

At Simanjiro Mission:

During my sojourn in Tanzania (1980-1981) I made 2 visits to the Simanjiro Mission clinic deep on the Maasai Steppe, south of Arusha. The mission was run by Spanish priests and volunteers whom I met through a Chilean friend who had briefly taught at the same girls' secondary school where I was posted.

When editing these notes, I was uncertain as to how to render the text, given that much of the conversation during the visit was in a mix of Swahili, Spanish and English. I hope that my effort to preserve the authenticity of that mélange is not too great a hindrance to readability.

I also hope that this text serves as something of a tribute to the residents of Simanjiro Mission at that time—particularly, Padre Pepe—a man of exceptional integrity...

First visit (July 1980):



Early morning after the student buses have departed for holidays, I walked from the gates of Weru-Weru to *mila sita*, to catch a bus to Arusha. From the midst of the packed aisle through the 90-minute trip, I breathed the smoke-sweaty redolence of the *Maasai* women mingled with the sour old man stink—vaguely reminiscent of the reek of skid row hotel rooms of northern cities. As we smoked to a stop by the Arusha airport to admit several more women bundling babies and bananas, a sleek black bus whizzed past with some foreign delegation blinking curiously out the tinted windows.

At 10:00 AM, I alighted at the central traffic circle in a cold and windy Somali Rd. market. Walking briskly the half-kilometer to the Catholic Central House, I rehearsed Spanish phrases for meeting with Senora Marta, Spanish lay volunteer, and mutual friend of Chilean Adriana Borquez.

The gates of the Catholic Central House were wide open as was the double door to the mission house itself. Gingerly, I entered the well-swept hallway. Senora Marta, 40ish and rotund, immediately appeared with a warm smile. I greeted her in Swahili.

She told me that it would be at least an hour before the Land Rover was fuelled up and loaded. With the option of staying in the churchy waiting room or returning later, I decided to head back towards the market for a *chai*.

Back at *Casa Central* by 11:00 AM, I was heartened to see that the Land Rover was packed outside the gate with a *Maasai* girl and her child waiting by the door. Marta was also standing outside with arms crossed waiting for *Hermano Antonio*, the paramedic, who was to drive. “*Momento*,” she said. “*Puedes esperar a dendo.*”

I then sat in the waiting room alongside an old priest from Milwaukee while Marta drove off to the hospital in search of Brother Antonio. I leafed through some old *Newsweek* magazines on the bookshelf and then found a novel, ‘*Spark of Life*’, by Erich Maria Remarque, which I shamefully “borrowed” for the trip. Before Marta returned an hour later, the waiting room gradually filled with visiting Catholic lay volunteers and visiting clergy. Obliged to put my book aside in the spirit of fellowship, I chatted with a Mutt and Jeff pair of American priests on a 2-week tour of African game parks as well as with a ruddy-cheeked Peace Corps girl from Maine.

However awkward among the Catholic faithful, I submitted when Marta motioned me to the refectory for lunch. As we sat down for stew and *ugali* at the long wooden table with the priests and lay-people, I leaned forward with ear sloppily tuned between Spanish and Swahili.

There was brother Ambrose, the Tanzanian youth counselor, patiently tutoring the stammering Americans in Kiswahili while a Dutchman apparently on leave from his Ethiopian mission, focused on his chewing. The old Irish priest who was overseeing a diocese construction project, smiled at the earnest efforts of the Americans in Swahili and held one hand behind his chair to balance his crutches.

As the platters were passed, *Hermano Antonio* barged in with his young *Maasai* helper. Making excuses as Marta reproached him for the delay, he wolfed down a plateful of *ugali* and *mboga* before heading off again, this time accompanied by Marta.

After the lunch, I sat outside on a lumber pile in the afternoon sun. A few more cardboard boxes were stacked before the Land Rover, apparently a donation from the Diocese of Milwaukee. Open flaps revealed the contents: several pairs of Dr. Skoll’s pediatric sandals, disposable diapers, Gerbers’ Banana apple dessert, cherry flavored chewable vitamin C tablets and a box of Kraft caramel Wrapples (What could bush-wracked missionaries more desire?)

It was nearly 4:00 PM before Antonio and Marta reappeared and another 45 minutes before the Land Rover was repacked. Watching Antonio cramming and rearranging the boxes and bundles reminded me that these ‘*wazungu Waspanola*; [Spaniards] were a tribe unto themselves...

Only by 5:00 PM were we ready to roll. Marta, Tanzanian Brother Cesar, and I were crammed in with a tight load of furniture and supplies in the land vehicle while *Hermano Antonio* commandeered the mission ambulance.

At the southern edge of Arusha in late afternoon, we bumped off the asphalt onto a laterite road though landscape ever flatter and dryer as we moved away from the slope of Mount Meru and onto the steppe. Soon the road narrowed to a two-wheel track and then the dirt track itself seemed indistinguishable from the surrounding plain. The hazy blue triangle of Mount Meru fell further behind while there remained to the east a glimpse of the Kibo peak of Kilimanjaro truncated by clouds.

We bucked on across the steppe past *Maasai* hitchhikers standing with palms and spears held up in supplication for a lift. With a peep of the horn and hand signal of no room, we barreled past. Through the 2 ½-hour journey, the only other vehicles met on the road were a few lorries heading back to Arusha teetering with bulging sacks of charcoal. Labourers in grey rags riding on top of the burlap sacks waved as we passed.

On southward our vehicle bumped, braking sharply before rocky patches and grinding down into 4-wheel drive to cross dry streambeds and gullies. Sometimes the track was barely distinguishable and thorn bushes scraped the windows as we detoured around rock piles. Still, through the dusty window was an array of exotic views: marabou storks and brilliantly tufted birds on the dusty roadside and *Maasai* trudging towards their hidden *bomas* beside donkeys laden with sloshing leather saddlebags of water.

