kind of behavior that in our society would be treated as criminally deviant to be treated as a shared responsibility. In our developed economies, we tend to isolate and often punish disordered personalities and treat sickness as a sign of individual weakness and mental aberrations as a form of deviance.[7] The stress literature can be seen as attempting to reverse this logic, but it fails

when it only leads to organizations attempting to remove the symptoms (Quick, Nelson, & Hurrell, 1997). The deeper remedies lie in culture: Collectivism and service ideals are part of both the prevention and the cure of endemic stress. Family firms often have this ethos, but they are apt to criticize themselves for being "too soft," when actually this is just the other side to the coin of their greatest strength—their ability to embrace and integrate diversity (Nicholson & Björnberg, 2004).

Alternative Models of Leadership, Power, and Authority Operate

The charismatic chief, known colloquially and fittingly as "Cool," gave a detailed account of what being a leader meant to him. He said he had been chosen for his good behavior. Probing revealed that this connoted a mix of favorable temperament and reputation for morality. When asked about the requisite skills of leadership, he said, "Never quarrel with anyone. Don't demean anyone." He told us about when he was identified as a leader at the time of his circumcision and how he was chosen over another candidate, a murran who turned out to be docile and slow. He described the achievement that identified him early as a success in ensuring 150 cows survived during a drought, though his remarks indicate that qualities of character—steadiness, self-control, empathy, and interpersonal problem solving—were more likely to be what marked him for leadership within a culture with these values. These qualities, as it turns out, are pretty much what is currently discussed as emotional intelligence (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2004).

I asked him to give an example of the most difficult kind of task he would have to undertake. He launched into a story of a conflict between a murran and an elder, where the former had disobeyed an injunction of the latter. What made this case difficult is that the age-set structure gives automatic authority to elders, as in many traditional cultures. This meant that early intervention had to tread a delicate line of mediation. In such a case when right is on the side of the junior party—when a murran is wronged by an elder—Cool's account showed his role to be one of fine adjustment and face saving, while giving due recognition to the fact that an offense had been given.

We asked Cool about a typical day. His account showed that much of it was spent schmoozing—walking around the manyattas talking to men and women—an essential activity to oil the wheels of the community and for the leader to retain his intelligence about the community and his ability to broker problem solving.

At the senior level, elders have a collective authority. Within this clan, there was not a single chief but also a vice chief at a different location and a third leader who was designated as a coordinator of communications, traveling the range of the tribe. The leadership role of these individuals was clearly low in the exercise of power, though high in status and authority. Whenever we raised questions about critical decisions, it was never these individuals whose authority was invoked. Instead, it was invariably a group of elders. Their role was clearly to capture and exemplify consensual authority. Personal power did not distill in the persons of whoever was selected to take part in this collective activity because the composition would vary from time to time and from decision to decision. However, we gathered that, nonetheless, certain individuals considered especially wise or just would be called on more often than others for this duty. In this way, the leadership model matches exactly the values of the culture; individuality is acknowledged without eroding the power of the collective ideal.

Power is very much a property of the structure, which is stratified by age and gender. Women play no part, officially, in any of the decision making, though more detailed ethnographies have documented their behind-the-scenes influence and their key role in many of the social adjustments that need to be made (Hodgson, 2001). Much the same can be observed in family businesses, where women may exert an unseen influence both on decisions and, of course, through their role in schooling the next generation. My discussion with Maasai women revealed that they have strong ideas of what is correct male behavior, and one can presume that they help to enforce this through their private conversations and by the informal sanctions that may take place in intimate relationships. Yet in the literature, there is universal agreement as to their role as one of severe subjugation to male authority. As will be discussed later, the role and treatment of women in Maasai society has ethically troubling features beyond the fact of their formal powerlessness.

