1 Reminiscence and the Manipulation of Experience

This chapter is concerned with personal anecdotes, told and elaborated before an audience, as a form of structured autobiography. Erving Goffman (1969: 28-40) has drawn attention to the element of performance in such presentations, with role play and the manipulation of reality to create an effect. In this way, a contrived self-image is built up which inadvertently may even captivate the teller. The aim here is to discern the relevance of exaggeration in recalling episodes of one’s past for an insight into autobiographical accounts, and ultimately even the record of history itself. Both history and biography are concerned with processes in time and are bound up with the life courses of individuals. Autobiography gives a uniquely personal insight into the process of history, but may view the memories of earlier times through the distorting lenses of later life, and these in turn are moulded in part by the social construction of ageing.

To illustrate this, I have chosen two autobiographical anecdotes that relate in the first instance to the self-image built up by a colourful Maasai elder. The second is of a misencounter of my own during my first spell of field-work, narrated years later. Each can be viewed in its historical context and both are shown in the concluding section to relate to the interpretation of maturation and ageing in the relevant culture.

1.1 The Maasai Who Would Not Grow Old

Popular accounts of the Maasai give a larger than life portrayal of a proud, tradition-bound people who once dominated a whole region of East Africa. While these accounts are open to question, the larger than life aspect at least is fostered by the Maasai themselves who remain convinced of their stature. This is not only for the benefit of tourists, but is found also in remoter areas where it is the tourists who are the spectacle, and even today when there is a new status quo in Kenya with the Maasai officially relegated to little more than an extension of the game parks.

While working among the Maasai, much of the information I collected, even from the most reliable informants, was dogged by this element of exaggeration. Collecting autobiographical accounts, then, had its dangers, especially when the informant projected his own role prominently. In one respect, however, any autobiography was a valuable resource. The Maasai are a semi-nomadic people, and no one with whom I had close contact early in my stay was still living with the same neighbours a year earlier.

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1 A previous version of this chapter has appeared under the title “Automythology and the Reconstruction of Ageing”, and was published in Okely, J. and Callaway, H. (eds.), 1992, Anthropology and Autobiography, ASA Monographs 29. Routledge, London. (pp. 50-63). I am grateful to the Association of Social Anthropologists for their permission to reproduce it here.
later, and many were no longer even in the same neighbourhood. Nomadism creates a situation in which a community study extended over time, comparable with Turner’s Ndembu (1957) or Middleton’s Lugbara (1960), is not feasible for the anthropologist. For the actors, on the other hand, there is a lifetime experience of an extended community. They see themselves over the years as itinerant members of a much larger slice of their society, making visits as well as moving with their herds, and constantly re-establishing social contacts that have lapsed in the course of migration. Autobiographical accounts provide an introduction to this wider community, albeit coloured and distorted by tricks of the memory and trips of the ego.

In Matapato in 1976, this dual aspect of autobiography was vividly illustrated by ‘Masiani’, an elderly Maasai who as an informant was not particularly interested or well informed. He was deaf, self-centred and impetuous, but also generous and a lively raconteur. His flamboyant narratives of his various encounters with other Maasai could hold an audience, giving the impression of a spirited young man (morani/warrior) who had never quite settled down to the more subtle ways of elderhood. I managed to collect enough of these anecdotes to piece together his life story over a period of historical change. This was complemented by rather different interpretations of some of the same events and of his character by his age mates and members of his family. An intriguing aspect of his self-centred perspective was his inability to fit together the two ends of his experience of the tense father-son relationship, first as a truculent boy and later as an overbearing patriarch. He claimed that his guardian uncle had killed his father by sorcery and portrayed him as a kind of ogre from a Maasai children’s story: ‘he was gigantic. He was as big as that tree over there. Each of his fingers was as thick as my wrist. And his nose – it was terrible!’ This led to Masiani rebelling and asserting his independence as a grown boy. Then, when I met him as an old man, he boasted of his overbearing behaviour towards his oldest son, while glossing over the point at which this son in his turn had rebelled and asserted his independence.

When collecting his fragmented account, the strong element of exaggeration reminded me of The Life of Benvenuto Cellini (Gust 1935). As a Renaissance ‘lie’, Cellini’s autobiography gives a vivid picture of the ethos of his times. Similarly, Masiani’s colourful account was a Maasai ‘lie’, and the licence he assumed in his actions and recounting is a feature of Maasai society which increases with age. On his own terms, Masiani’s self-portrayal provided a model of Maasai society, riddled with Maasai clichés, and as much a truth of Maasai ideals as a distortion of biographical and historical detail.