When we cut the engine at the top of a rise to wait for the ambulance to catch up, insects droned hypnotically in the growing dusk, vying with the incessant dry wind.

"Simanjiro es un isla," said Marta nodding across the desolate plain to the silhouette of Mt. Hanang far to the southwest. Indeed, the journey to the Mission isolated on the open steppe oft times seemed more like the crossing of water than of land.

Several minutes later, we did reach the first islet in the ‘sea’. The hamlet of Komolo under a hill, consisting of little more than a few mud-walls and a single *duka* [shop] amid patches of scraggly maize. As we approached, a *Maasai* man waved us to a halt. Coming up behind him were other *Maasai* sheltering an old woman with a sick child in arms. We immediately pulled over with Brothers Cesar and Antonio running out to help. Antonio held a penlight to the baby’s eyes while the grandmother watched anxiously. The baby’s eyes rolled and twitched while the little chest rattled and thick mucus oozed from her lips.

“*Pronto, pronto a Simanjiro!*”

Brother Cesar took the child in arms and with Antonio rushed back to the ambulance, which sped on ahead. With dark enveloping, we continued more slowly in the Land Rover. Apart from thorn bush and an occasional baobab, only whirling insects were illuminated in the bumping headlights. Still, we braked hard twice in the path of humpy silhouettes of *nyumbus* [wildebeest] with eyes shining yellow.

It was pitch dark when we arrived at Simanjiro, a long mud-walled and thatched mission house and adjacent clinic set amid a *shamba* and surrounded by a thorn bush fence. After the vehicles were unloaded, I was introduced to Thomas, the rural medical assistant, and

Remedios, a pretty dark-haired Spanish missionary both on duty in the clinic. Behind them was a child lying on a cot with an intravenous tube. A half dozen other burnt and bandaged children were on the laps of their squatting mothers.

When a dog by the mission house door jumped on my legs, Antonio wordlessly gave it a kick again reminding me that I was not among Anglo-Saxon Europeans. Entering the kerosene lamp-lit living room I extended my hand to the portly *Padre* Miguel whom I'd briefly met once before in Moshi. He was about my age and would be the new priest at the mission who would eventually take over from *Padre* Pepe. He stood up with his owl like expression, scratching his bushy beard. He sat back in the corner to continue his Swahili mini-lesson with the cook.

I turned to *Padre* Pepe, who was in the corner fiddling with a short-wave radio. According to Adriana B., the Chilean friend who introduced us more than a year ago at Weru-Weru, *Padre* Pepe was an embodiment of liberation theology, and probably out of favour with the church hierarchy. He was middle aged, ragged of beard and deeply tanned from more than a decade in Africa.

"Welcome to Simanjiro," he said in English with a warm smile. "Make yourself at home, *Mmalimu* [teacher]."

Glancing round, for a place to sit, I was struck by just how spoiled I was at Weru-Weru with electricity, running water and most luxurious of all—privacy.



After a morning tour of the mission compound (a cluster of zinc-roofed buildings centered around the clinic) with *Padre* Miguel, I took a walk out onto the plain. My excuse was to take some photos—but the pressing need was just to have some time alone.

With the mission buildings receding to a clump of eucalyptus trees in the distance, the compound really did look like an island. The vegetation was mostly coarse (mostly dry in this season) grasses and low-lying cacti with a few acacia trees. The bare patches of black earth were scattered with clods of wildebeest manure and weathered bones. Meanwhile, herds of wildebeest and zebras grazed like cows in open 'pasture' that stretched in all directions to the horizon. When approached from downwind, the animals looked up, flicked tails and edged only slightly away. It seemed that the instinct for surviving on the open plain among a myriad of competing species—even when danger was in sight—was just to keep a safe distance.

Warned by *Padre* Pepe against the dangers of lions, I kept within sight of the compound circling at about a kilometer radius. Within the rush of the incessant dry wind were

strange hiccupping bird sounds. Sometimes when I stopped to listen, profusions of butterflies flew up at my feet. Even stranger were the conical red termite mounds, some rising 2 metres high amid the thorn bushes.

Through it all was a delicious visceral excitement in having this opportunity to linger where no tourist safari ever ventures. Still, after a couple of hours, I was suddenly sweating and drained of energy. Touch of malaria? I headed back, to double up on my usual morning dosage of chloroquine.

Back at the mission, I excused myself and lay on the bunk for an hour reading old *National Geographics*, wondering whether I was really up to a 6-day visit. There was the option to catch a lift with the ambulance back to Arusha tomorrow morning. Would that not be an insult to my hosts?

Fortunately, the dizziness passed and curiosity overwhelmed mere discomfort. Emerging in the common area after the siesta, I chatted in a Swahili-Spanish-English *patois* with Remedios and Marta about *Maasai* folkways. They admitted that the *Maasai* were not easy converts, and no less resistant to the Lutheran than to the Catholic missionary efforts. While the *Maasai* ascribed bad luck and illness to '*upepo*'—evil spirits—they apparently believe in a supreme being, *Ngai*, in contrast to more animistic belief systems of neighbouring African tribes. As Remedios pointed out, the *Maasai* regard themselves as "*gente escogito*" a chosen people, clearly superior to other Africans and on more or less equal footing with Europeans.

Meanwhile I noted that Remedios wore not a cross but a ring around her neck. Petite and dark-haired, she seemed an unlikely Catholic "volunteer" in this remote Mission. I wondered what her betrothed (presumably back in Spain) would have thought of the flirtings between her and *Hermano Antonio*.

As the dizziness subsided and the claustrophobia lessened, I decided not to ask about the possibility of heading straight back to Arusha but rather to join *Padre Miguel* and *Hermano Antonio* tomorrow in their pastoral visit to Komolo.



Padre Pepe drove in the lead with lay-priest and *Maasai* translator, Cesar, in the Isuzu pick up. The Land Rover followed with *Hermano Antonio* at the wheel accompanied by *Padre Miguel* and I.

