

Dopoi Center Orientation Handbook



Supo Oleng! Kintoomoni Enkop Lor Maasai!
Hello! Welcome to Maasailand!

We are excited to host you! To get everything you can out of your trip, please read this orientation handbook before you come.

This handbook will help orient you as you prepare for your trip to the Dopoi Center and to aid in prior learning and context so that you can be prepared to engage as fully as possible when you arrive!

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Introduction to the Dopoi Center:

A Mission of Indigenous Tourism

The Dopoi Center is located in Southern Kenya in the territorial homeland of the Maasai people. Maasai are pastoralists who coexist with wildlife within diverse ecosystems that they have inhabited for many centuries. As an Indigenous community, Maasai are among those leading efforts for cultural survival, rights to homeland, and environmental stewardship. Dopoi Center is a community organizing hub and Indigenous tourism center built and directed by Maasai community members to support the ongoing work for those causes.

Located on 10 acres just outside of the Maasai Mara Game Reserve, the Dopoi Center is reimagining tourism from an Indigenous perspective. At Dopoi, we guide global tourists who come to Maasailand seeking education and genuine connection with local people, land, and wildlife to all the beauty and depth that Maasailand has to offer.

Maasailand today, an area encompassing roughly 62,000 square miles dissected by the Kenyan/Tanzania border, is rich in biodiversity and the highest concentrations of wildlife in the world. This is a direct result of the coexistence between the wildlife and the Maasai people, who have for centuries respected the equal rights of wildlife communities to the land. One of the most wonderful things that we can experience in Maasailand is the connection that Maasai culture maintains with wildlife, trees, rivers and land, and to the broader intelligence of what we refer to in the west as 'nature'. Maasai culture understands that elephants, hyenas and birds, all living things, are organized in communities, that they have language and actual culture. Maasai people negotiate with these other communities to share resources. Thus, Maasai society sees human beings as part of this natural world, an understanding that was largely abandoned in western culture long before any of us were born.



Because of the density of wildlife, the Maasai community has become a host to East Africa's wildlife tourism industry. This offers great potential for our survival as a culture and community, and Maasai are eager to share our culture and way of life with others, and to teach about the wildlife with whom we live, and to be able to earn income while remaining at home.

But tourism as an industry was founded for a different purpose. As it was colonized by the British Empire, Maasailand was seen as a means to extract profit through hunting and what we know as tourism today was founded on that desire. The safari industry has created a competitive atmosphere where only the 'Big 5' species are often valued, and the dynamic stories that can be told of the interaction of species is ignored. Lodges have been illogically located on river banks which prevents both wildlife and domestic animals from access; fire is used to draw the wildebeest migration to areas with new grass, leading to the destruction of many smaller mammals, birds and reptiles. Tourism has commodified Maasai culture while blocking Maasai participation: though 100% of the land in the Mara is Maasai ancestral land, local people have historically only had access to a small percentage of jobs in tourism that takes place here.

The Dopoi Center has been created to be a form of capital and expression of Indigenous power. Dopoi is a registered Community-Based Organization, which means that we are accountable to the local community, ensuring we hire locally and fairly, share water and other resources equitably, and negotiate grazing land with our neighbors during droughts. As more Maasai youth are trained and employed within the tourism industry as field guides, chefs, lodge staff, and managers – wages remain in the community and those who are employed can work while living in their homes. Dopoi hires Maasai youth who are then trained with work experience to enter

competitive employment openings.



Dopoi Director Meitamei Olol Dapash is patron for the first Maasai workers union, the Mara Guides Association (MGA), and we work exclusively with MGA guides to expand the community's influence on wildlife management. Dopoi operates a beading cooperative that serves women's microenterprises who live at a distance from the opportunities that tourism provides. Thus, by spending money at the Dopoi Center you are not just investing in your own experience, but also investing in this community and its projects. Dopoi also houses our international partner organization in Kenya, the Institute of Maasai Education, Research, and Conservation (MERC). MERC was founded in the 1980s to be the outward face and representation for 150 Maasai grassroots organizations to bring collective power to the Maasai community.

