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Esoto: *where girls and warriors meet*
The changing space and perceptions of esoto over generations of the Maasai women of Engare Sero

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to document the changing space of the esoto dance of the Maasai through descriptive analysis. I will consider how performance, relationships, and life after esoto have changed generationally. I will also analyze why these changes are occurring with a discussion on women's opinions of the esoto. I chose the study site of Engare Sero as it has recently commenced a new age of development with a primary school, tourism, and the mixing of other Tanzanians. I interviewed exactly 105 women in the village within a 5km radius from the village center. I spoke mostly with older women and only briefly chatted with girls in the town market. Through analysis I have found the three factors that I believe are causing the changing space and perceptions of esoto to be western education, Christianity, and Swahili culture. While all women agreed that the esoto has changed in some ways since they were young, they had differing opinions on the relevance of the dance today. The western principles that are applied through these three factors have come to modify Maasai values, concepts of morality, and priorities in their developing world.
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Introduction

Cultural spaces all over the world define and transform peoples’ customs, agency, and daily experiences. As we find these spaces of self-identification overlapping, traversing, and adjoining to one another it is a science of mercurial adaptation that allows us to transition. What comes to question when considering these spaces is to what extent we shape the space in relation to how much it shapes us. Space is ultimately void without the existence of people who negotiate its terms of being and purpose in reality. These cultural constructions also have the uncanny ability to give and take agency, renegotiate social convention, and trump individual sentiment. As you walk out of your room, down the hallway, out the door, and onto the street your meticulously fashioned spaces construct, exist, and collapse with every step. In so many ways these human-manifested realities are true from the global community all the way to an individual in the company of no others, bringing theories such as John Locke’s state of nature to moot conclusions.

These spaces have, in fact, become so removed from our conscious selves that we are seldom to question their fundamental roots and how they manifest in our interactions with one another. I have been in Tanzania for over two months now and have been witness to the cultural establishments. One of the most intriguing dynamics to observe is the difference in spaces that are uniquely male, uniquely female, and overlapping and how behavior changes accordingly. My Bangatan homestay gave me the most time in one community to synthesize these observations. One of the most striking comments that I heard during our focal groups in Bangata was spoken during an all-women’s focal group. When asked about their perception of western women, they said that western women seem smarter than Tanzanian women and that we seem older than our actual age (Focal Group 2. Bangata, Tanzania). I was deeply disturbed by this comment and still can’t seem to shake the sentiment out of my mind. That they have somehow come to the
conclusion of mzungu\(^1\) women being inherently smarter than they are may be a symptom of some greater global pressures.

After this comment I became increasingly attentive to tonal changes as the women in my Bangatan host family traversed from spaces of greater to lesser agency with such fluidity. With Tanzania being the home of over 120 ethnic groups it is a difficult process to generalize cultural spaces for all of Tanzania. Conceivably, the cultural practices that seem such the antithesis to the west are those of the Maasai. Immigrating south into East Africa some 250 to 500 years ago, the Maasai have held onto a tightly knit, homogenous set of cultural practices.\(^2\) Even in the face of adversity and pressure from the Tanzanian government, their practices have mostly survived into the 21\(^{st}\) century.

Age sets organize the Maasai society by events that a westerner may call rights of passage. These age-sets differ between men and women, as there are more for men than women. Men transition from boys, warriors (morani), junior elders, senior elders, and finally to elders. These five age-sets are distinguished by various ceremonies and move simultaneously when the laibon, one of the elders, deems the appropriate time. Women move through 3 age-sets including uncircumcised girls (ndito), circumcised mamas (yeyo), and grandmothers (koko). Interaction between the various age-sets of women and men is strictly followed as morani are free to have sex with uncircumcised girls (Rosenberg, 2009). It is common practice among the sexually active age sets to have multiple lovers or, friends, as the Maasai say.

*Morani* and *ndito* exclusively exist within the *esoto*, a social dance of the Maasai where morani (ranging from the age of puberty: 13, to 27) dance and sing with lovers, a group of girls 6 to 15 years old.\(^2\) Before the dance, which starts around 10 in the evening, a girl will dress herself in elaborate jewelry including a white disk some 4 inches in radius that clasps tightly around her neck as well as

\(^1\) Mzungu is the Kiswahili term for white person.
\(^2\) Personal Communication, Babu Liki, October 2010
\(^3\) Esoto specifically means the place where warriors and girls meet.
other necklaces, bracelets, anklets and hats. A girl will have many morani friends during her years attending the esoto but will choose her first and most important friend, olokoingipoto, to give the cream of milk to. This gesture signifies a bond between the girl and her olokoingipoto.

The esoto is an important space and time of agency in the totality of a woman's life as it is the only time when she may have sex uncircumcised and is expected to have several partners. Uncircumcised girls are, on one hand, burdened with reproductive duties to prepare for motherhood but are also “granted a great deal of personal freedom. The young girls from one or more settlements form a group which is independent of the adults and has it’s own rules of behavior” (Von Mitzlaff, 1988). Although a married woman is expected to have sex only with her husband, this rule is commonly broken for their esoto lovers (Von Mitzlaff, 1988). It is seemingly a time when sex is most pleasurable and the community monitors relationships to a lesser extent. As tourism continues to introduce the Maasai to differing customs and cultural spaces, Maasai women’s views on esoto customs continue to change. The most influential forces are the introductions of Christianity, western education, and Swahili culture to the Engare Sero community. Even the Tanzanian government has taken a firm stance on the enforcement of western values in the country by outlawing the practice of female circumcision and requiring all children to attend primary school which does not allow students to attend esoto. As I study how perspectives on the esoto are changing through generations, I will keep in mind the various scales of influence that shape this changing space.
Study Site

_Engare Sero_ village sits just south of the Kenyan border between the southern tip of Lake Natron, the Rift Valley Wall, and the impressive _Oldonyio Lengai_, or, 'Mountain of God'. _Bomas_ lie on either sides of the _Engare Sero_ and _Endalalani_ rivers, the main water sources in the village. Since becoming an official village in 2000, the town center, as well as the population, has grown tremendously. There are now a number of _dukas_ in the area that can provide you with a cool Coca Cola and crispy _nyama choma_ at any time of the day. Three campsites are scattered within the village and are the only places for tourists to spend the night in addition to one guesthouse overlooking the town center. Dirt roads dominate the infrastructure with one main road cutting through the center of _Engare Sero_ leading northwest to _Wasso_ and south to _Mto Wa Mbu_.