As we bounced along, Antonio thumped the dashboard in accompaniment to Spanish folk songs blasting from the cassette player. More than once he hit the brakes in a dusty screech as wildebeest or gazelle scattered across the track. A few times he stopped and

let me stand by the door to take photos of grazing zebras, giraffes— even ostriches raising curious heads from the side of the track. Without a telephoto lens, unfortunately, I ‘captured’ nothing more than blurry patches between dull earth and sky.

Only as we reached the dry crater bowl of Komolo hamlet did I realize that the missionaries would be conducting a Saturday evening “*misa*” [mass] in the local church. Already the parishioners were clustered in the doorway. Even before we opened the doors, dusty anemic children were rushing towards the Land Rover expecting *wazungu* treats if not magic tricks. Along with *Padre* Miguel, I shook little hands and in turn asked names.

One little girl in blue dress and neatly plaited hair introduced herself as Anastasia. She motioned me to swing her playfully around, as *Padre* Miguel was busy doing with other ‘*kadogo*’ [little ones]. Anastasia stood out not only in being neatly dressed among the ragged and dusty kids but also in looking less sickly than the others. Indeed, one of the little boys, no older than four, showed the grayish pallor and pot-bellied signs of kwashiorkor.

With the kids swarming around, we moved slowly towards the church. The single roomed mud and wattle structure set amid a field of withered maize stocks did not provide the strongest testament to the authority of the *wazungu* god. Yet it was, no less than Notre Dame cathedral, as *Padre* Miguel solemnly advised: “*un lugar de adoracion*” [holy place] deserving at least the removal of hats.

We took seats on the rough wooden benches. Men sat on the (emptier) right side while women and children squeezed together on the left. The altar was on a low wooden platform at the front, directly in front of a bamboo wall hanging in the middle of which was a wooden cross. On both sides of the bamboo backing were two hanging batiks. The one on the right depicted an African Madonna and child and that on the left had an angelic male figure. The dusty room was filled with the babble and cries of the children, squirming on their mother’s laps as we waited for the service to begin. One little boy standing on the bench kept zipping and unzipping the back of his mother’s dress.

Suddenly, *Padre* Pepe emerged from the makeshift vestry at the front— transformed in flowing vestments. Before starting the formal mass, he bantered and chatted with a few parishioners at the front and then introduced me— the strange *mzungu* in their midst—as the “*mwalimu linatokana ni Moshi*”, the teacher from Moshi.

Padre Pepe then launched into what seemed a semi-formal mass, offering a sermon in Kiswahili in which he acknowledged the suffering borne by the congregation for the shortages of food and water. He urged that they help one another not just with “*poles*” [sorry, sorry] but also with real sharing. A few women with vigorous voices in the front pew led the singing, first in a chorus of “*No kweli, bwana!*” After the communion was taken, the singing became more spirited. Along with clapping to the hymns there was whistling and yip-yipping ululations. I sat in the back row, moved by the sincerity.

After the service, I waited with *Padre* Miguel outside the church as *Padre* Pepe greeted all the departing parishioners. With no priestly collars in need on the *Maasai* steppe, *Padre* Pepe changed back to his blue jeans. Rather than heading directly back to the Simanjiro mission, an invitation had been accepted for tea at the nearby compound of one of the more active *Maasai* parishioners who had attended the service.

The compound, comprised of several *bomas* (the elongated *Maasai* mud dwellings), was only a few minutes' drive away at the top of a hill.

As soon as we stepped outside the Land Rover beside the mud wall that surrounded the entire compound, I recognized little Anastasia who attended the mass with her mother. She remembered me, too. Climbing on my knee, she dipped her hands into my shoulder bag. She pulled out books and pens asking *hini nini?* [What's this?] and tried on my watch and sunglasses. However charmed, it was appalling to see that—like the more ragged kids—she too had infected bumps and lacerations on her shoulders. It could only be evidence of poor hygiene even within this more “prosperous” family.

Meanwhile, a few kids from neighbouring compounds gathered round. Along with *Padres* Pepe and Miguel, I swung the children in turn. One grabbed a stick to playfully ‘beat’ [*kupiga!*] *Padre* Pepe and another little boy pulled the cigarette from *Padre* Miguel’s mouth and ran to the side, puffing on it.

Ignoring all this hyperactivity, the parishioner’s wife brought us a plastic container of honey beer and a basin of *ugali* with a sour milk dip to share. We sat on the wooden bench outside the *boma* as she dribbled water from a clay pot over our hands. With scrawny chicken scratching underfoot, we partook of the meal. In a flourish of luxury, the parishioner brought out a few bottles of purple soda pop (a day’s wages here) for the kids. Anastasia gulped hers down then patted her bulging belly.

“*Nimeshba sana*” [that’s really good] she said. She then added: “*boro kuliko maziya!*” [better than milk]

After the meal, and more swing-rounds for the kiddies, we returned to the church building where *Hermanos* Antonio and Cesar set up for their rural health outreach program.

On a rickety table they displayed a row of brochures, each pile under a small stone to hold it against the breeze. All were in Kiswahili with simple illustrations on a variety of topics: nutrition in pregnancy, clean water, dysentery prevention, malaria prevention—even one warning about VD. Hardly surprising there were none on contraception: not only sinful by the teachings of the church but frowned upon by the Tanzanian government.

A few villagers pressed curiously against the table. Some were in red *Maasai* cloaks and others in tattered shirts and trousers: their sleeves attached by a few filthy strands and pants patched with dizzy squiggles of thread. The few locals who were curious lifted the

stones and glanced at the papers but most were only waiting to have *Hermano* Antonio and Brother Cesar check a lump or sore throat. Not equipped for a clinic, Antonio and Cesar, submitted to performing only a few proddings while gesturing towards the tables.

