Shepherd School

There isn't much call for warriors these days, although the shepherds are still busy. This is why school for some in northern Kenya is held on a hillside in the late afternoon.

**By James Astill**

Johnson Kinyago, a sun-dried Masai herder, has two sons. "One is a genius - he can identify every animal and find water anywhere. So he's with the goats," he says proudly. "The other is stupid, and maybe not mine. He's in school."

At Dol Dol cattle market in Laikipia, northern Kenya, a group of blanket-wrapped Masai elders nod their approval. Herding is for bright sparks; school for thickies, all of them say. To their mind, Kinyago's is in fact quite a scholarly family. Only 35% of Masai children attend school: the derisory standard for Kenya's pastoralists. The reason is that pastoralists depend on their children's labour, so even if persuaded of the merits of school, few could spare their ablest offspring. The result is an illiteracy rate of over 90%, leaving the Masai vulnerable to habitual abuse from their more worldly neighbours.

With their lovingly slitted and stretched ear lobes, their ochre-stained warriors and gap-toothed brides, the Masai live much as they have for centuries. But in a radically changed world. When their - illiterate - forebears made peace with the first British settlers, they unwittingly signed away 90% of their land. The remaining arid patch no longer supports their swollen population. During a recent three-year drought, more than 80% of their animals died; and the proud Masai are now humiliatingly dependent on food aid.

In an effort to break this debilitating cycle, a group of educated, young Masai have established non-formal classes across Laikipia's rocky hills, bringing school to the shepherds. They understand the prejudices they are confronting. "My father hated me because he thought I was not his, so he chased me off to school," says Peter Lowara, a social worker with the group, which calls itself Osiligi, or Hope, in Masai. "It was terrible - I felt like I had no prospects." But they also know the consequences of resisting change.

"Land issues have caused a crisis in pastoralism, and this is threatening our whole people," says James Legei, Osiligi's programme officer. "Unless we find alternatives, we will die; which means we must become educated."

Over the past four years, meeting under shady thorn trees or in sheltered hollows, 1,800 young herders have acquired basic literacy, Swahili, English and maths. Nearly 100 have continued into the formal education system and the prospect of jobs, whilst those remaining with their herds should at least now be able to read the instructions on packets of veterinary drugs in English, or hold their own against Swahili-speaking livestock traders for a fair price.

Fixing his blackboard on a spindly acacia, Joseph Saoi proudly shows off his class of a dozen bright shepherds, aged five to 13. Arranged along a fallen tree, eyes rapt to the board and hands clutching dog-eared exercise books against the breeze, their thirst for learning is palpable. Most see duller siblings troop off to school every morning leaving them behind. But for these two hours of the late afternoon - timed so the regular school children can take over herding after class - they have a chance to catch up.

Thirteen-year-old Joyce Korosian, Saoi's best reader, has four brothers, all of them in school. "My parents love me most because I look after the goats, and my older brother has to look up to me," she says, tugging shyly at her bright, beaded head-dress. "But I would prefer to go to school myself because I like speaking Swahili so much."

According to Osiligi, the devastating effects of the drought caused some Masai to rethink their traditional disregard for schooling. But at the same time it crippled their ability to pay the mandatory fees. This leaves girls, whom the Masai consider a poor investment because they will be married outside the family, further from school than ever. "I see more and more girls at my classes, because they are the lowest priority for formal education," says Joyce's proud teacher, Saoi.

Stephen Pokisa, like all Osiligi teachers a pastoralist himself, lost his entire herd of six cows and 30 goats during the drought. When the last animal died, he tracked his pupils along their migration routes, teaching by paraffin lamplight at the end of their hard day's hunt for water. For want of stock, Pokisa has since learned how to cultivate, and now teaches that skill too. "I never wanted to grow things," he says "But it has become necessary for my survival, just as one day it may be for my pupils', too."

That freedom to adapt its classes is one of Osiligi's strengths. Besides the three Rs, its students are taught the basics of animal husbandry, hygiene and Masai culture. According to the national curriculum, they would instead be forced to study crops such as coffee and pyrethrum, which do not grow in Laikipia's arid soil. "The education system in Kenya is killing individual cultures," says Legei. "It has to be more sensitive to the particular needs of each community. If you educate my way of life out of me and there is no job at the end of it, what then?"

Legei is fiercely proud of his people's traditions, but he does not fully share them. His unpierced ears show, for example, that he was never a warrior. Whilst his brothers were fighting off raiders and hunting lions, he was, of course, in school. "Education kills some traditions," says Ugei. "But the thing is to control the pace of change, so you can retain others, and a sense of identity, which is crucial." In fact, though the Masai's culture seems vividly alive, it is dying.

In many parts of Laikipia, there are now more gaudily decorated warriors than there are cattle for them to protect. One of them, Samia Sashore, 24, began attending Osiligi's classes last year. "There's not much for a warrior to do these days - there are eight of us in my homestead and two cows," he says, walking across the savannah with his spear in one hand and his mothers shopping in the other. "My ambition is to learn Swahili and get a job."

**Guardian Education, Tuesday 2 April 2002, pp6-7**

**Reference:**  
**Title:** Shepherd School  
**Author:** Astill, J  
**Publisher:** The Guardian  
**Date:** 2002

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
|  |