Considering the larger landscape of Northern Tanzania, the village plays a critical role in tourism, a business that brings in roughly 20% of Tanzania's GDP. Sharing the region with the renowned Serengeti National Park and Ngorongoro Crater brings many tourists to the village that wish to experience cultural tourism with the Maasai. Lake Natron also becomes a selling point in itself as 75% of the world's flamingos breed in its shallow waters.

The increased amount of tourism over the years has acted as a catalyst of development and globalization in the area. One initiative already underway is the expansion of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority (NCAA) to incorporate Lake Natron and all land between the two landmarks. The NCAA is currently functioning under a multiple-use land system in which people are still allowed to live on the protected land under restricted terms. In hopes of preserving the flamingo population and increasing tourism, the NCAA is pushing for full

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4 A _boma_ is the community of huts that forms when a husband begins his family. Each wife has her own hut and the huts form a circle around the cattle pen.
5 _Duka_ is the Kiswahili word for shop.
6 _Nyama choma_ is roasted meat, a popular snack in Tanzania.
7 Personal Communication, Baba Jack, September, 2010.
management of the land and the movement of the Maasai to a northern farming community, Loliondo. Though the land is multi-use, there is a push to create a pristine image of the flamingo breeding grounds, absent of the Maasai.

Further development is highly anticipated in president Kikwete's seemingly ubiquitous words, “The road is coming.” Plans to pave the main road that connects Engare Sero to Mto Wa Mbu to the south and Wasso and Serengeti NP to the west are being implemented. The road would introduce a new level of global pressures that the Natron Maasai have never experienced before. Trade will become more fluid with goods flowing to Lake Victoria from the coast, tourism will increase as the national parks become more accessible, and global trends and technologies will stimulate the Maasai in the dominant western discourse of modernity.

As the Maasai have been a fascination to the western eye for over a century, their rituals and ceremonies have become the opponent of a moral western crusade. With the Tanzanian government asserting mandatory attendance in primary school, the Maasai are now being exposed to western education and the narratives that sustain western culture. While the Maasai have been extremely cohesive in the past, swift change is taking hold of their customs and daily experience. With an estimated 20% of the village practicing Christianity (personal comm. Baba Jack) instead of their historical belief in Animism, the Maasai are now reconsidering some keystone aspects of their culture including polyandrous relationships, female circumcision, and partners before marriage. The unification of ideologies that has so truly defined the Maasai in the past is shifting as quickly as the sands of Engare Sero.
Methods

For this study I spent 20 days between November 5-24, 2010 in the Maasai village of Engare Sero. My sample frame was the Maasai community of Engare Sero village with my sample population encompassing the Maasai women from the earliest age a girl can attend the esoto, around 7 years of age, to the eldest women living in the village. I conducted a few key informant interviews with officials in the community in order to obtain more knowledge of the esoto and broader themes at play in the experience. To compare perceptions over generations of women, I grouped the interviewees based on the age sets: yeyo (circumcised woman/mama) and koko (grandmother). While it was difficult to find young girls around the bomas, I simply started conversations with ndito (uncircumcised girl) during the afternoon in town. My interview questions for were a compilation of age-set specific questions as standard questions on which to base comparisons. My interviews were conducted randomly and opportunistically in pairs of two yeyos or kokos so that I could pay attention to each individual while also creating a comfortable setting for the women. I used random sampling methods walking from boma to boma within a 5km radius from the center of the village.

The discussions that I have had with the women of Engare Sero have allowed me to analyze my data with descriptive statistics. I have decided not to use statistics, but have created more of a narrative of the esoto as a way to express most honestly what I have gleaned from my time in Engare Sero. My biases come mostly from my views as a western educated, college-aged feminist. I will try to keep my writing open to express most earnestly what I have learned from this experience. My study was also limited in my inability to speak Kimaasai. I ended up hiring a different translator after three days of data collection because the one I originally hired in Arusha did not speak the dialect of Kimaasai spoken in Engare Sero. I eventually found the help of an Engare Sero native. Being an outsider and creating the unnatural communicative space of an interview was also a bias, but also necessary.
Results

_You want to stay forever in the esoto place_, a yeyo tells me as she describes enjoying the free time she had when she was ndito dancing with warriors. Most women looked back on their ndito lives as a time of freedom and being deep in the culture. The yeyos and kokos that I spoke with in Engare Sero were gracious enough to confide in me the details and stories of their lives. To honor this confidence, I will keep their names anonymous throughout the results and discussion. Furthermore, as I used a translator and probably lost much of the nuances of their words, I will use italicized words to indicate when a woman’s words were translated. These women all told me about their witnessing a change in the actual esoto event happening today, all expressing similar differences in the changing space. While the women all had varying details to tell me about their preparation and different opinions on the relevance of esoto today, they all had the poignant sentiment of esoto being a special time in Maasai youth’s lives, “all I have now is from that time” (Rosenberg 2009). It is a unique space in cultural time that is highly anticipated and celebrated by the Maasai community.