So here we find models of leadership at the farthest remove from those of the modern corporation, as with their cultures: a stewardship model of leadership around the exercise of emotional intelligence in interpersonal problem solving, authority by consensus decision making, and strictly stratified hierarchies of authority (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997). In

business, leadership is the exercise of individual discretionary power, decision making is via political process of coalitions of interest, and hierarchies of authority are highly labile and are not founded on any particular fundamentals. Again, some family firms depart from the corporate model in the direction of the Maasai example, with an emphasis on settled leadership arrangements and on consensus, stewardship, and servant leadership (De Pree, 1999; Greenleaf, 1991; Semler, 1993). The underlying dynamic of this are three unique aspects of family business:

1. Kinship co-ownership of a productive enterprise. This is typically what underlies the distinctive cultural strength and attachment to their products and services that mark family firms (Denison, Lief, & Ward, 2004). The Maasai display a similar emotional attachment with their animals.
2. Intergenerational transmission of assets. This is what gives family firms their renowned longevity, long-term strategic perspectives, financial prudence, and enduring, value-based distinctiveness (Lansberg, 1999). This continuity is the raison d'être of the Maasai.
3. Integration of kin and nonkin in the enterprise. The most successful family businesses are those that build clan-like structures, with family and nonfamily working together as a single bonded community (Gersick, Davis, Hampton, & Lansberg, 1997). That, of course, is the classic clan structure as marriage ties blend related and unrelated people to a common destiny.

Mythologies Are Central to Sustaining Strong Cultures

The mythology around which the Maasai way of life revolves is that of the warrior. We were regaled with stories about lion hunts, raids on rival tribes to steal livestock, border battles to protect their tribe against enemy incursions, and other heroic exploits. Lion hunts are an important part of the rituals of the group. They are part of the collective socialization of youth into adult ways—a source of bonding among the murran—and the means of acquiring valued accoutrements for rites and ceremonies (tail for the leader, skin for a marriage ceremony, etc.). We were told about how the group encircles a lion; one especially honored youth is given the job of rushing toward the open jaws of the lion at bay, inserting laterally a double-pointed stick and rotating it so that the lion's jaws clamping leads to its demise. Bush raids are portrayed as vital to protect the integrity of the tribe. Warriors patrol the perimeter of their range to deter their enemies. "The murran are like an army in the bush," we were told, and "enemies come frequently."

Deeper exploration and checking reveals a different reality. Lion hunts have become an extreme rarity; the last one for our host group was 15 years ago, according to one informant. The Maasai range, as specified by government regulation, is adjacent to and intersecting with wildlife conservation areas where lions are protected. Raids are also a thing of the past. The greatest threat comes from neighboring tribes letting their stock graze into another tribe's territory, as had recently occurred in our area with Samburu neighbors. The warriors do spend their time patrolling the territory, but this seems to be mainly an extended gossip network—the bush telegraph. Yet they do this kitted out for a more glorious role, adorned with their symbols of male pride and honor and carrying their useless weaponry. Autobiographical accounts from Maasai perpetuate the mythology; they are mainly heroic self-portrayals— quite at odds with the contemporary reality of Maasai life we witnessed (Lekuton, 2003; Saitoti, 1986; Spencer, 1993).

The Maasai are keen to display their mythic identity at every opportunity, especially at a time such as our arrival at their manyatta. On our first evening with them, they ritually slaughtered a goat, shared it with us, and then performed a dance. The slaughter was performed by two young murran, who first suffocated the beast, then carefully peeled back the skin at the neck, taking care not to shed a drop of blood before making an incision in the main artery of the animal's throat. Then the two murran took turns to fall to their haunches to suck the blood directly from the prostrate beast. The remainder of the blood was drained before the carcass was cooked on the open fire. Their delight in this honor was apparent. I asked one of them if it tasted good. He wrinkled his nose and shook his head but spoke with pleasure of the honor that it conferred on him.

The control of aggressive males is one of the key needs of every society, as has been observed (Coon, 1971; Harris, 1979), and the machismo and even violent aspects of the warrior cult are arguably a way this society siphons off its aggression, such that the wider culture can retain a peaceful integrity.

Their mythical sense of identity incorporates a powerful need to believe in their self-reliance. For example, I asked the Maasai in some detail about what they did about sickness. They claimed to be entirely reliant on local folk medicine and care through the ministrations of the witchdoctor. This turns out to be

only partially true. Claims made that outsiders were never invited in to provide medical assistance were discounted as romantic stories by another informant.

What does this tell us of relevance to business life? For sure, we have no such reliable cultural means of containing male aggression as do the Maasai. Writers on corporate culture describe the symbolic, ritualistic, and unconscious normative themes that define the most intangible aspects of corporate identity (Goffee & Jones, 1998). Stories are a central vehicle for the transmission of values, the maintenance of norms, and the buttressing of shared identity (Martin, 2002). Culture is the taken-for-granted substratum of assumptions and beliefs in any social system. Its functional importance is that it governs what people pay attention to—what they rule in and rule out in making choices, often without conscious thought, in their everyday choices and reactions. Cultures are strong or weak. The Maasai culture is extremely strong, with its mythologies acting as a powerful binding agent. In business, writers talk about strong cultures, but they scarcely bear comparison to such an example (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Company cultures often do have elements of what one can call heroic mythologies and legends, but there is little uniformity or consistency to them. Unlike the Maasai, if you ask two or three warriors in a firm what drives the culture, you are likely to get two or three different answers.