Meanwhile, I leaned on the car feeling useless. The mild effect of from the honey beer was wearing off leaving me drained in the afternoon heat. With the attendant aching of limbs and slight dizziness, I wondered whether it was just the daylong exposure to the dust and smoke or some chloroquine resistant malaria. Fighting the wave of nausea, I convinced myself that the reek of unwashed bodies was certainly no worse than childhood memories of burning mittens on top of classroom radiators...

On the drive back to Simanjiro Mission, we stopped to offer a *lifti* to a *Maasai morani* holding his spear across his shoulders and a *mzee* [old man] who supplicated with upraised palm. Miguel and I moved to the rear along with the *mzee* while the *morani* sat in the front. Antonio sang loudly along with the cassette and for a few moments, I pulled out my harmonica and blew notes to the delight of the old man. For his part, the *mzee* pointed out into the darkening plain where he said we might see the yellow glow of the eyes of the *Maasai Steppe simbas* [lions] which are believed to fear *kitu kabisa*—absolutely nothing...

It was dark by the time we rolled back into the *isla* Mission. First, we dropped by the infirmary where we found out from Hermanas Marta and Remedios that *el niño* who was brought in a state of emergency from Komolo on the day of my arrival, was “*un pocito mejor*.” Back at the Mission house, the fluorescent light was plugged into the car battery and Antonio recounted the day’s events with the Mission sisters. Dinner, an hour later, was a rare treat: delicious *nyumbu* [wildebeest] steak left over from a fresh lion kill, apparently found beside the road and brought into the clinic in the afternoon by a Lutheran missionary doctor on his visiting rounds.

Still a little feverish at bedtime, I was visited by dream images of cavorting skeletons—no doubt inspired by Remarque’s concentration camp horrors and the ‘*History of the Black Death*’ (with Brueghelian illustrations) read on the night before leaving Weru-Weru.



I woke up early and sat in the living room finishing the Remarque novel. *Padre* Miguel, the first of the missionaries to stir, told me that a visit to some local *bomas* was on for this afternoon and that on Tuesday morning, I might accompany *Padre* Pepe back to Arusha. However grateful for the hospitality, I was enormously relieved by the prospect of a shower just two days away. Later in the morning, I sat in on a Swahili lesson in *Padre* Pepe’s office and then borrowed his *darabinas* [binoculars] to start off on another walk in the surrounding *porini* [plain].

Heading in a southerly direction, about a kilometer from the mission, the land gradually dipped leaving the Mission out of sight. Further on in a thorny depression—there came a jolt of alarm. A few paces ahead, a spotted *fisi* [hyena] leapt out of the bush and darted away. The heart pounded in the realization that I was in a dense thorn thicket—utterly vulnerable. Slowly, I backed out onto rising ground, ears singeing in what seemed a close call. Leaping out of that thorn bush could just have easily been a lion.

A half hour down the desolate path, I scanned the binoculars towards what appeared to be an injured *nyumba* [wildebeest] standing alone under circling vultures. Then I heard the faint buzz of a vehicle. A moment later, I saw the Land Rover bucking across the plain toward the mission, trailing a cloud of dust. When I walked back to the thorn fence of the Mission, the Land Rover was parked near the clinic entrance door. A white haired old *mzungu* was directing one of the boys standing outside in unloading several stocks of bananas.

“For the children,” he muttered.

He limply shook my extended hand and introduced himself as a biologist from Germany attached to the research station in Tarangire Park, a 2-hour drive to the east. He said he periodically visited the mission on his field trips in the area. When I mentioned my scare moments earlier, he chuckled:

“You know the biggest lions in the world are right around here!”



This morning I joined *Padres* Miguel and Pepe on another pastoral round. The sun was still low when we sped off southwards passing herds of gazelles, gracefully loping giraffes then vultures feasting on the gory remains of a freshly killed zebra. That lion left no appetizing bits for human scavengers.

After turning sharply off the road, we bumped straight across the Simanjiro plain for a half hour towards the settlement of Emboreet. The wheel track deteriorated to little more than a footpath as we approached a cluster of squat grey mud *manyattas* (the oblong mud and wattle *Maasai* huts) rising above the thorn bush. Pepe informed that in this *boma* compound dwelled the extended family of a *laibon*—a *Maasai* tribal elder and healer. Being a local VIP, the *laibon* apparently expected regular courtesy calls from the missionaries, who ‘operated’ on his turf.

As we drew up outside the thorny enclosure, 2 younger *Maasai* women carrying bundles of firewood on their heads, turned to face us. They wore the traditional beaded disc

neckpieces and copper earrings dangling from their elongated lobes. Both had babies swaddled on backs and older children standing beside them. The children watched us impassively while blackflies swirled around their shaven heads and alighted in the corners of their lips and eyes.

From the gate in the thorn fence that circled the *boma*, an older woman, stepped forth—the elder wife. She greeted us in Kiswahili and said that her husband had left early in the morning for Arusha. Still, in keeping with *Maasai* hospitality, she invited us into her *manyatta* for *maziwa* [milk].

Buzzed by flies and the sharp smell of cow manure (along with the squish of it under the sandals) we stepped through the gate of the *boma*. We nodded to a younger wife who pulled her back sling around to nurse her babe.

The old woman led us into her *manyatta*. It was rather like entering an igloo—first through a gooseneck entrance and then into a rounded smoky darkness. As the eyes adjusted, the interior view was of a crackling fire in the center of the hut with smoke rising to the hole at the dome of the roof. Cowhide beds circled the walls and a few more slits around the walls served as vents for the smoky air. There was a sense of being in a primordial cave: protected from the elements; safe from lions and from flies—albeit amid an eye-stinging haze.

“*Moshi ni shida!*” said our host, [the smoke is a problem] in the tone of a housewife apologizing for a messy kitchen.