As I was interviewing one yeyo about her memories of esoto, a young laioni\(^8\) walking near the hut was wearing a shuka\(^9\) on his head that he had fringed into strips like Rasta braids with the end tied in a bundle with a stick at the end to portray the weights morani put at the end of the Rasta. The cloth tied around his chin as a warrior ties string to hold his hair ornaments in place. He stood very straight, trying to be tall like a warrior, and jumped as high as he could reach with his Rasta headdress fluttering behind his descent to the ground just as morani do their jumping dance. His father had helped him fashion it together earlier that morning. Young girls outside the boma who were not yet old enough for esoto were similarly mimicking the dance formation seen at the esoto. They would stand in a

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\(^8\) _Laioni_ are uncircumcised boys who have not yet become morani.

\(^9\) _Shuka_ is a light, colorful cloth that Maasai men wear over their shoulders.
circle and practice the songs, dancing and bobbing their heads. Both groups seemed to be aware of the prestige and high anticipation that is a part of their upcoming social age-sets.

Of course we went to esoto, we are Maasai girls!: Performance through the Generations.

The space and performance of esoto has seemingly changed over the generations moving through these male age-sets. The age a girl first attends esoto tended to range from 7 to more commonly 10 years old. One yeyo remembered attending esoto when she was 5. In the older generations there was a special boma where morani would host esoto. Everyone in the village knew the esoto boma as the socializing spot. At that time there was no town to visit in the afternoons and evenings so girls had endless hours to play with their friends. At night, one girl is appointed on the walk to esoto to teach the others a song, this is how you knew the esoto was starting soon—the girls voices could carry far away in the desert. They would walk from one boma to the next, collecting each other for esoto. One koko remembers warriors coming to the esoto from all over and giving her friend a calabash of milk. Another remembers shaking milk for her boyfriend, I was very proud; I was more free that time than now.

Songs changed for each generation and became a new creation and source of pride for the members of that age group. The topics ranged to all aspects of Maasai tradition, some songs give you a good reminder of life—you are getting older! expressed a yeyo as she bobbed up and down, undulating her shoulders to the song she was humming, my generation had many songs about growing older because you can’t stay in esoto forever—you must get married. Another generation of yeyos sang about being proud to sing in Kimaasai and enjoying the young Maasai life. During one of my interviews in town a koko sat in a duka, singing and teaching her young granddaughter the songs of esoto from her generation. As ndito, she sang about

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10 Personal Observation, November 2010.
pride of girls, pride of warriors, stealing cattle, and warriors jumping with rasta braids. As she sat trying to remember all of them, someone in a duka behind us shouted out a song about girls dancing with shaking necklaces to help us complete the list. She smiled at the girl in her lap and said *these songs teach you how to grow through the culture.*

Esoto fashions, just like the songs, have been constantly changing to each generation's unique style. Much preparation goes into the ensemble that a girl wears for esoto and the image of being ndito, *we were most beautiful when we were young—we were quick, fat, and smooth. I enjoyed this time.* The older generations wore only skins unlike the generations of today that wear cloth around their waists and shoulders. One yeyo reveled in her memories as a girl saying, *we had bracelets all around with necklaces and cow skins and our breasts were standing firm.* Another thought, *I was most beautiful when I was young. Now I am old and not as smart.* Some women felt that they looked better in old age saying, *I look better now because I have children.*

Demonstrating the role of jewelry, a yeyo began dancing for me, bobbing her head and swinging her elaborate earrings. She outstretched one arm, gliding the other over top her skin saying, *we wore iron around our legs and arms up to the knees and elbows to show off our fat.* Jewelry was very different for many koko generations: blue, red, and yellow beads were used to cover the entire calf. Girl’s mothers sewed bright colored beads in haphazard patterns onto their esoto skin skirts. Dancing topless in a half circle at esoto, the girls would wear only a skin skirt while the warriors had bells around their ankles for dancing and skins aroung their waists. The girls also wore *ebonyo,* beads that traversed the face from the bridge of the nose to the chin. They would decorate their foreheads with beaded designs and wore strips of skin with beads crossing both shoulders. One woman described the smeared zebra colors that girls and warriors used to paint on their faces, *the paint has no more meaning than the paint you put around your eyes to make them look black.* It was a statement of beautification in her time.

The smell of *osendu* flowers still reminds one koko of her life growing up and going to esoto. Sheep oil mixed with red soil and *osendu* flowers was a mixture that
girls and warriors painted over their heads and bodies as a perfume and gesture of beauty. One Koko associated it with the smell of morani saying, *you make me laugh thinking back to those times, I could smell them from far away!* Girls don’t use the red oil today, but use cosmetics instead. In her time there was no town to buy cosmetics. Even some older women prefer cosmetics, wanting to adapt to the ways of development, *but we still enjoy the smell of red oil.* While the smell is an element of attraction to the Maasai, Swahili outsiders consider it vile. One yeyo told me that if you wear it to school your Swahili teachers will dislike the smell and beat you for wearing it. Another said, *I don’t like the smell of sheep oil. I use cosmetics because the sheep oil looks like you are covered in dirt.* Still other women said that they did not use cosmetics besides soap for church because they dislike the smell of cosmetics.

_We were famous for our generation at the esoto_, a koko told me, _it was our job to sing and dance with warriors._ Esoto attendance used to be mandatory; parents could beat their daughter if she didn’t go to esoto. When you were sick and could not attend, you had to report to other girls who would tell the warriors. If 10 days went by without a girl reporting to esoto the warriors would chase her away from esoto and beat her with a stick. When I asked two kokos my usual first question: did you go to esoto? they replied, *of course we went to esoto, we are Maasai girls!* There was no reason to go home before morning, _there was no city, just the bush and cows._ Now esoto is a choice for most girls in Engare Sero. Many mamas even disallow their daughters to attend esoto, and complain that the girls try to escape to it every night.