We believe that a new form of tourism is the future for Maasailand: one that is Indigenous led, community based, and ecologically informed. When you stay at Dopoi, you support this vision. We invite you to come to know Maasai across what separates us, tourists and Indigenous hosts, and to find our way together to celebrate the joy of life in the Mara!



Introduction to Kenya and Maasailand

The land that is now Kenya has been home for thousands of years to communities that hunted, gathered, fished, farmed and herded native cattle. Centuries of coexistence were disrupted by European colonization in the late 19th century, and Maasailand divided between British and German colonies which in the 1960s emerged as the Kenyan and Tanzanian nation-states. Kenya alone recognizes 42 distinct ethnic communities. While today most Kenyans live in cities or towns, some Kenyan ethnic groups identify as Indigenous, which means that they reject complete assimilation and strive to survive as cultural communities, typically in rural areas, practicing traditional economies on what remains of their pre-conquest lands.

Why Learn History Before Arriving?

As Maasai look to connect with people from other parts of the world, our greatest challenge is to be seen beyond the primitivist stereotypes that have been perpetuated about us as

an Indigenous African people. These stereotypes are validated most in the history that has been written about us, and so as we reclaim our history, we reclaim our identity. History can teach us all about how we came to be in relation to each other, how our worldviews have been formed, and thus to lead us all to open our hearts and minds to new possibilities.

Maasai History Starts Before Colonization

Before our colonization, Maasai maintained for many hundreds of years a rich and complex cultural life that revitalized the land and coexisted with farming, fishing and forest communities. Cattle have been central to our identity as a people from the beginning, with goats and sheep, and our love for these animals is tied to our willingness to live in harsh conditions, through cycles of rain and drought, to coexist with wildlife rather than barricade ourselves in fortified human-only environments. This life was possible only because of the density of our social structure and adherence to a cultural life that knits the community across great distances and ritualizes our values. Far from the stereotyped portrayal we see in history books, of Maasai as wandering nomads with little in common but a language, we know ourselves to be the architects of an economy that sustained our environment, and a social life that protected human decency and justice.



As livestock requires grass, our need for grazing land has led us to complex relationships with neighboring non-Maasai communities, especially farmers. Intermarriage and sharing food during hard times enabled Maasai to coexist with farming communities through flexible yet clearly