Take, for instance, the incident when Masiani was punished by his age-set tor for being involved in a drunken brawl. He drew blood by retaliating against an age mate who had attacked him. This was a ritually dangerous offence for an established elder,

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2 For an edited translation of Masiani’s life, see Lechieni 2013 (a fabricated anagram of Cellini).
and Masiani had to make reparation even though he claimed to be the innocent victim of the attack.

‘The elders of my age-set told me to give the man I had fought a sheep so that he could drink the liquid fat and we could become friends. But I refused: “I won’t give anything to that man who throttled me until I wet myself and beat me until he thought I was dead”, I said. I had many sheep, but I had none that I was prepared to give that man. So they went round calling one another [to mount an age-set posse to punish Masiani’s disobedience]. One night I could hear them yelping not far away. I had a quiver with poisoned arrows, so I went out of my village determined to shoot them as they approached. Another young man of our family came with me and told me not to shoot. The posse came and settled down to a discussion. We both lurked in the darkness to overhear what they said. They were as far away from us as that thorn-fence over there. One said: “Oye ... let’s not rush in and grab his cattle: let us be careful in punishing this elder”. And another said: “No. Let’s rush in and beat him”. And a third said: “He should not be rushed or beaten. We must get him carefully”. My young friend then turned to me and whispered: “You said just now that you would shoot them all; but do you want to shoot men like that who are shooting away from you [and advising restraint]? Wouldn’t that be bad?” And I said: “It would be bad. Let’s forget about shooting at them”. So we got up and walked slowly towards the discussion. And addressing these elders, I said: “Oye ... don’t again suggest that you should rush in and grab my cattle”. And they replied: “Forget it, for we are not going to rush in”. And I went on: “When I overheard that you wanted to rush in and grab my cattle – I didn’t beat that man recently nearly as hard as I would have beaten you, the one who made that suggestion. And you are that man’s brother, you goodfornothing (laka iposo)” So they came and grabbed two of my cattle: a heifer and an ox ... I did get that ox back again though. It had been placed by the elders in another herd and one day it strayed. So I stole it back and drove it away. I then swapped it for a white heifer elsewhere, and drove that one back to my own herd. The man who was looking after the ox came to search for it, but he never knew that it was me who had taken it, getting my own ox back.’

The incongruity of this account is that Masiani was not just an implacable rebel. He was well connected within his own age-set and popular for his loyalty and the colour he brought to their ageing reputation. The whole episode – taking up his bow against his age mates, haranguing them, and then recovering his ox after it had strayed – over stretches credibility, as do many of his other stories. His excessive rashness at each stage, the coincidence of the stray ox combined with the incompetence of the herder simply does not ring true. Taken as a fantasy surrounding Masiani’s punishment, on the other hand, the account seems to portray his feelings quite vividly: the urge to defend his herd; the voice of caution from a younger kinsman whom he was not obliged to obey; the desire to rise above his punishment by first boasting over the heads of his age mates and then staging an audacious counter-theft; and implicitly his ultimate loyalty to his age-set in submitting at least to the minimum fine of just one heifer. These expressions of the ambivalence that surrounds the defence of a man’s own domestic interests as against his submission to age-set discipline would be perfectly intelligible to a Maasai audience. The tension between these two types of involvement alters in the course of the life span and is expressed in their ideology and in various Maasai stereotypes. Masiani’s audacity may have been
largely that he was prepared to fantasise in public what others would have felt in private. Rising in his own estimation above his adversaries, he also tried to show that he was prepared always to defer to higher Maasai ideals. At worst, he paid for his excesses by having little personal influence in the local political scene, but he still carried weight as a virile member of a dwindling age-set who refused to bow to old age. What he sometimes lacked in personal dignity, his age-set gained in popular acclaim placing them above trivial conformity. Their occasional flamboyant excesses displayed the irrepressible spirit of younger men, and to this extent old age itself had to be respected not only as the ultimate achievement, but also for its own irrepressibility. Historically, it was a period when ultimate power was felt to have slipped into the hands of younger men encouraged for the first time by an alien black administration. Against this trend within the local community, older men could retain their prestige so long as they could hold an audience with stories that glamorised their role and responses within Maasai tradition. Beyond the flamboyance of the performer, the element of exaggeration becomes intelligible in the wider context, parading the undaunted spirit of a Maasai.