_We used to walk to the esoto together_, one yeyo explained, _now they all walk alone._ She remembered when she would collect milk from her boma and bring it all together to cook at esoto to give to her friend. One yeyo recalled that, _if there are flies in the milk you will be forced to drink the milk yourself then they will strip you naked, and beat you!_ Time and effort went into accompanying and pleasing your friends. Many older women thought that today girls do not take care of morani like they used to. As one koko puts it, _people don’t really know the esoto today._ It was seen as a place to learn, especially from older girls, how to handle the warriors. A
Most kokos and yeyos noted that the biggest change in esoto today is the loss of their time at orbo. Orbo was the daytime aspect of esoto where warriors and girls spent all afternoon sitting under a tree naked playing games, dancing, sleeping and having sex (often for the first time at orbo) until it was time for esoto. One Yeyo smiled and said, *at orbo we used to sit under a tree while warriors and girls would cut each other and make jewelry.* Another woman remembers her favorite part of esoto as going to orbo and playing games with her friends. As she recalls, *we would strip each other naked and pretend to hit each other.* She also described what sounded like a game of hide and seek played in the bush. It was not uncommon for girls and warriors to go out into the bush and stay for weeks at a time to dance and relax, *there was no business to do back then, people stayed with their cows.*

Orbo has since become a lost tradition in Engare Sero. Ever since the town center has grown in the middle of the village people are busy with school, looking for jobs, working, and visiting the local bars. Evening esoto is now the only place and time for a girl to spend with her friends without adults around. Most women feel like it was, at one point, a good place to teach young girls about traditional ways. They said the warriors would teach them about the bush and growing older, but that it no longer serves this same purpose. One koko explained, *now girls don’t learn these things, they just get pregnant. They are not serious about the culture.* Girls and warriors would sleep together under the same tree and now they go find a separate place to sleep with their friends. Many women thought that in their generations as ndito there were no diseases and no worries for sex, but since the mixing of tribes they feel that Swahili people have brought STDs to the once sheltered nomadic group. One woman described her pride of being young by saying, *the tradition was the deepest it had ever been so no one was running to the city. I wish I could go back to that time.*

*If his face looks fit, black, and smooth I can feel the blood in my heart:*  
Friends and Esoto Relationships.
In these most traditional times, a girl was supposed to have three friends that she chose herself. The first, olokoingipoto, is the one she chooses as a young girl usually around the age of five. Everyone knows he is your friend and there is a celebration when you give him cream milk to show the village that you are together. I asked one koko how she knew at such a young age who to make her olokoingipoto and she responded saying, the way your blood is attracted when you see someone and your heart says, I want to be with you. The second and third friends are chosen when you are older. You go to them when the first is not around. They are known as ojipite, the one who helps you in esoto, and okiloki, the one who your parents do not now about. As one yeyo recalls, I had three friends, but my favorite is the first. He is the one who breaks the way and this is how I grew up. Another woman remembered fondly her friend and the advice he gave to her as ndito. Many women of younger generations felt it was best to have only one friend to avoid diseases from sex. But the number of friends is usually based on your generation's customs. Most women had 1-2 friends while I also spoke with a koko who had 5 friends. A girl can have up to 10 friends but most of them are kept a secret from the village and even the esoto community, in my generation, every girl had 3 friends. If you didn’t, they thought you were crazy!

I talked to a few women who were ndito at a time when their tribes still traveled nomadically, so esoto would happen wherever they stopped. She talked about finding a nice tree for orbo and choosing a boma for esoto. We were meeting new people frequently; all Maasai, she said, a girl could find a new friend in each place, but I only gave one the cream milk. Another said that she gave more than one warrior cream milk, but it is the girl’s choice to do so.

Choosing an esoto friend is an important part of fixing your social status and Maasai women have all different reasons for why they chose their esoto friends. Many looked for dancing style and how high he could jump. Others considered whether or not he was a leader in singing at esoto. It was very important for all women, however, to find a morani who was serious about the culture and who was respected by the elders. As one yeyo puts it, the best morani are from my generation,
they stayed with the cows and never went to town. They ran deepest with our traditions. Some felt that the warriors are all beautiful, not one more than another, but you give cream milk to your favorite. Another was attracted to her friend’s style of dress and his face saying, if his face looks fit, black, and smooth I can feel the blood in my heart. When a girl finally chooses her friend, she will take his spear out from the pile during esoto and announce his name to everyone. One yeyo remembers telling me, I chose the spear of my friend at esoto, and it showed in public how I love him.

A young ndito just emerging into esoto life will often consult the older girls for tips on how choose her olokoingipoto. This transfer of knowledge was a more prominent aspect of the older generations esoto experience. It was, in fact, the duty of older girls to guide the younger girls in proper esoto etiquette. A young girl, in fact “will not make the decision to have sex with her [olokoingipoto] for the first time on her own, but together with the group of older girls” (Von Moitzlaff 1988). Naturally, they took on an authoritative, advising role for an entire social group in the community. This degree of influence in any given space is symbolic of the greater degree of agency experienced.