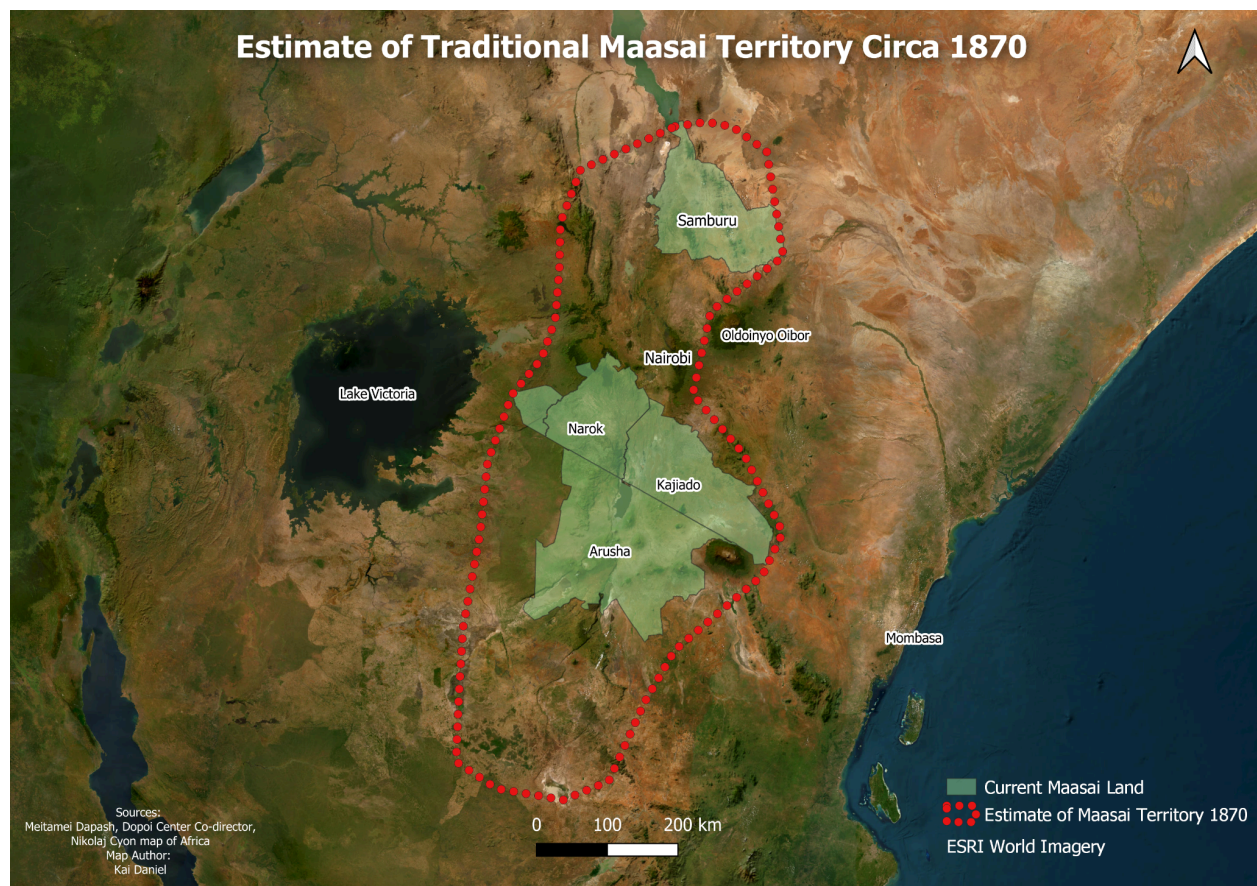
defined borders. Maasai culture continues to sustain a dense web of relationships among political and social strata within the community: sections, clans, genders, and age groups, through which decisions are reached and accountability is maintained, and we continue to require grazing land for our survival.

Maasai have a rich oral history that tracks key events and movements of Maasai people throughout time utilizing periods of years defined by Olporor, the age group system. We trace our roots to a long-ago migration from Mount Sinai, and sayings like ‘Oposanti,’ meaning ‘hard like it was at Sinai’ evokes the strength of our oral history and our cultural resilience.

Maasai Have Long Resisted Colonization

When the British Empire arrived in Maasailand in the 1880s, they encountered difficulty due to Maasai political strength and military power. But Maasai resistance was broken for a time through diseases introduced by the British and a devastating period of *Emutai* followed, ‘the time of death.’ As Maasai society recovered, largely through cattle raiding, the war with the British continued in big and small ways through the colonial period. Maasai were subjected to massacres in the 1910s and 20s, as they sought to recover the occupied homeland from which they had been evicted for British settlement.

British functionaries invented a story for their superiors in London that Maasai leadership was friendly to the British agenda, which has led to a false narrative perpetuated today that Maasai collaborated with their colonization. In fact, oral history supports extensive evidence of a different story, of Maasai as the one Kenyan community that the British were unable to control through the colonial period. This ‘decolonized’ history is important to us today, as we draw on the courage of our ancestors for the continued struggle for fair treatment by Kenyan courts and the Kenyan government as efforts continue apace to continue illegal occupation of Maasailand.



Kenyan Statehood has brought even greater injustice to Maasailand than the Colonial Era.

