



Newsletter: November 2007 Douglas McFalls

USA: P.O. Box 45751 – Seattle, WA 98145 Tel. 206.227.0082

Tanzania: P.O. Box 233 – Mtwara, Tanzania

Kenya: P.O. Box 142 – Loitokitok, Kenya

Email: Douglas@ADEAAfrica.org

www.ADEAAfrica.org

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TRADITIONAL DANCE AND DRUMMING TROUPES IN VILLAGES:



This past week I traveled deep into the bush with four others to watch two days of performances by rural village troupes. What we experienced was extraordinary and magical. The performances were staged under the thick arms of giant mango or cashew trees. The villagers gathered in a great circle when they heard the drummers begin warming the drum hides over a fire of dry grass. “Kling, Kling, Kling” went the small high-pitched drums until they reached the desired pitch. We had come to

make a promotional video to help us raise funds for a traditional performing arts festival: The MaKuYa Festival (from Makonde, Makua and Mayao tribes of Mtwara). The festival will gather unique rural troupes from throughout the region for a day or two of performances



On our tour men, women, hundreds of children and our group watched in delight as the performers showed their skills. Many wore varieties of grass skirts and bells made of metal that they wore like beads across their chest. Rattles of dried mango pits or large seeds were worn around their ankles for percussion. Stories were told using masks and thespians performed to the rhythms of drums. Some wore guinea fowl feathers, others animal hides. Many wore hats; some powdered their faces; some danced on stilts. Some groups had small children. One group had been dancing together since 1952!

We were honored guests given the best seats in the house (carved stools, benches or Makonde woven beds).

Dominique, the man from ADEA who located these groups for us, was held in great esteem because they are so anxious for such a festival to occur –

they all agreed to perform without compensation! And Philipo (ADEA's Co-Director) masterfully spoke of our idea to help preserve and promote the rich, but little known, performance culture of Mtwara.



“Inakufa?” He would cry (Is it dying? - the dance and drum tradition), “Haikufi!” “It is not dieing,” they cried back. We had the chance to meet with village wazee (elderly/seniors), and many lamented how much culture is being lost. The young want to make up their own new dances and styles, with little interest in the traditional ways. One elder was so excited about our interest in life in the past that he collected sticks to demonstrate how they started fires without matches. We may have a new gift item – traditional cigarette lighters! We learned that the elders have dances they could teach and would like to teach, but don't know how to inspire the young to learn them. We hope our MaKuYa Festival will do just that.

Here are some wonderful pictures taken by my friends.



ARTISANS IN MTWARA: CHANGE MIGHT BE IN THE AIR

This morning two of the painters came by my window at 6:15 a.m. to collect the key for the studio. “Wow, could it be they are finally getting it?” You see, the mentality here is, if you have money, why work? So when ADEA has a large number of orders, it is a challenge to get the artists to work hard. They don’t always realize how critical it is to fill orders in a timely manner in order to insure more orders in the future. With money in their pocket, they are relaxed; they come late, take long tea breaks and slip out early. I have tried to explain that when you have lots of orders, is when you must work harder, first, keep your clients happy and, second, because there are “fat” and “lean” seasons for work. “Christmas is coming, and there are orders! Work now and you’ll eat in January.” Still the fruit of these dialogues seemed negligible, until this morning!

“Today I travel to Dar es Salam and on to Kenya. I am taking with me everything that is ready for orders. Once I’m gone that’s it,” I told them. And here they are!! Can it be they are changing?!

MAASAI SCHOOL

Soon I will travel to Rombo, Kenya to help with the school. Last week they were hit with an unpleasant surprise. “Light of Maasai” who had built three classrooms and agreed to give them to our school program, has decided instead to form their own government school. It seems that there are some politics involved – as elections are coming up. We are concerned because, though we also considered government schools, we decided against them. The government schools have little respect for Maasai culture and teachers would be non-Maasai. For a teacher to be sent to such a rural place would be considered a hardship post and teachers would likely be chosen because of poor, and even abusive performance in urban areas. The Maasai would have to provide housing for the teachers, which would be a hardship. And, the government school would not have the flexibility of student participation which enables children to both attend school and provide the help at home the family needs. We are doing our best to retain the two classrooms AMREF built for us. We have learned that meetings with leaders and verbal agreements are not enough – we must produce letters stating the agreement and get signatures. My next newsletter will let you know what is happening.

LOCAL TIDBITS:

- I have a housekeeper. His name is Msafiri. I love it! I had expected to hire someone for help 2 days a week, but he was so reasonable, I have him full time. He has also worked with internationals for a many years – he even makes sweet rolls! This gives me more time to work, and I eat more properly.
- Electricity has been great, but water is a challenge in my house. Sometime I “bathe” in a basin, so I can use my waste-water for the toilet (i.e. ceramic hole in the ground.)
- My digital camera was stolen from my desk. That was a bad day. One can’t let down for a minute here with things of value (even pens). It’s painful because it had to be an artisan, my housekeeper or my housemate. Arg!
- My refrigerator broke two days ago and it is hot! I was in sad shape yesterday with no cool drinks, and all my frozen wild bush pig had to be eaten at once. It was quite a feast. I pray the repairs will be successful! THEY MUST BE - or I’ll go crazy!

A SPIRITUAL NOTE:

This is actually a question for some of you – especially you parents. How do you keep on loving and persevering when you are exasperated?

That's all for now. I'll send news soon after some time with the Maasai. Happy Thanksgiving!

I hope you are well. I am excited to host seven of you in late November. It should be an amazing time, and I am excited to see the Serengeti!

Douglas – Kupikita (Makonde) – Oloikurrukurr (Maasai)