Girls and warriors took great pride in each other and their relationships. Many of the women recall spending long afternoons making cuts on each other and decorating their friends in the red oil. Girls today even spend most afternoons fixing belts, bracelets, and necklaces for their friends. The Maasai consider wearing jewelry beautification. So, the more friends a morani has, the more jewelry he wears, making him more beautiful and, thus, more desired by girls. It is a positive reaction loop of attraction. One yeyo recalls the way she played with her friend at esoto, saying, we would joke about loving each other. I liked the kissing—we kissed on the neck, mouth, and breasts. Another koko remembers her boyfriend dancing at esoto after coming back from killing a lion, he danced with the lion’s tail on his spear—everybody loved him, he was so strong.

He is the one who came to build my life forever:
Life After Esoto
During every interview I asked the rather open-ended question, “What do you remember about esoto?” Women typically responded by shaking their shoulders and mimicking the dances of their childhood or singing to me the songs that they learned at esoto. But one koko that I talked to had a very different and quite visceral reaction to the question. She responded by telling me that the question made her far too sad to continue with the interview. She was sad to be reminded of those times because she was not sure if her olokoingipoto from esoto was still alive or not. She figured that most all of the warriors from her generation had passed away by now. The interview stopped then and there as she requested not to continue. I did not understand before this how integral a friend is to a girl’s identity in Maasai culture, but when I asked one woman about this unique relationship she expressed so succinctly, to ask, “What is your friend’s name?” is like asking, “What are your mother and fathers’ names?” It is a part of a girl’s identity that she is able to choose without the approval of her parents and is so attached to her daily experiences that it would be difficult to divorce from.

Many women had a difficult time telling me about the memories of their friends and in one interview my translator had to ask the yeyo’s husband to leave out of respect for his status. A few women no longer see their friends because when they married they were arranged with a husband who lived in a village far away from her home. I said “pole”11 to one woman whose friend lives far away in the Ngorongoro highlands and she replied, eeh, I really miss him! Many women expressed stronger feelings for their friends than their husbands, I push and fight with my husband. But when I see my boyfriend we hide and kiss around the corner.

The mentality in which these women function determines much of the daily decisions they make. Maasai “patriarchy, like gender, is produced, maintained, and transformed through the cultural and social relations of power between women and men, but also among women and among men” (Hodgson 1999). It seemed for many women that running against the grain of society and privately defying the authority

11 Pole is the Kiswahili word used to express sympathy.
of a husband was worth risking the potential repercussions. Part of being yeyo means that your husband has control over your personal life and he is allowed to know everything that you do. While one koko was describing to me the difference between her friend and husband she pretended to hug and kiss her friend, then slapped her hands together to illustrate a beating from her husband. *My friend is the one I chose,* she said, *we can have sex and hug as we like. My parents chose my husband and when we have sex we look so tired.* Although the price for sleeping with your lover and being caught entails an enraged husband and painful beating the elders know that “they are powerless against the solidarity of the women, who would never betray each other. If a woman did this [and betray the solidarity] she would exclude herself from the community of women and potential lovers” (Von Mitzlaff, 1988). To meet with her friend one yeyo sends an elder woman to call for him and they meet in the bush once a month so that her husband never knows. Some women simply enjoy seeing their friends to share stories and catch up on each other’s lives.

Most women remember enjoying their young age and playing with their friends at esoto, but not all of them are still seeking to be with their friends today. One yeyo expressed, *I love my friends and my husband, but being yeyo is a famous name because I can have children now.* For many, marriage was not the most exciting time of life, but arranged marriages are a part of the culture and it seemed to be important to most girls to respect the wishes of their parents, *I was most proud when I was free, and I was not happy to marry, but I respect my parents.* To see other men when married can cause disturbances in your family. Many Christian women, in particular, said that they loved their husbands and no longer sought after their friends, *I feel closer to my husband. He is the one who came to build my life forever.* The other woman I was interviewing commented, *sex was good when I was young, but now I have no feeling. Esoto is a good time to enjoy sex. Now I have children and am too busy.*

While quite a few women refrained from seeing their friends once married, many told me an interesting way to stay in close contact with their esoto friends. Many of them said that that they were promising their esoto friends their first-born
daughter in marriage. One yeyo described it as an extension of their love in the next generation. Another told me that her son was set up to marry her friend’s daughter when they were both old enough, *this way my husband won’t fight with my friend.* One woman promising her first daughter to her esoto lover says it is her way of saying, *I still remember.*
Discussion

If the western story of Africa were written, it would be dressed in a narrative of heartbreak and failure, followed by a renaissance of the spirit and concluded in a celebration of triumph and reclamation. But this is the western story. The history of individual agency runs deep in the fabrics of western society’s earliest thinkers and has since justified the active creation of cultural spaces, the mentally and physically manifested worlds that we function within on a daily basis. We have become accustomed to the greater degree of agency we have in sculpting what the world will or should look like. Through western conquest and colonization, 2/3 of the world has burgeoned into the 21st century with increasingly limited ownership of their daily experiences resulting in the marginalization of this 2/3rds.

Women in most all ends of the world carry the shared assumptions of womanhood on their backs into any room with them. In many ways the woman has been the other, or, the exception, to the male dominated public sphere. It is the realm where ‘man’ transcends animalistic attributes. The private sphere has been, contrastingly, seen as the natural realm—associated with women. But since the beginning of the 21st century western feminists have come to discover and attempt to define their own other. This other holds the burden of filtering, complacently accepting, and adapting to the institutions, ideologies, and values of the dominant western discourse, including that of the feminist dialogue. She sees her western counterparts as succeeding in the global arena and questions the seemingly different agency that we wield. This agency “with which people shift between different group identities provides the capacity with which they transform the cultures of those groups as much as the beliefs and practices already existing in them” (Masolo 2002). As the west reflects on the other 2/3rds of the world population, it is often overlooked how this greater agency aids itself to defining

12 The Other is the term the polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski used to describe non-Europeans and the current way we view them. I am considering his theories in a gender context.
familiar cultural spaces. Marginalization has been the critical symptom of this lack of acknowledgement. This other 2/3rds has been dealt a passive role in maintaining its own functioning spaces.