The world celebrated African Independence in the late 1950s and 60s, and the formation of states on the borders of former colonies and control ostensibly devolved to Africans. But Independence brought a deeper loss of land and rights to Africa's Indigenous peoples. Maasai and other Indigenous Kenyans were maintained in poverty and lack of access to education while their lands were illegally occupied, initially by Kenya's first president and his political allies. Maasai have lost still more land through the creation of game parks for tourism, especially Maasai Mara Game Reserve and Amboseli National Park. Lodges were erected on the seized Maasai land, typically on sites with precious above ground water, and Maasai people and their cattle excluded from the parks and from the revenues and employment that they generated. The Kenyan government continues to attempt in various ways to convince the Maasai to relinquish their lands for agriculture and to give up their nomadic, pastoral life and participate in the market economy.

Maasai people today work to maintain our culture and society in the face of our growing involvement in the global economy. We continue our pastoral economy, though as land becomes privatized, grazing lands are shrinking and some Maasai people are turning more to agriculture. The majority of Maasai people live in extreme poverty. Their photographic images, beadwork, gourds,

spears, and other marketable artifacts are the stock of Kenya's tourism industry, yet little of the income produced makes its way into the hands of Maasai people who are dependent on intermediaries to sell goods in lodges and cities.

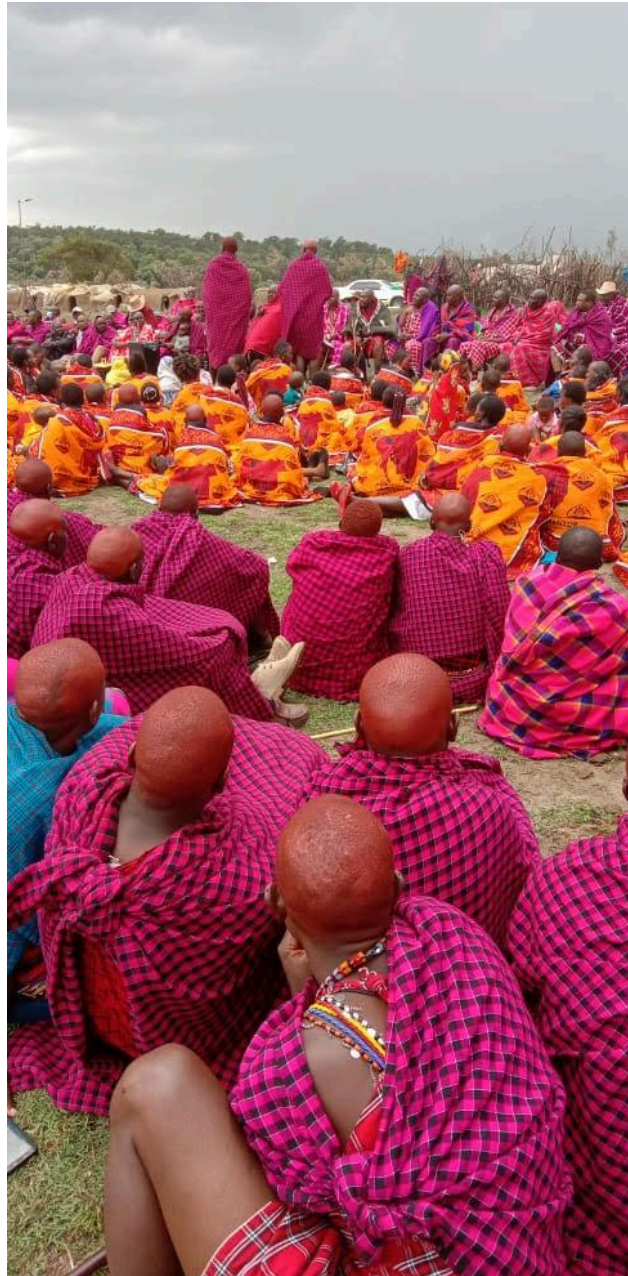


Maasai Maintain a Vision of the Future Rooted in the Past

Our vision as a community is found in our efforts to sustain our rich culture, the deepest tenet of which is to care for the land that cares for the people. Maasai people have lived within the rich ecosystems of East Africa for centuries. In the balance our ancestors found with the natural environment, people shared the land with elephants, giraffes, rhinoceros, and other wildlife, and we see ourselves as custodians of the land, which to us is a sacred living entity.