After we were seated on stools, the elder wife proffered the milk in a calabash, charred on the inside. We passed the calabash sipping the smoky yogurt-like *Maasai* staple. In a display of her affluence, she then turned on the radio and showed us her “*torchi mkubwa*”, her big red plastic flashlight, bought in Arusha.

It was interesting that this elder wife, while generous to her guests, seemed completely at ease before 3 male *wazungu*. That feeling was in surprising contrast to the common nervousness of rural woman of other tribes in the presence of *wazungu*. While subservient to the males of her own clan—she was foremost a *Maasai*—one among “*el gente escogito*.” [the chosen]. Before blinking back out into the bright grey light, *Padre Pepe* promised another visit soon and asked that his greetings be conveyed to the *laibon*.

Walking back through the compound gate, we passed the darkened doorways of another *manyatta* from which a calf with a beaded disc around its neck (similar to one worn by the women) blinked into the grey light. I stopped to pat it. As it licked my hand, I recalled

Padre Pepe's comment that that for *Maasai* men—especially the non-Christian—cows are more valuable than children.

A few young women with babes on backs stood near the Land Rover as we prepared to take our leave. Stooping to pat a toddler on the shaven head, *Padre Pepe* turned to the shyer little boy who stood back squinting at us. The child had one reddish eye, apparently from conjunctivitis, while the other eye was crusted almost shut.

“*Pole*,” said *Padre Pepe* said to the young mother “*Safisha kwa maji safi!*” [Wash that with clean water]. Lacking so much as a first aid kit—let alone rudimentary first aid training—I again felt useless.



Back at the mission by mid-afternoon, I took another walk—this time in a westward direction.

In all my walks I have seen bones were scattered widely throughout the plain—but no complete skeletons—evidence that carrion is usually dragged away by scavengers... This time when I came upon a wildebeest skull with horns intact, I lifted it into the branches of a thorn bush to take a photo. Afterwards, I looked for more interesting bones to photograph.

A half hour later, with the mission only a speck on the eastern horizon, in a bare patch amid the thorn bushes I sighted a gleaming human skull. It was turned upwards with eye sockets staring into the sky. Examining it from bended knee, I noted that by its size, it must have been a child's skull. It was picked clean and sun bleached. A few ants crawled on the underside where it had lain on the black-cracked earth. Impulsively, I lifted it up and placed it in a thorn bush intending to take a photo. Struck appropriately by my callousness—I relented and placed it back on the same spot. Stooping again, I gently kissed the forehead, and murmured “*pole!*” [Sorry]

On the walk back towards the Mission, I encountered 2 *Maasai* boys herding a small flock of goats. We had a friendly chat in Kiswahili, in which they told me that they both attended primary school, now closed for holidays. I asked them to pose for a few pictures holding up another wildebeest skull.



Back at the mission, Antonio informed that the little boy brought from Komolo was making great progress. As evidence, he showed us a glass beaker containing the tapeworm he had extracted from the child's belly.

Padre Pepe, coughing as he lit one cigarette off another, followed up on our morning visit with a few anecdotes. When I told of encountering the human skull, he confirmed that *kweli cabesa*, many *Maasai* do not bury their dead but leave on the *porini*, the open plain. He said that when deaths occurred at the infirmary, the families often disposed of the body in the vicinity of the compound. Once, he said, one of the mission dogs dragged a child's arm into the house.

Moments later, *Padre Miguel* motioned us to the table for the evening repast: *ugali* with canned *samaki* [fish], which tasted slightly off. By some oddly inquisitional turn, was the strength of a spoiled Anglo stomach being tested?



Discovering that I had the camera on the wrong light meter setting—thereby spoiling most of the recently taken pictures—I was determined this morning to get a few “good ones”. I headed out early in a southwesterly direction across the *porini*. Following the recommendation of *Padre Pepe*, I enticed ‘Rafiki’, the black mutt, to accompany me. Rafiki seemed happy enough to lead the visiting *mrungu* who has, after all, consistently directed his table scraps to him rather than to the cat or to the other two canine moochers.

Just a few minutes out from ‘shore’ there was Nafiki, the same *Maasai* boy seen yesterday with his goats. This time a younger ‘brother’ accompanied him. I asked them in which direction I should head to encounter *swala* [gazelle] or *pundumelia* [zebra]. They both burst into laughter suggesting that I had accidentally uttered some obscenity. When their mirth subsided, they pointed in a western direction towards the distant Tarangire Park. Nafiki asked me to take a picture with his brother, but I indicated that I was almost out of film. In *Kiswahili*, they asked about the pictures I had taken yesterday. Could I send them to the missionaries who will make sure he gets one? I said I would try.

I set off again with the dog bounding ahead. We passed a stagnant waterhole where a startled flock of yellow birds flew upwards, almost at my feet. Moments later, a frightened savanna hare rousted by Rafiki zigzagged away into the grass... We then came upon termite holes and heaps of old wildebeest bones but no *swala* or *pundumelia*. In a wave of nausea and dizziness, I wondered what might happen should I collapse out here on the *porini*. Would the dog return to the compound alone? How long could an immobile person last out here before being found by a lion or hyena? While the nausea

soon passed, I resolved that once back at Moshi, I would definitely get a blood check for malaria.

On the slow return, we approached another solitary wildebeest lagging near a dry maize *shamba*. Rafiki nipped across the plain in pursuit. A great movie shot was missed in the spectacle of the black spot of the dog zipping behind the bucking wildebeest. In the cool wind, I crouched and chewed on a spear of grass. Far across the plain, Rafiki, as if summoned by radar—slowly circled back toward me. Before heading back to the Mission, I managed to get a long shot of two giraffes loping before an acacia tree.

Back to the mission as the sun was setting, I finished the concentration camp novel then began reading the Pelican '*History of the Spanish Civil War*' found on the bookshelf. Its pages had hardly been turned. Will it be missed, I wondered, if I leave '*Spark of Life*' in its place?