The leaders of corporations try to elevate their brand equity, mission statements, and strategic plans to the level of cultural norms, but the problem is that often only a small percentage of employees—those closest to the source—take them seriously. The best family firms again supply the best examples, in terms of little gap between cultural self-image, mythologies, and the way of life of the community (Daily & Dollinger, 1991).

Strong Cultures Can Rapidly Decay

Our journey back to civilization was disturbing by how short we found the distance—literally and metaphorically—between the nobility and integration of this historic culture and its extreme degradation. We called this sad journey—a one-way transition that many traditional societies have undergone (Pelto, 1973)—"the Road to Rumeruti," representing our physical journey to the border town of that name. Rumeruti somewhat resembles an African version of a Wild West frontier town—one long main street con-

sisting of the normal provisioning stores for people going to and from the bush. The target for our reconnection with the world of commerce was, unsurprisingly, the first bar in town to consume the closest one could get to a cold beer in such a place. As we pulled up, the first and most striking phenomenon was the absence of body language signals of friendly welcome, such as those we had grown used to receiving from the people in the bush. In our new setting, travelers like us were a familiar sight, and we seemed to represent an opportunity for, at best, a somewhat cool curiosity and, at worst, petty theft. We had to abandon our beer and leave because a gang of youths was fooling around with the trailer hitched to one of our four-wheel-drive vehicles. Our two drivers, father and son,[8] advised that the situation was becoming unstable, and we had best finish our beers at a more congenial location. The youths appeared like any disaffected and low-expectation group that one finds in many transitional societies. I was reminded of the gangs hanging around the town squares of the former Eastern Germany's regional towns I saw a few years ago, oppressed by unemployment and damaged pride and now forming an aimless but menacing presence.

On the way to Rumeruti we had seen earlier signs of the same phenomenon, or what could be seen as intermediate stages to this condition. The first was a stop at the cattle ranch of a wealthy local (White) explorer. We admired his cattle and camels but were less impressed by the living conditions of his workers. These Maasai dwelt in corrugated tin lean-tos, much less commodious than the traditional Maasai dwelling, though no doubt better stocked with Western consumables. The women and children sat in the dirt around the huts in a much more listless fashion than we were used to seeing, and they eyed us with cold indifference.

Farther down the road, we stopped at a village of Maasai employed by local White farmers and service businesses and tried to conduct our usual ethnographic interviews, but we were met first with suspicious demands about why we wanted to know such things and then with demands for money. We were ready to offer our usual gifts and also cash if need be. Indeed, we did both but abandoned the interviews, sensing that we would get little reliable intelligence. Yet the few comments we did record affirmed that these people had abandoned most of their Maasai traditions and practices. Elders were no longer revered

because there was no structure to sustain such respect. Instead, they were uselessly hanging around, waiting for the next meal or conversation.

The bulk of Maasai society remains in its timeless balance. In some areas, tourism has invaded and has begun to transform their existence (especially in the much visited Maasai Mara game reserve). Here, just at the short margin where one crosses between their world and our world, one retains the impression that they have, fatally, let go with one hand—the handhold to their ancient civilization—and with the other grasped something insubstantial and unsustaining. The only way out of the listless limbo they had entered was by the historically familiar migration to the big city—Nairobi in this case—where they would join the street people seeking advantage in scratching for a living at the margins of the human tide that flows through such a metropolis.

Does this sad story have any lessons for business organizations? It shows not so much that culture disappears but that it can get degraded quite rapidly, and those that build to greatness often do so retaining their distinctive family identity (R. C. Anderson & Reeb, 2003; O'Hara & Mandel, 2002). This is amply illustrated by the history of mergers and acquisitions, where value—often cultural value—is destroyed rather more readily than it is created (Empson, in press). Postmerger integration failure is often because of cultural residues—loyalties detached from their points of origin, for example—persisting to be a destructive force where once they were part of the organization's strength. Family businesses that sell up typically lose their identity and therefore one of the sources of their comparative advantage, quite rapidly. Yet we cannot keep cultures alive just for their aesthetic value. When the time for transition comes, as in the postmerger or post-IPO period, firms need to find ways of saying goodbye to the old and embracing the new. It is the difficulty of the latter that many organizations such as the Maasai, at their margin, face.