Though it is popular western theory that “the cultural worlds which we assume to be common for the actors within them are constituted by the effects of the actors’ own actions within society as an influencing and conditioning (also self-preserving) institution,” it must be noted that our increasingly global world changes the cultural climate of so many societies living outside of the 1/3rd conducting the western discussion (Masolo 2002). The effects of seemingly ubiquitous western values are great, especially when the assumption is made that these values have solely brought economic prosperity to the west. The undeniable presence of the west in these previously self-maintained societies is having the effect of stifling the agency in constructing and defining these societies’ cultural spaces. Because of this presence, a society’s values and perceptions of a cultural space’s value and meaning are altered to consider, and often adopt, the dominant neoliberal discourse.

The Maasai of Engare Sero have inevitably been adopting western concepts of morality, economics, and education into their lives with the idea that adopting the western way will lead to development and economic prosperity. The Maasai have been shifting toward a more globalized culture that can best be described by a process that Ferguson refers to as “creolization”, meaning, meeting other cultures and adopting or fusing new cultural practices with their own (Ferguson 2007). Their lives now require them to live out several identities with only the context of Maasai culture and history to contextualize and make sense of it all.

After living in Engare Sero for the duration of my study, 3 weeks, I have come to witness and formulate three forces that are most dramatically changing the village and face of Maasai culture. These three factors are western education (which I will now refer to simply as “education”), Christianity, and Swahili culture (the symbol of development to Maasai). While these concepts were introduced fairly recently, it is incontestable that these forces have so thoroughly honeycombed into the everyday experience of being Maasai. While the dominating western sentiment is that the absorption of western values can help the Maasai develop, it is also believed that
this development has the power to ‘liberate’ women of this western deemed patriarchal society. As most all forms of development in Engare Sero have, in some form, come to reject the fundamental values and experience of the esoto space, it is up for debate if taking away the space of greatest agency in a woman’s life can truly liberate her. Not surprisingly, the esoto space has become the Maasai symbol of the rapidly creolizing culture and brings to the forefront the fact that it is not possible to group all women in the world into one homogenous unit of uniform desires, ideas, and opinions. With education, church, and the resources of Swahili culture, one brought the crux of the discussion to my attention, why would we stay proud in our culture if we don’t benefit? Today, cows are dying from disease, but my daughter will have a job.

*I need my daughter to be educated like you are:*
*Importance of Education in Engare Sero*

Education, specifically, has been implemented into the Maasai life of Engare Sero, as well as the rest of Tanzania, by the government making primary school mandatory for all children. While it is without doubt that most all Maasai in the area find education to be a valuable asset to their children’s lives, the school has taken an authoritative role in the community, requiring not only attendance and participation in the classroom, but also impressing western values and concepts of a proper classroom setting. The enforcement of these values have come to limit the Maasai’s ability to continue with all cultural practices. While the prospects of losing an aspect of culture may seem like something the elders refused, even the male elders of the community feel that education should have been a part of their childhood (Focal Group 2, Engare Sero).

The one primary school in Engare Sero has taken a very strict stance on their students going to esoto—it is simply not allowed. The Head of the Primary School, a Chagga man from outside of Engare Sero, spoke with me about the conflict. He said that when girls go to esoto they become tired, or sometimes become pregnant and cannot perform well in school. With the government pushing for greater emphasis
on education, the school wants no distractions to keep the students from performing well on their final examinations. Furthermore, when a girl is pregnant investigations are undertaken and the boy who makes her pregnant will go to jail for 30 years. He said that the Maasai are allowed to go to esoto when they have finished with primary school or if they do not attend school at all. He does not feel that the law is hurting Maasai culture because they are free to attend esoto when finished with primary school. He also felt that, since the rule is not strictly enforced, the law does not actually affect a student’s decision—they still go to esoto.\textsuperscript{13}

All of the women I talked to agreed that education was important to Maasai life today. Many felt so strongly that they considered the school rule as a step in the right direction and that esoto is no longer relevant to their modernizing lives. While all of the women I talked to went to esoto as ndito, about half said that they were not allowing their daughters to go. Compared to what a child can gain from education, they see the dance as a waste of time and most of the leaders of the village see no profit in the esoto. One yeyo felt that, \textit{if you go to esoto, you cannot be serious about your studies}. Another women, who did not allow her daughters to go to esoto, felt that it is a good government rule because there is no benefiting to be had at esoto, \textit{I even wish that I were sent to school, but my parents never sent me}. They hoped that the law would also help keep their daughters from careless sex and diseases. The law would also help keep girls focused on a career and a job. During an interview one woman pointed at her small daughter and told me, \textit{I need my daughter to be educated like you are}.