A particularly memorable day with the missionaries: especially ending up bedded down in a *Maasai boma* along with *Padre* Miguel and the young seminarian, Raphael.

We spent the morning fetching a load of water jugs in the Isuzu pick up from the nearly 100 kilometer drive across the open *porini* to Emboreet Wells. With that delay, we did not set out on the pastoral visit to Loiborsiret until late afternoon.

It was dusk before we arrived at the compound of the friendly *Maasai* Catholic who welcomed us to stay the night. As tradition dictated, we were led to the same *boma* where his two wives were sleeping. I lay on the cowhide mat in the pitch black with my jacket rolled up as pillow. Curling to the mud wall, I tossed through the night. It was impossible to sleep amid the reek of smoke and manure not to mention the snoring of *Padre* Miguel in the mat adjacent. Then sporadically, there was the soft rattling from across the *boma*. Was it from the waist beads of our host's younger wife?

The next morning, I crouched shivering outside the *boma*, joggling on my knee, the dusty little boy named "*Padre*", in honour of the white 'fathers. When the charred gourd of *Maasai* sour milk was passed around, this time I politely declined.

Although our clothes stank with smoke and manure, by 11:00 AM we were gathered in the elders' reed and mud-walled shelter where *Padre* Miguel was readying to celebrate mass.

Only ten worshippers, mostly women (including the two who slept across from us last night) were in attendance for the service. We rose solemnly from the rough wooden benches as *Padre* Miguel, aided by Rafael, awkwardly officiated.

Meanwhile, from another compound just a few hundred meters away, there came the sound of a rollicking hymn sing. A Lutheran service! So it was that the Cola Wars for the dominant flavour of Christian redemption was waging on the *Maasai* steppe...

After the ill-attended mass, Miguel, Raphael, the *Maasai* elder and I had rice and beans in the mud-walled village ‘restaurant’ before a cartoonish wall mural. It depicted the recently vanquished Idi Amin [‘Nduli Amini’] as a peacock—scurrying away from the blows of a Tanzanian woman soldier with a machine gun strapped to her back.

Afterwards, along with the elder, we drove to the nearby patch of forest wherein a *Maasai* circumcision *sikuku* [party] was underway.

The Catholic elder introduced us to the officiating *laibon*. Woken suddenly from his honey wine stupor, he was momentarily confused when a *mzungu* extended a left hand in greeting. The *laibon* stared at me in red-eyed anger until Rafael, offering an apology in *Kimaasai* while nodding towards an empty right sleeve. After a few more glogs on the mead gourd, the frown of the *laibon* turned to a grin. By the time we took leave, it was difficult to extract his arm, draped over my shoulder...

Meanwhile, in addition to the free flow of honey wine, there were strips of beef barbequed on an open fire. As self-conscious as I was to pluck up the morsels with fingers of a left-hand, I was ravenously hungry. Unfortunately, only a few bites of the delicious beef were relished. In seeing drunken old women coming back from behind the bushes still dribbling between the knees—the appetite shriveled.



Early the following morning I got a lift back to Arusha in the Mission combi, which was delivering a woman and her sick, infant to the hospital.

I sat between *Padre* Miguel and *Hermano* Antonio in the front seat, excited in the prospect of a bath and a proper bed. As we drew closer to the city, *Padre* Miguel, became more serious.

“*Bien entonces*”, he said gravely, “*cuales son tus impresiones?*”

My impressions? I fully appreciated his protectiveness of his flock and their vulnerability. Politely, I listened to his advice against making hasty judgments about the *Maasai* culture—especially based on our night in the *boma*.

“*Verdad, no soy turista tipica!*” I said, lamely trying to make light.

Whether or not he thought that I would be respectful when showing my photos and describing my experiences, his handshake at Arusha Mission House was still warm.

In expressing my gratitude, I invited him to visit me at Weru-Weru and promised to send photos to our mutual friend, Chilena Adriana B., in England. In return, he invited me to sojourn again in Simanjiro on my next school vacation. Perhaps he thought it unlikely I would take him up on it.

Second visit: (June 1981)



Despite the warning of the sore throat yesterday morning, I rendezvoused with *Padre Pepe* in at the Catholic Diocese Central House in Arusha. With the delay in waiting for the supplies to be loaded in the combi, we did not depart Arusha until mid-afternoon and did not arrive at Simanjiro mission until dusk.

I was up several times in the night stumbling though the pitch black for water and toilet paper to clear the ballooning sinuses. Sleepless, I mulled over the shocking news that Danili, the cook, had recently died of cerebral malaria. Remembered as soft-smiling and shy, he could scarcely have been older than twenty-five. Meanwhile since the last visit, both Remedios and Marta have returned to Spain. Immediately upon arrival, the absence of their cheeriness was felt.

With full-blown flu, I excused myself and spent most of the day at the Mission supine in the cot of the tiny guest bedroom reading old copies of *National Geographic*...

Guilt was added to the misery this afternoon when *Padre Pepe*, between cigarettes drags began sniffling. Then there was the ‘joshing’ comment of *Padre Miguel*: “*Cual donacion traes esta vez?*”

So, is my lasting ‘*zawaidi*’ [gift] to Simanjiro Mission to be nothing more than a nasty flu bug?



Although dizzy in the morning, I accompanied *Padre Miguel* and seminarian Raphael on pastoral work to the hamlet of Liborsoit. Soon to be ordained, the smooth faced Raphael informed that he would be one the few priests in northern Tanzania who are fully fluent in *Kimaasai*.

After an hour’s off-road bounce northward across the *porini*, we drew up outside a cluster of *manyattas* enclosed within a circular thorn fence.

We stood by the open doors of the Land Rover as a few *Maasai* women and children came out of the *manyattas* to stare at us. Translating from *Maasai*, Raphael told Miguel that the men were not around. As we entered the *boma*, the children came forward, a few

presenting their shaven scalps to be touched by the *Padre* for a blessing (Recall the *Maasai* greeting: “*Sobai*”, responded to with an “*Ahba*”).