Ethical Challenges Are Ever Present

We take for granted that other cultures have a right to exist, especially if they are exotic and present no external threat, such as is true of many aboriginal cultures. The Maasai, with their positive social values, their pacific way of life, and their harmless environmental impacts, seem to be a prime example of a world we should leave alone and in peace. That is the policy that has been effected by the governments whose dominion cover the Maasai range: protecting them within a range of conserved land against what would otherwise be the invasion of the agrarians, as happened in former times. In earlier times of human history, the prevailing perspective on "alien" cultures has been much less relativistic and much less tolerant. Cultural imperialism was implicitly part of the economic conquest and was the norm prior to the 20th century. Priests rode in the bows of the men-o'-war that brought civilization to the "savages," with the gun and the cross as the twin instruments of conquest (Landes, 1998). Without compunction, our forebears viewed other cultures as backward, corrupt, ungodly, and in need of enlightenment. Now we shudder with guilt at the memory and try to respect the differences that survive as much as we try to honor their past.

But should we now view other cultures without criticism or without raising universal ethical questions? The Maasai present a challenging case, chiefly in one respect: the role of women. There are three aspects that are potentially troubling. One is female circumcision, or "genital mutilation," as reformers rightly term it. This was universally practiced in the area we were located. Not only is the practice arguably a denial of young women's rights, but also its ritual form is brutal and painful in the execution. Second is what in the West might be called licensed pedophilia. Circumcised girls quickly become wives, usually of elders, often polygynously. The warriors, during their 14-year age set, are part of a male fraternity. Given that this is at the peak of their sexual maturity and that they are the focal point of all the Maasai's glamorous self-regard in their decorative mythic identity, they clearly need a sexual outlet. On questioning them about this, the object of their amorous energy turns out to be uncircumcised, that is, prepubescent, girls. Their premenarche status also minimizes the risk of unwanted pregnancies among girls who will shortly be marriageable. Third is the absence of women from any formal role or status within the community, though, as I have noted, their unofficial influence may be much greater. However, the scope of this influence is limited to the domestic sphere, and the absence of women in formal decision-making positions—and, indeed, the absence of regard for any individual talent or needs—is troubling to Western sensibilities. How can one square these practices with the values of stewardship? It is perhaps a fact of life that within societies such apparent contradictions have always prevailed. In the Maasai case, a framework of shared norms and practices acts as a protective perimeter within which

humanistic values may be fully expressed, even though those same norms sanction ethically abhorrent practices and morally oppressive intergroup relations.

Ignorant bliss might summarize the situation of many of the Maasai. Of course, one has no right to rob them of this state, but one can legitimately question the ethics of denying experience and choice to people in any social system and perhaps especially when it focuses with particular force, as it does here, on one sex: women.[9] Would it constitute a return to the bad old days of cultural imperialism to assert that one should not seek to preserve such cultural arrangements? One can argue that a social system that denies women their human rights and keeps both them and many men in a state of retarded development through compulsive structures and intensive mythologies is undesirable and that the state should not seek to preserve it. The counterargument is that we have not right to pass moral judgments on one culture from the perspective of another.

What does a Darwinian perspective have to offer at this point? It does not take sides in this debate; rather, it takes both. It rejects an undiscriminating relativism because it asserts that all cultural arrangements are co-evolved systems, mediating between an ancient and unchanging human nature on one hand and a changing set of environmental demands on the other. Each has costs and benefits, and therefore it says that some are less costly to human happiness and capability than others. The Maasai are, in this view, locked into a fragile equilibrium. It requires only minimal change to context and inputs to bring profound disturbance, as we have seen. The practical riposte is that change will come to the Maasai through two forces: education and money. Their blissful existence will be corroded by the power of knowledge and by the inexorable invasion of the moneyed economy. Should this change be hastened or hindered on ethical grounds? This is a question beyond the scope of this article, but it does have wider relevance.

