

## Visit to Kisamis Kenya February 2010

Hello all,

November 2009 - a bit of background.

The Osiligi Maasai Warrior tour group gives an exciting performance in Devon. John Curtin, in an impassioned speech, tells us they are desperate for help to improve their community school. Talking with Tajeu, their leader, two options emerge - refurbish the existing school or rebuild. It seems obvious that refurbishment is the best plan - relatively cheap and easy but of course Roger and I have not seen the school.

Thursday February 4<sup>th</sup> 2010 Maji Moto, Kenya

We have heard about a new primary school close to the Maasi Mara, built and funded by the Polish government and Asante Africa, an American charity. The school, half an hour's drive down a badly rutted track, is conveniently located next to hot springs (ideal for bathing and clothes washing) and a large watering hole. Its mission statement on the school gates says "don't exchange girls for cows" in reference to parents receiving cows in exchange for their daughter for marriage. The two classes we see with Tajeu, John and Tumpes (a tour group member) are a model of excellence - enthusiastic qualified teachers, happy, busy children and colourful displays. The buildings are spacious, light and well equipped with strong furniture. Everything is simple but fit for purpose. We are inspired.



The school is preparing to accept boarders (a surprise to us, but we are told it's a good way of keeping girls from early marriage). Children are taught in English but also learn Swahili and have some lessons in "mother tongue" (kimaasai) to keep Maasai culture alive. They come to school in Maasai dress twice a week.

The justifiably proud head teacher Hellen tells us she could not have succeeded without the support of her village chief - an enlightened man regarding the environment and female circumcision (widespread among the Maasai, just before marriage) and quite the businessman. He is leaving for the USA to raise funds to protect his local environment - wild animals are threatened by tourism and land purchase. He will take only his shuka (shawl). Fortunately he is going to California so it shouldn't be too cold.

With some trepidation he has just joined an adult class at the school to learn to read and write. Apparently he's having great fun.

Monday 8<sup>th</sup> February, Kisamis near Kiserian, Kenya,  
Kisamis is the tiny town near the home of the Osiligi Maasai Warrior tour group.

We visit the Maasai Plains View School along with Keseme, a member of the tour group and Tajeu, both community elders. Tajeu also has a personal interest because he has a son at the school. It's a collection of tin buildings mostly on rented land, some with dirt floors and like many Kenyan schools is privately run. Catharine, the head, is struggling to make ends meet and because she doesn't own the land, cannot invest any more money in it nor can she afford to pay experienced teachers. To add to her problems, the recent droughts mean there is no money to pay for school fees so pupils are leaving. The fees are very low by western standards - normally just within the budget of a poor person. We conclude that investment in this school is not viable, given the lack of land. Without investment though, the school's future is hanging by a thread and if Catharine loses any more pupils she will have to close.

Olepolos, two mile from Kisamis.

The village elders call a meeting on Tajeu's land. About 60 people turn up. They give speeches about how important education is to the Maasai now and how, if the school is built, they will do whatever they can to support it. The community is enthusiastic.

Most of the people here today live in manyattas - a collection of basic, traditional, windowless huts made of wood and cow dung. There is little inside each hut other than hide covered, raised, separate sleeping areas for men and women, a fire with no chimney and a couple of cooking pots. At the centre of the manyatta is a pen for goats made of thorn bushes to protect them from wild animals. The manyatta is surrounded by the same bushes.

We decide to build a new school ready for the school year beginning January 2012. Tajeu and Tumpes generously donate 2.5 acres each of their own land - the minimum size the government will allow for a school. It's currently rocky and full of vicious thorn bushes but in a beautiful spot.

It was our plan to look for sponsors for needy children on completion of the new school but if we wait, many will leave school early due to poverty. We will try to find sponsors now. Katharine gives us a list of pupils who can no longer afford to pay the fees and Tajeu identifies the most needy.

Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> February, Olepolos

We walk to the local watering holes. These are shared with domestic and wild animals, are scummy and unfit for drinking. Nearby, Tumpes had a very deep well dug on his land five years ago but it has never been used. It has no cap and no pump. The community are fearful that children will fall down it so the simple solution, a bucket, is not viable. We resolve to finish the well by the end of May.

So, we have a school building project. All we need now is a local project manager, ideally someone from the community, willing to work for no wage - a tall order indeed. Tajeu manfully volunteers. From the organising and exploratory work he has done so far, he seems to be up to the job. His friend Muyaki has supervised building projects before and generously offers to help him.

We spend a couple of days agreeing a long list of tasks to be done before we can start to build. We agree a monitoring process and leave Tajeu and Muyaki in charge.

Helen Pannell