After the head rubs and smiles, *Padre* Miguel was keen to practice his catechizing skills. Out of the back seat he pulled the little ‘catechism wheels’ he had showed me before we left the Mission. He shuffled his handful playfully and then handed them to the few older women who stood shyly in a semi-circle. They jostled the toddlers and swatted flies while the white *Padre* pointed at the bright coloured words, translated thus, from Kiswahili:

‘Do you want to learn about the life of Christ? Why are you a Catholic instead of the Lutheran? What do you think causes ‘upepo’?

Through broken Kiswahili translated into *Kimaasai* by Rafael, *Padre* Miguel warned the women that belief in ‘*upepo*’—spirit possession—had no place in Catholic doctrine. In an aside to me he whispered that the Lutherans have been known to condone belief in ‘*upepo*’—presumably in a bid to win more converts. Meanwhile, the women smiled awkwardly in the pastor’s earnestness. When the wheels were tucked back into *Padre* Miguel’s pocket, the mood lightened. Rafael then handed out the colourful Catholic tracts (in *Kimaasai* and Kiswahili) from the back of the Land Rover. The receiving women cooed gratitude.

Taking leave, we bumped further along to a second *manyatta*, wherein the headman, a prosperous farmer dressed in ‘modern’ green overalls, stood before his thorn gate. With slightly bowed head and elongated ear lobes shivering, he greeted *Padre* Miguel with the sign of the cross. After pleasantries, he showed us his diesel truck, presumably obtained through the grace of the Christian God. He was clearly as proud of this possession as any of his cows, children or wives.

We drove back to the hamlet, to see whether *Padre* Pepe had arrived. With no sign of him, we stopped by the mud and wattle *duka* [shop] surprisingly well stocked with tins of corned beef and fish, candy and biscuits, bottles of orange squash, Dodoma wine and Ndolvu beer. However costly (and scarce) any factory produced item in Tanzania, there were several *Maasai* holding shilling notes and pointing eagerly at the shelves. A few were standing outside, drinking beer. One *Maasai* woman, clutching her brown bottle of Kilimanjaro lager, complained of *homa* [fever]. The woman beside her pointed at the bottle and cackled that the beer was good *dawa* [medicine] for all that ails. Meanwhile, *Padre* Miguel, having been eager to show the Catholic colours, seemed disappointed with the general nonchalance.

In effort to drum up more attendees for the mass, we drove to one more *manyatta* a few minutes away. We arrived amid the chirpings of sunset and tinkle of cowbells. A few *moroni* [young men] were herding the cows back inside the thorn kraals. Silhouetted in the dusk with spears over shoulders—they could have been figures on a tourist batik.

Still, there was the awkward moment when one elder raised his chin frowning and turned his head away from *Padre Miguel*. That was his show of defiance of Christian salvation. Nonetheless, a gourd of honey wine was passed among us.

After sunset, with a full moon rising, *Padre Pepe* arrived in his jeep. We joined him in repairing to the mud-floored schoolroom where he was to perform mass.

Although there were no more than a dozen in the congregation (mostly women), it was a very special night for a particular *Maasai* girl and her mother. With clasped hands and eyes uplifted under their white shawls, they knelt before the *Padre* awaiting their first communion. *Padre Pepe* pushed both hands down on their quaking heads, confirming both to the Roman faith.

At that moment, the tiny congregation burst into song. As ululations trilled in the moonlit school room, I stood rapt above the rear bench. Were it not for the *mafua* [cold] stuffing my nostrils: might the spirit have been more deeply inhaled? Might the scales have fallen from the eyes? Never had ‘surrender’ come so close!

After the mass, the singing grew ever more spirited. Along with the worshippers, I jostled back towards the *duka* with its makeshift bar. As we crowded in alongside the moonlit maize fields, *Padre Pepe*, sniffling with the bug I brought to the mission, declared that it was the day of his patron saint—St. Antonio. For that, he would stand us all a drink.

Upon finishing his beer, *Padre Pepe*, still in white cassock, grinningly accepted a drink from every tin of ‘*dadi*’ [maize liquor] passed along by the tiny group of parishioners. For the following half hour, he laughed, clapped hands, danced and leapt among his flock. Meanwhile, the congregants glugged through 3 pails of *pombe* and wailed out songs from their Swahili hymnal, including *Ave Maria*.

“*Que parace, F.?*” the priest asked at one point in pausing to catch his breath and light a smoke.

Es precioso,” I stuttered, “*pero, fue religion?*”

“*No es religion,*” he said with a sad smile.

How can such doubts be possibly reconciled with a life of self-sacrifice? On the way back to the mission to the mission, there were giraffe running slow motion in the headlights.

“*Son maravillosos!*” murmured *Padre Pepe* at the wheel.



After just 3 days, along with heavy *mafua* [head cold], the stomach is aching with a surfeit of sugar. It seems that since the demise of poor Danili, the Simanjiro missionaries have been subsisting largely on the expired junk food from American charity boxes. Consider this morning's breakfast: expired Carnation Breakfast Bars along with warm sugary *café con leche* mixed with smoky *Maasai* milk. Gerber's cherry-vanilla baby dessert was an added treat. However much the body is lacking proper nutrition—the sucrose-loving viruses are being well fed!

At noon, I headed out again in the Land Rover with *Padre* Pepe and *Padre* Miguel. We started out on the road to Komolo then cut across the steppe through sorghum fields broken only by a few immense baobab trees. After a 20-minute bounce, we reached the settlement, which Pepe identified as *Numbo Tano* [number #5]: a few mud cubicles under a hill. This was the heart of lion country, we were informed by the young Catechist (*Maasai* earlobes but wearing ragged trousers) who joined us in front of the only cinderblock structure. The building functioned as elementary school, *Chama cha Mapuduzi* (Tanzanian ruling party) meeting hall and church.