When we look at business organizations, we tend to be a lot less shy about making ethical judgments about their standards of conduct or their treatment of their people. What is the price of the autonomy or performance of a business? One can argue, from the first principles of the new Darwinism, that some ways of working and organizing are more injurious or restrictive to the human spirit than others and that some liberate and engage human capabilities better than others. Family firms often achieve the latter, exhibiting positive qualities such as cultural inclusiveness, value-driven leadership, a high degree of identification with their own products and services, and a communitarian link with their customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders (Miller, 2004). To a degree, these are the best qualities of tribalism. We can also see the worst where firms degenerate in squabbling silos of divided interest, with detached and self-interested leadership.

CONCLUSION

The Maasai do inhabit a distant world in many ways, though in other ways, closer to us than we might think. Anyone who has traveled to remote locations and has had the opportunity to talk and exchange with tribal people will report how small the distance is between conversing minds. Personally, I can say that some of the Maasai with whom I met and talked were people I could relate to more easily than some people in my home community. That is a matter of social-psychological chemistry. Evolutionary psychology tells us how impressed—overimpressed—we are with what lies on the surface of physical and cultural appearance, for beneath the surface lies a genetic identity and similarity that is much greater than among members of our nearest primate cousins, the chimpanzees (Jones, 1993). It is very easy for any human to tune into and share experience with another human once you have crossed the language barrier. At the same time, within our narrow bandwidth of genetic differences we do vary in temperament, personality, intelligence, and interests in ways that mean we get along much more easily with some of our kind than we do with others. Culture, of course, is a powerful container of these differences, sometimes amplifying them, sometimes muting them. The Maasai are an extreme version of the constraint of difference.

The question with which this article opened has been answered here as follows: Cultures differ at many levels, including across types of business, not least between family and other kinds of firm. Clearly, there are major differences between the goals of businesses, whether family or nonfamily, and these tribespeople. That is partly a matter of complexity and differentiation, for as I have noted, the life of the Maasai is immeasurably simpler, but it shares two features especially with family firms: a mutual dependence between kinship group and the products of collective labor and a competitor relationship with other

members of the wider community—in the Maasai case, other clans within the tribe, other tribes within the people, and other ethnic and tribal groups within the locality.[10] The laws of economics apply to their activities as much as they do in any business community and society (see Becker, 1991 and Sahlins, 1972, for relevant analyses). The Maasai are interested in generating surpluses and regulating consumption, not just in an idyllic life of peaceful coexistence. They strive against elements and resource insufficiencies to increase their stock, improve their welfare, and enhance the quality of their consumption. Yet like some family businesses, they will not venture into new areas of development that would erode the core of their shared experience and practice.

The Maasai case underlines the ways in which structures, norms, mythologies, and contextual conditions hold them in place and how they can be quite easily eroded or invaded by forms of change. Food sharing and the control of aggressive males are, as we have observed, critical functions in tribal communities. The Maasai solution involves powerful, inculcated norms of sharing on one hand and the mythology of the warrior on the other. In Western organizations, we do not do either of them reliably or effectively. Food sharing is unequal and often arbitrary, and ambitiously machismo males are often given dangerous license. The Enron case exemplified both of these, as do many other businesses.

The wider implication is that what we accept as normal in our businesses is a matter of choice and that if we want, say, different kinds of leadership from the dominant paradigm, then we have to do more than just train it into candidates or assume it will happen just by making judicious executive appointments. It is a matter of culture and what holds culture in place (Schein, 1985).

NOTES

1. Gideon Lepalo.

2. James Ole Nairuko.

3. This Maasai tribe numbers around 30,000 in six sub-tribal groupings, one of which were our hosts.

4. This display is akin to the *stotting* (vertical leaping) of the Springbok, which similarly connotes genetic fitness.

5. Anthony Willoughby and Jo Owen of Auvian Partners.

6. We were told that around once every 2 months, visitors from outside would be seen.

7. One is reminded of Samuel Butler's novel *Erewhon* (an anagram of *nowhere*), written some 130 years ago as a satiri-cal critique of socialism and Darwinism in which sickness is treated as a crime and crime as a sickness.

8. Mark and James Savage of Savage Wilderness Safaris, Nairobi, Kenya. For details, please see http://www.kilimanjaro.com/safaris/savage

9. Similar ethical questions were raised about the Taliban prior to their removal in Afghanistan.

10. The Laikipiak people have been in the headlines for their attempts to reclaim ancestral territory near the region of our field trip (Lacey, 2004).

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