The quiet, dissenting voice argued the focal point that the esoto can teach girls so much about culture and life that a western schooling never could. A koko told me during this discussion, \textit{esoto is a way to give each other company}. \textit{It is like a classroom where girls and warriors learn from each other}. She told me that girls

\textsuperscript{13} Personal Communication, \textit{Engare Sero} Primary School Headmaster November, 2010
living in the remote village of Leprakashi,\textsuperscript{14} on top of the Rift Wall escarpment, are too far from the main road for the government to ever visit. Those girls, who don’t go to school, still paint their faces for esoto, a tradition that has not been practiced in the central Engare Sero area for several generations. Some of these mothers wanted for their daughters to experience both worlds. As one mother said, \textit{it is taking away an important part of our culture. If the esoto dies the culture is broken}. Only one woman that I talked to seemed to feel that the esoto had more to offer children than education saying, \textit{we have always had esoto. School has just come into our lives. Esoto was nice at a previous time, but this generation prefers education, mine preferred culture}. The predicament seems to lie in the fact that the government has made the two experiences mutually exclusive and now some youth will not know the long-established values and practices as fully as others. Some internalization of a ritual or ceremony can be lost if an individual does not fully comprehend the nuances. A very discerning yeyo that I talked to considered this dichotomy and explained, \textit{everyone in the world is running toward education, but we can run with our traditional ways as well.}

\textit{If my daughter passes examinations, she can live her life as she likes}, one yeyo said, \textit{no circumcision}. This was one of the less common, but quite noteworthy, sentiments that women felt about their daughters’ education. They similarly felt that if they passed examinations then their daughters could choose their own husbands. As stated earlier, girls who are educated are becoming more resistant to listen to their parents who often arrange for their girls to marry 50 year old, uneducated Maasai men. One yeyo has other plans for her daughters after education saying, \textit{I want them to choose someone who is educated and knows about the world}. While this was not the dominating opinion of Engare Sero women, it still seemed an indicator of slow change in the area.

Although individual choice is a cornerstone value of western neoliberal values, arranged marriage, circumcision and polyamorous relationships have been staples

\textsuperscript{14} Leprakashi is considered part of Engare Sero, but takes half of a day to reach from the town center. Some children are making the trek to and from school every day, but many do not.
of Maasai culture for centuries. But, the rather big step to allow the youngest generation to choose a new lifestyle, that could potentially reject these staples, seems to have left a footprint in the minds of Engare Sero Maasai. One of my longest interviews was with one yeyo who felt very strongly about education and her daughter choosing for her own life. Toward the end of the interview she told me, *she can choose her husband because she is more educated and can now teach me about the world.*

*We are no longer proud about our cows, but about God: Christian Women’s’ Perceptions of Esoto*

Christianity has similarly altered the Maasai and women’s hopes for their daughters. On the drive from Arusha to Engare Sero any town you pass through is likely to have a European group of missionaries on mission trips to save specifically the Maasai dispersed throughout East Africa. The values of the two groups are seemingly incompatible on many moral fronts, making the Maasai a popular objective of Christian rallies. On our way back from Engare Sero in the tourist town of Mtu wa Mbu, a group that called themselves The Crusaders were visiting the bomas in the area with enough rice to feed every Maasai they came across and teach them about Christianity. These groups have similarly introduced Lutheran, Catholic, etc. churches to Engare Sero. Many responses to my interview questions were qualified with the statement, *because I am Christian.* The kokos and yeyos who were Christian expressed Christianity as being one of the biggest changes in esoto performance. As one yeyo was telling me how her daughters are Christian and, thus, not attending esoto, her daughter sitting next to me sang a Christian song in Kimaasai with the title, *No Way to Hide When God is on Top of the Mountain.*

One Koko stated, *now people are Christian and copy Christian songs at esoto or just don’t go at all. We are no longer proud about our cows, but about God.* There are several churches of differing denominations in Engare Sero that have made statements similar to the school about the esoto. Harping on western values and the values taught in the Bible, the churches state that the esoto is a place of sin, abuse,
and disrespect. When considering the environment of the esoto, one Christian mother says, *my daughter will not learn these things but will learn about Christianity.* Many who are churchgoers feel that the esoto used to be a respectable event to attend but it has changed so much that it has little to offer the new generation and that, *church can bring us development.*

As the church challenges the fundamental traditions and values of Maasai in *Engare Sero,* some women felt as though there were great benefits to be reaped from listening to the church. One yeyo concerned about her daughters contracting STDs told me, *there are diseases now and no one is protected so we run to the church. It gives us good advice, but there is no advising at esoto.* But even some of these Christian women felt that the church was breaking Maasai culture by impressing contradictory values, *Christians don’t want alcohol, but we still want to drink our local alcohol.* The church also suggests for women to dress a certain way and to be in monogamous relationships. Even with the acknowledgement of their fading ceremonies, rituals and transforming culture one woman told me, *I feel loser to the Christian way.*

*Our time was the best time of culture; there was no mixing of people:*

*Influence of Swahili Society on Maasai Cultural Spaces*

When I spoke with women about development the rhetoric took an unexpected turn from the typical association with the west and development to Swahili and development. The Maasai have long resisted government pressures to colonize with the rest of East Africa and never let western colonizers drastically change their way of life. But the Maasai of *Engare Sero* have recently let in, what they consider, Swahili culture. This is much different from European colonists as they consider Swahili people simply to be any Tanzanians outside of the Maasai culture. These are the people who have, in most recent decades, introduced western institutions such as the hospital, dispensary, police station, primary school, and authorities to *Engare Sero.* The women that I talked to have seen both the positive and negative effects of Swahili culture in Maasai life including esoto practices.
One woman thought back to when people had no jobs and there was no town center. As she explained, *we enjoyed the Maasai way of life as it was high culture because we had not yet mixed with Swahili. Now people are running to religion.* The use of the term 'high culture' was used by many yeyos and kokos to illustrate the time when the Maasai were most fixed in their cultural habitus. They see this ‘high culture’ manifested in almost every aspect of their childhood in dancing, singing, fashion, and dedication to the Maasai daily experience. The women mostly found benefits in the Swahili customs of using condoms, medical care, and investing in western education. The negative side is seen in children having sex at a younger age, diseases, higher pregnancy rates, police investigations, and alcoholism. One koko looked back on her youth in envy telling me, *our time was the best time of culture; there was no mixing of people.*

Since the village center began to flourish, the esoto space has drastically changed from Swahili influences. Although it is strict morani law that junior morani are not supposed to drink alcohol, one women accounted warriors going to the bars and showing up at esoto drunk, *it is now called a western esoto,* she said. Authenticity in performance was also at stake in the rhetoric of many kokos. As this koko expressed, morani are no longer performing the real esoto. The songs have even changed to include Swahili, English, and Christian songs.

