



An Evening Walk

Memories
of Tanzania

Helen Fallon



Agnes Mosul and Mary Koitee, Masai women from Rift Valley Province, Kenya. Photo: P.J. McCamphill

It was a busy little town on the main route between the capital Dar es Salaam and Arusha in Northern Tanzania. I was there, some years ago, for a few weeks working on a library project in a teacher training college.

On my way back to my residence each day, I watched women peeling cobs of corn, and men making building blocks from the red earth; in the process, creating huge voids in the landscape. Hens scratched in the dusty earth. Children ran about playing. A tailor sewed brightly coloured cotton, streaked with gold thread that was imported in bales from India. Small shops sold trinkets and household provisions.

Masai women in flowing purple robes, wearing bead bands that stretched their necks and earrings that required holes about half a centimetre in their ear-lobes, stood out even in that colourful and exotic place.

The Masai, however, are more famous for their cattle herding than their jewellery making. These tall stately men and women, who are supposed to have come originally from along the Nile, follow the cycle of the seasons; moving their cattle to graze in the same way as their ancestors have done for hundreds and hundreds of years. They consider their cattle to be sacred and, therefore, they do not slaughter or sell them.

Some of these tall stately Masai men can also be seen keeping guard outside the homes of the elite in Dar es Salaam, rather than standing, with their cattle, silhouetted against the orange African sky.

The Masai women come into the village from the hills in the late afternoon and set up makeshift stalls, selling potions and lotions for a variety of ailments. One afternoon I stop to examine a stall. The woman is wearing a necklace about two centimetres in depth. It's made up of alternate rows of tiny dark blue and white glass beads.

I enquire if she will sell it to me. Using her long shiny fingers she indicates how many Tanzanian shillings she wants for it. I know this is a figure she has conjured from her imagination and that she expects me to bargain for hours. Time isn't important here.

I decide to surprise her and agree, without haggling, to the price. I leave her smiling happily. With the necklace tied securely around my neck via a leather clasp I make my way home, passing a young boy selling copybooks with sun faded yellow covers and an old man uttering prophecies of a second coming.

The next day on my way home from work the Masai woman spots me approaching. She calls to her friends. Suddenly I'm encircled by a half-dozen women who wave necklaces, bangles and earrings in front of me.

Smiling, I untangle myself from their friendly grasp and make my way home through my neighbour's overgrown garden, where the whisper and scurry of insect life and the happy voices of children playing replace the sounds of the village traders.

I still have the Masai necklace. It brings back happy memories of a people and a place that I will not easily forget. ■

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