With the help of many friends from other parts of the world, who come to love the land as we do, we are building a future where pastoralism and coexistence can thrive even as our children are educated in both Maasai culture and western education. We see revenues from tourism used to mitigate the impacts of climate change, to help us access justice and representation in the Kenyan state. We seek to share our culture with all those who can benefit, and join broader conversations about our global future from Maasailand.

To reach that future, Maasai are undergoing a cultural revival of epic proportions, hosting huge ceremonies that even a generation ago seemed to be dying out. Our ceremonial life fuels our integrity and keeps us on the path.



Tips About How to Show Up in Maasailand

When you land at Dopoi you will want to share your best self, and these are some tips to help you prepare:

1. Be prepared to practice patience. At Dopoi, we hire local people who may not speak English fluently and who may be undergoing training; your kindness and flexibility are

greatly appreciated.

2. In Maasailand we typically travel on poor roads and we cannot always predict how long a trip will take; our community encounters unforeseen challenges and may have to postpone plans or delay departures. Thus at some point you may find yourself waiting. Maasai people tend to respond to these realities with patience and humor. We ask that you try to think of the time, as Maasai culture encourages you to do, as an unexpected gift, and look for the possibilities it opens up.
3. Dopoi hosts many events and meetings, when it is appropriate you may be welcomed into these spaces, but not every event or conversation is open to tourists and you will be guided to respect those boundaries.
4. Furthermore, at Dopoi we maintain a separation with wildlife with sturdy fences surrounding the perimeter, and 24- hour security by young Maasai men. At Dopoi we do not walk outside the center unaccompanied, and that is how we do our part to maintain a peaceful coexistence with all of our neighbors in the larger community.
5. We ask that you do not take pictures of Maasai people, homes, and domestic animals unless you are given explicit permission from your guide or Dopoi Center staff. You are a guest in this community and being invited onto community land is like an invitation into someone's living room. However you are welcome to take picture freely at Dopoi itself, and in many situations such as visits to schools or specific gatherings, and we will guide you.
6. Maasai society is organized around two genders, and Maasai men and women have different clear gender roles and responsibilities. Some of those may be difficult for you. We encourage you to resist the temptation to apply your culture's understanding of *what gender means* onto Maasai culture. You will find Maasai people to be non- judgmental about your own gendered identities, and please feel free to share yourself.
7. Any time you spend learning to speak Maa before arriving will be time well spent. We will meet English speakers, but not everywhere, and those will most likely be men, and younger men, so to talk to elders and women, you would do well to pick up some basic words.
8. Please do not swear! In Maasailand, swearing is an actual curse, something that you do to curse another person. Don't feel bad if you slip, just try!
9. Sometimes people come to Maasailand with questions about things that are actually pretty personal, about plural marriage for example, or circumcision rituals. You do not have the time on this trip to develop the kind of trust necessary to bring up these sensitive topics. Try to apply the same kinds of respect you would expect for visitors to your own culture by not assuming entitlement to intimate information. Asking about things relevant to Maasai people, such as the well-being of the children, the cows, the rains, will open up opportunities for you to have real conversations!
10. Please wear modest clothing. That means no short shorts, no spaghetti straps. Maasai people are not prudish about bodies. But as you dress modestly, you communicate that

you respect the community. Brightly colored clothing is always appreciated!