One koko explained to me that the importance of esoto comes from the generation of the *Imakuyni, the Maasai who were alive when the world started.* They were most dedicated to Maasai culture and taught the later generations to stretch their ears, pull their teeth, and dance at esoto. As she explained to me, *the esoto will never end, it is the life of the Maasai.* Her friend felt that if the esoto is ending, they will still be Maasai. But she laughed and shook her head seemingly in amusement of my questions saying, *the esoto will never end because as each generation grows old and tired a new generation is ready to show their pride.*

After every interview that I conducted I would let the women I talked to ask me as many questions as they wanted about me and my life in America. These-post interview questions were equally enlightening as my own questions as it was interesting to find out what they find curious about me and the *other* that they see in
me. After one interview that lasted roughly an hour and a half concerning mostly the developing reality of Engare Sero the yeyo wanted my honest advice as to what I thought was best for the future of the Maasai, How would you feel about your life if your parents were Maasai and you were born here, would you prefer this life? She posed the question in such a way that I could no longer consider, with vague comparisons, the benefits and setbacks of our two worlds. I wanted to tell her that holding on to culture and choosing to embrace the beneficial aspects of development was the best option. I wanted to tell her that she would not like the western life—not all that comes with it. But I also thought of the young daughter sitting in her lap that she wanted to raise with all of the resources of my life—a hospital, education, money, and choices. And I could not deny her those desires. I said, “no”.
Limitations

- My study was ultimately limited by my dependence on a translator. Concepts that are explained through one word in English may take several breaths to express in Kimaasai and vice versa. I can imagine that much of what the women hoped to express to me was lost in translation.
- I cannot divorce myself from the connotations that my appearance and status of power and privilege yield. As an outsider coming into Engare Sero village to interview people who I am assuming are others compared to my life, I set up a very artificial situation. This is inevitable with any interview or participant observation, but it still must be noted that I will never be able to say definitively how the Maasai women of Engare Sero think and feel.
- Being only three weeks long, my study was a very limited amount of time I could spend collecting data and internalizing the society operating around me.

Recommendations

There are so many interesting topics to study when considering the Maasai. While I was in Engare Sero, I wondered often about how the marriage process along with all of the dowry negotiations worked as well as what Maasai do when a member of the village dies. Ethnography on circumcision of males, females, or even both, would also make for an interesting ISP. But my best advice for any future social study done in Tanzania is to allow your interviewees to ask you questions, as you can glean equally enlightening insights from their curiosities.
Conclusion

The esoto performance has changed through performance, relationships, and life after esoto. Some symbols of this change in performance come from girls today wearing clothing instead of skins and using cosmetics. Many of the yeyos and kokos see this as non-authentic and drifting from the old cultural ways. With the introduction of Christianity and Swahili culture, the esoto of Engare Sero has incorporated Christian as well as Kiswahili songs into the dance. Esoto relationships are also changing as girls have less time to spend with warriors. Now there is no orbo and most time is devoted to school or going to town. Similarly, women today are reconsidering arranged marriages for their daughters after esoto. Some feel that if the girl passes her examinations that she should be able to choose for herself.

Perceptions of the esoto were overall mixed but every one I spoke with agreed that education is a vital resource for any child living in Engare Sero today. Many women felt that the esoto had lost its older value and meaning in Maasai culture and that it is an unnecessary ritual in the modern world. Others felt that, it still has importance and can even teach valuable cultural concepts that a western classroom never could. Among Christian women, many felt that the esoto was contradictory to Christianity. Furthermore, Swahili culture is perceived, especially by kokos, to have been a strong catalyst of change to esoto. The mixing of people, as they said, has made the new generation less serious about culture.

The esoto has been a long-standing ritual of the Maasai of East Africa. It is a unique space and time where girls and warriors dance, sing, and play until morning comes. The women I spoke with all felt as though the esoto, whether now or in the past, has been an important time in a Maasai girl's life. It has served as the medium for fostering relationships, passing information generationally, and catalyzing a girl's entrance into adulthood. The esoto is, seemingly, the time and space in which a Maasai girl has most agency in her life. Which brings to question whether the forces that are changing this space will support or stifle their agency in the future.
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Appendix A: Map of the Greater Serengeti Mara Complex
Appendix B

Interview questions for yeyos and kokos:

As ndito, did you go to esoto?
How did you prepare for esoto?
Who taught you the dance and song? What do you remember about learning these?
How many friends did you have?
How did you choose your friends?
What do you do with your friends?
What makes a good friend?
What makes an attractive friend?
How would you describe your emotional attachment to your friend?
How would you describe your emotional attachment to your husband?
Do you still visit your friends? How often?
What happens during those visits?
Is sex different with esoto friends than with your husband? If so, how?
Do your daughters go to esoto? If not, why?
Do your daughters go to primary school?
Do you see any changes in the esoto that girls attend today? If so, what changes?
Do you think the rule that students of the primary school are not allowed to go to
esoto is a good rule? Why?
Will your daughter’s marriage be arranged?
Has Swahili culture changed esoto? If so, How?

Interview questions for ndito:

Do you attend esoto?
How old were you when you began attending?
How do you prepare for esoto?
Who taught you the dance and song?
Do you walk to esoto with other girls?
Do you hope to gain friends through esoto? If so, how many
What makes a good friend?
What do you do with your friends?
Do you want to marry? When would you like to be married?