As we waited for the parishioners to arrive, poor *Padre* Pepe slumped with a cigarette in the front seat of the Land Rover, hung over and sucked out by my flu bug. *Padre* Miguel glanced up nervously at the setting sun, again nervous of sparse attendance. After a few minutes, the *Maasai* catechist banged a tire rim dangling from a rope attached to a leafless tree—summoning the few women and children, standing outside the cinderblock to move inside for the service.

With Pepe under the weather, *Padre* Miguel, lifted the surplice over his shoulders. After a further half hour wait for stragglers, *Padre* Miguel began the service. Among the mere dozen or so standing at the rough benches was one barefoot ten-year-old girl who sang in a clear angelic voice. She looked round several times in shy curiosity at the strange *mzungu*. Surely, it occurred, I was bearing witness to the purest faith in all of Christendom! Alas, the whisper of Grace was again unheeded.

After the short service, Miguel haltingly took questions in his shaky Swahili ("Are you coming back next Sunday?" asked the only *mzee* [old man] in attendance).

When we walked back to the *combi*, we saw 2 shaven headed teen girls grooming themselves in the car mirror, wiggling their ostrich feather aprons. For a moment they hummed together in a high-pitched drawing and sucking of breath that was both queerly hypnotic and sensual. Seeing me watching them, they giggled and whispered, possibly wondering what the odd *mzungu* could be doing there if not on missionary business.

Ignoring the preening girls, *Padre* Miguel opened the sliding door and brought out shiny Catholic prayer and hymnals. Though a bargain of only 20 shillings each—there were no takers...

Just as the moon appeared over the distant hills of Tarangire, we were off bouncing along the twisting track toward Simanjiro Mission.

Back in the common area of the mission house, I leafed through ‘*National Geographic*’ in the faint lamplight while *Padre* Miguel wrote letters at his table. *Padre* Pepe, rallied somewhat from his flu, busied hands in his corner with a Macramé. *Hermano* Antonio, the medic, sat beside me horse-playing with the new *Maasai* domestic helper lad crouched on his other side.

Feeling ever more guilty for my uselessness, I decided to leave tomorrow— even if it meant trying to hitchhike back to Arusha. Still, what traffic is there out here besides that of the missionaries?



First thing in the morning, I told *Padre* Miguel that I had to be back in Moshi to get ready for a trip to Dar es Salaam. No doubt relieved, Miguel told me that although the mission planned no trips to Arusha for the next few days, *Hermano* Antonio would be driving to Komolo (nearly halfway to Arusha) late in the afternoon to pick up some supplies. He said I was welcome to stay over in the Apache camper trailer, which the Mission kept there as a repository for first aid supplies. I could try to catch a lift from Komolo to Arusha early in the morning. Plying between Komolo and Arusha were a few lorries carrying loads of the locally produced charcoal.

After profuse *asante sana* and *adios* to *Padres* Pepe and Miguel, in late afternoon I was squeezed between Antonio and Samuel the clinic attendant, bouncing in the clinic *combi* towards Komolo. At a few junctures Antonio obliged me by asking Samuel, at the wheel, to stop so that I could pictures of ostriches and a pair of giraffes loping alongside the acacia trees into the setting sun. I duly took pictures, no doubt confirming for Antonio that that I was, at heart—a *turista tipico*...

Arriving in the Komolo trailer just after dark, we crammed around the trailer table to sup on dollops of Kraft macaroni and breakfast bars. Squeezing afterwards into a bottom bunk, I once again wondered how many lay Catholics would suspect how much of the missionary work of the Holy Mother Church in Africa is fuelled by caffeine, alcohol and loads of sugar...

Still, I fell asleep in the tremendous relief that tomorrow night I would be back in the privacy of my flat in Weru-Weru: enjoying decent food, clean water, electric light—and

my own bed. Still, I shall always remain grateful for the glimpses of greater fulfillment through self-sacrifice and renunciation of material comforts... Were it not for the lack of privacy!



By 8:00 AM, after one more Carnation breakfast bar and glass of sweet tea—Antonio was headed back to Simanjiro and I was out by this side of the dusty track under a baobab tree, scanning the hills and listening for faint sounds of an approaching motor...

By 11:00 AM—not a single vehicle had passed. Patience ragged, I sat on my knapsack glancing from the road down to Marxist Issa Shivji's '*Silent Class Struggle*'—the most boring unread book on my shelf I could possibly have brought along. In 3 hours, there was scarcely any foot traffic save the occasional *Maasai* walking along the dusty trail.

One friendly *Maasai morani* passing did stop to ask the usual questions in *Kiswahili* ("Where you from? "What are you doing here?" etc.)

Before he sidled along, I said jokingly: "*wewe ni mkali sana*" [you're a very tough guy, right?]

"*Asante sana*," he replied, appreciating the compliment.

Just as intense boredom was about to give way to panic, along came the Simanjiro clinic truck with *Hermano* Antonio at the wheel. Beside him was a young *Maasai* woman with a sick babe in arms—a suspected case of cerebral malaria warranting an emergency trip to Arusha.

Whether or not there was a scowl on Antonio's face when he applied the brakes—I was delighted to hand up my knapsack and pull myself into the back of the truck. Hunched amid 3 *Maasai mzee*, it was a grueling 2-hour bounce to Arusha, even without the string of snot snorted from the old man flying into my cheek.

2½ hours later, in climbing down numb-kneed from the truck near the Mount Meru Hospital, I offered profuse “*adios*” and “*asante sana*” to *Hermano Antonio*. I then limped off to the Arusha bus station.

Haggard, famished and a week unwashed—I drew more stares of shock than of the usual curiosity in the sight of a raggedy ‘*mzungu*’.

1980-1981, Weru-Weru, Kilimanjaro District, Tanzania. From black hardcover notebook (Transcribed, 2015)

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