11. Please be sensitive to talking about money in front of Maasai people (the cost of an iPhone, for example). Know that the people that you are with inevitably have close family members who cannot afford medical care or school fees, and who live with a lack of access to things that they need including food.
12. If you promise something (“I will help you get a scholarship to a school in the US”) you have to deliver. Maasai society values honoring one’s word above almost everything else. Please be careful to not make promises unless you are prepared to keep them. Giving false hope may be well intended, but it is actually harmful.
13. People may ask you for money or to buy something from them, and sometimes that can feel awkward, inappropriate, and confusing. Please do not feel obligated to buy something. You can be direct. Do your best to keep the humanity of the other person in sight, even if you encounter a situation where you feel “othered” yourself. All efforts to connect as human beings across differences in wealth are well spent, and you can develop a deeper kind of cultural competence through experience, as long as you keep trying. It helps to remember that all of us, as individual people, are struggling to navigate the wealth gaps between us, and we can help each other and also be forgiving of mistakes.
14. People from western cultures sometimes assume that money inauthenticates relationships. However, that is not true in Maasailand. It is entirely appropriate to share money. Money in Maasailand often means one basic thing: school fees, and a child can go to school for a semester for \$25 in some places. So that gift does not indicate that you are “paying” for friendship; it means that you are giving something that is meaningful in both cultures and are expressing a recognition of an equal relationship.

FAQ

What should I bring?

We are experiencing changing weather patterns which means more rain and temperature range, so your best strategy is to bring layers. At Dopoi, temperatures can fluctuate in a day between 90F to 60F at night. Remember, we are on the equator, the sun is powerful; so bring a hat.

- Looser fitting, or more modest clothes will fit your needs best
- Be prepared for rain with a jacket or rain poncho
- Please bring closed toed walking shoes for certain activities. You can wear sandals comfortably at Dopoi.
- You will also have the opportunity to buy a shuka, a Maasai blanket, for roughly \$20 and those are wonderful for taking the chill off in the early mornings or around the fire at night.
- Adaptors. They are the British model of typically three prongs.

- You will not regret bringing binoculars to use on wildlife drives! You can even sometimes see wildlife from the Dopoi Center, especially from the top of the water tower.
- Bring a water bottle, as we have delicious filtered water available at Dopoi and encourage no single-use plastic bottles.
- Be sure to bring any medications that you use. Many prescription medications are available over the counter in Nairobi but you cannot count on yours being among them.
- Everyone should take some kind of malaria preventative, and there are many to choose from. We have used a homeopathic remedy successfully for decades: Cinchona, but allopathic pills and shots are also pretty widely available and your doctor can direct you.

Resources nearby beyond Dopoi?

You will not have consistent access to stores while at Dopoi, so make sure to bring what you need from Nairobi, or Narok if you arrive by road. In both places you can buy batteries, get phone sim cards, photographic supplies, converters, granola bars and other snacks.

What about Medical Care when at the Dopoi Center?

In case of a medical emergency, we will utilize systems established for tourists through the major lodges for immediate care and/or medical evacuation to world class care in Nairobi. Dopoi is also located about a 10 minute drive from the town of Talek which has an excellent rural clinic.

Wildlife

Dopoi is located near the Talek Gate into the Maasai Mara Wildlife Reserve, and we reliably see many dozens of species of animals when we visit the park such as lions, elephants, buffalo, giraffes, wildebeest, zebras, and all manner of antelopes and other grazers. Over 140 species of birds have been seen at Dopoi itself, and a total of more than 300 species of mammals, reptiles, birds, and insects have been catalogued on the 10 acres, and we are happy to share local knowledge about them.

What will I be eating?

Food served at Dopoi is based on an African menu of: local meat, beans, rice, lentils, ugali, cabbage and kale, chapattis, coffee, tea, and a limited variety of locally grown fruits and vegetables such as mangos, avocado, onions, potatoes and tomatoes. Our chef can also produce more western style food for you and your group on request.

We can usually make arrangements to accommodate dietary restrictions as long as you fill out the dietary restrictions information when you book your stay. If you need to let us know about further allergies, please contact our email.

Language

In Maasailand, we encourage you to speak even a few words of the Maa language. Learning language is a way to also learn the culture, show respect, and create a framework for mutual understanding.

In Maasai culture, greetings are used to build community. Maasai people use greetings to establish who they already are to each other –through extended family, clan, section, and age groups, all of which ties individuals to particular land through which they are known. Greeting someone in Maa activates an established and connected community in which all peoples are related, including visitors to Maasailand.

