

Maasai Migrants: A Case Study of Applied, Collaborative Visual Anthropology

Abstract

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Peter Biella and Shamia Sandles

San Francisco State University

Sedentarization, loss of cattle, and the allures of city life and cash to send back home and have attracted thousands of Tanzania Maasai *ilmurran* (“warriors”) away from their traditional homesteads to cities like Dar es Salaam and Dodoma. In the cities, partly because of their coveted reputation for fearlessness and no nonsense with strangers, Maasai urban pastoralists have almost cornered the expanding market for night watchmen in private homes and public buildings. Yet the traditional lifestyle that made the *ilmurran* strong has also left them vulnerable to hazards in the city. Many have been prey to unscrupulous employers, are ignorant of legal protections for employees, and end up jobless, living in crowded and dangerous conditions.

Working in collaboration with the University of Dar es Salaam, Peter Biella and his students are engaged in the production of short “trigger films” made for these night watchmen. The films are scripted in collaboration with the subjects themselves and with members of the University’s Pastoralist Students Association. The primary purpose of the films is to promote lengthy post-screening discussions: dozens and even hundreds of audience members engage in a productive dialog made possible by the film-screening context. In it, remedies for widely shared, though privately embarrassing, distress can be talked about freely and publicly. The screenings conform to the model described by Englehart and Levine for HIV/AIDS education in Southern Africa (2003, *VAR* 19[1-2]). Its advantages are strikingly similar to those of group therapy. Often subjects of the films themselves serve the role of discussion facilitators. They keep the dialog focused, accurate and non-threatening.

In the proposed *VRC* session, we will show excerpts from the films along with clips of post-screening discussions. In a facilitated screening of our own, we will explore the theory of applied collaborative film giving special emphasis on the problems and successes of our work. Our strategy will also be evaluated as a model for future field schools in applied, collaborative visual anthropology.