As a beginning Maa speaker, here are some basic greetings; (pronunciation mirrors Spanish, so ‘e’ is pronounced ‘aay’ etc.

Supa (*Sopa*) - “Hello”

Enta Supa - “Hello” (to a group)

Supa Oleng! – “Hello!” (with enthusiasm)

Enkakenya Sidai - “Good morning”

Endama Sidai - “Good day”

Entepa Sidai - “Good evening”

Enkewarie Sidai - “Good night”

Ira Supat? (*Ee-ra Su-pat*) - Are you well?

E-e Kara Supat oleng! (*Ay-Eb kab-rah su-pat o-leng*) – Yes, I am very well!

An understanding of the Maa Language can deepen your understanding of cultural values and practices.

Freedom: There is no direct translation in Maa for the English word “Freedom”. To Maasai, the state of being “free” is inherent because there is no concept for the opposite of “freedom” There is no incarceration, enslavement, or servitude in Maasailand, and therefore freedom is not a right that can be taken away. The closest translation for “freedom” is the word “elakunoto”, which describes the act of untying a cow from a tree which is sometimes done to ensure a mother nurses her calf.

Olchani - The Maa word “Olchani” translates in English to “tree”, “medicine”, and “court”.

This word is used interconnectedly, to describe the Maasai justice system “Olchani”, which is always held under a tree, and can be understood as a form of medicine for the community.

Going Deeper:

Beyond the first layer of greeting, you can participate in a rehearsal of the community values that follow by ‘eating the news.’

Keja Inkera? *How are the children?*

Era Supati. *They are well.*

Keja Inkishu? *How are the cows?* Era supati.

Keja Enkop? *How is the land/universe?*

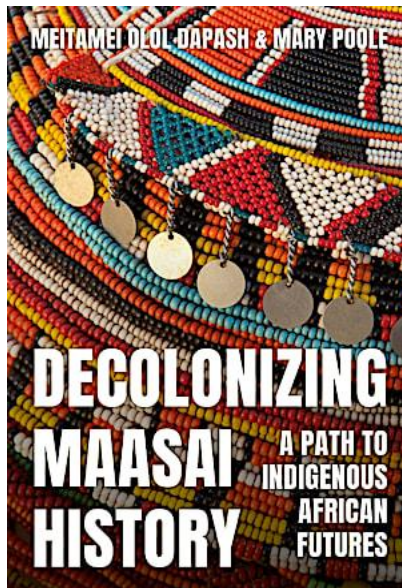
Esidai. *All is well.*

Nago talelo. *That is how it is.*

Resources for Deeper Engagement

Decolonizing Maasai History: A Path to Indigenous African Futures

By Meitamei Olol Dapash and Mary Poole



Dopoi Center directors Meitamei Dapash and Mary Poole have written a book to more deeply describe the decolonizing turn in Maasai history. “Through their rich and detailed narrative, we learn not only about the history of the Maasai as they understand it, but also about the relations between politics and Western history; about the untold history of Kenya both pre- and post-nationhood; about why the creation of nation-states is not synonymous with liberation; and about how and why Indigenous approaches to land obstruct global processes of resource extraction. All of this finds wider resonances that upend received narratives of post-’independence’ Africa and offer new opportunities for the emancipation of Indigenous communities from neo-colonial regimes the world over.”

The book is open access [here](#). Also [Link to Buy](#)

More resources on next page



1. [Aid in Reverse](#)
2. [The World Is Not Yours](#)
3. [In the Grip of the Vampire State: Maasai Land Struggles in Kenyan Politics](#)
4. [Wade Davis and the Ethnosphere](#)
5. [Top Down Solutions: Looking Up From Africa's Rangelands](#)
6. [Elephant Breakdown](#)
7. [Meitamei Olol Dapash-Coexisting in Kenya](#)
8. [Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global](#)
9. [Conservation and Native Peoples](#)
10. [A Clash Of Two Conservation Models](#)