It is perhaps significant that the setting for this episode was not, for instance, Samburu. The Samburu are up-country cousins of the Maasai and generally less competitive. I suspect that a Samburu Masiani would have projected his fantasies and tales on to some peripheral third party, identifying himself as story-teller with the conformist majority. The struggle for power between senior age-sets was altogether weaker among the Samburu and to this extent, older men were in a more secure position than among the Maasai. Such accounts as I collected from older Samburu were essentially oral histories rather than self-centred fantasies.

1.2 The Apparition in the Bush

Masiani’s account opens up the disquieting question of the extent to which all our Goffmanesque presentations of ourselves – even to ourselves – contain an element of autobiographical distortion, giving coherence and meaning to our being. Given that any anthropological account is inevitably reflexive and indirectly autobiographical, this in turn throws doubt on the anthropologist’s own judgement. To what extent, in other words, are my own accounts of the peoples of the Maa region distorted by unresolved dilemmas of my own past and present? To what extent do I too respond to my perceived audience, and possibly in different ways on different occasions?

Let me try to unravel this.

Writing about such peoples as the Maasai for an unknown reader, I feel obliged to be largely impersonal and essentially serious. Yarning about field-work with friends on the other hand, I find myself frequently resorting to personal anecdotes, rather
like Masiani, and not altogether aware of the extent to which the retelling of these stories takes on new complexions in the effort to gain an effect or to hold an audience. The frequent theme of such stories is the incongruity of the encounter between two cultures wrapped up in a joke.

Take, for instance, my recollection of an episode that I have retold on a number of occasions. This concerns a time when I had just acquired a Land Rover, and I then ended my first long stint of fieldwork among the Samburu with a trip to their close allies, the Rendille. There I was faced once again with a new language and an unfamiliar culture. I simply did not have the energy to start all over again; and this made me realise that I needed a break. A motor road nearby led me to hanker for a dose of English culture, to be able to relax with others in my own language, and to indulge in some privacy. I had been struggling with these feelings for several days, when my lethargic research efforts with some Rendille elders were interrupted by an apparition. A boat had suddenly appeared, perhaps 40 feet long, sailing majestically above the sparse bush cover. I could not have dreamed up a more incongruous diversion. Even the elders seemed disconcerted. Then as we looked, the boat came to an abrupt halt. That day was clearly not destined for untangling Rendille kinship organisation. I ran towards the boat, half expecting to discover some uncharted lake, but at least certain that any vessel that had run aground in the middle of this remote wilderness was in trouble or lost. This was the excuse I needed to get away from the Rendille and even to grapple with a western problem in English. I arrived at the roadside to find not just a stranded boat, but a line of stationary trucks with the boat perched on top of one of them. There was no lake and no sign of trouble, just some heavy vehicles and, beside them on the roadside, a huddle of Europeans looking at a map. This was my cue. Even if I could not help them unground a shipwreck, at least I could make out that I knew the area – and in English. ‘Can I help?’, I asked. They looked up with mild surprise and then down towards my feet. One of them said ‘No thank you’, and they turned back to their map. I too looked down and realised that I was wearing a well-seasoned blanket, a pair of sandals made from car tyres, and clutching a stick and a notebook. Had I been a Samburu – or if they had been Samburu – I would simply have stayed where I was and looked on. As it was, they were of my own kind and I wanted to escape. In desperation, I looked at my left wrist, as if wearing a watch that would remind me of an urgent appointment. ‘Good heavens!’, I said, ‘I must be going! Bye bye’. They looked up again and said ‘Goodbye’, and then returned to their map. I turned and fled into the cover of the bush. That, then, was my slice of English culture for the present.

Years later, my attention was drawn to an account by Hilary Ruben portraying an aspect of Africa that was fast disappearing. She and her family were members of this amphibious expedition and she gives a diverging account of the same incident. Possibly for effect, the encounter appears to be cited more than one hundred miles further north in an even more remote part.
One day ... a fantastic apparition appeared in the midst of all that nothingness: a white man, wearing shorts and shirt [sic] and a pair of thonged sandals [sic] like the nomads. He walked like a nomad too, with the same long [sic], springy gait. He smiled, waved [sic?], enquired whether everything was all right, and before we had time to catch our breaths and ask whence he came and whither he was going, passed on. Mad dogs and Englishmen, I muttered ... Months afterwards, we were to discover that this man was an anthropologist living mostly with the Samburu, and partly with the Rendille. It was in fact Paul Spencer ... (Ruben 1972: 160-1)

The two accounts are sufficiently similar to identify the same event, but they differ enough to raise questions. I am now unconvinced by at least one detail of my own version: it is altogether unlikely that I would have been wearing a blanket in the heat of Rendille country; a cloth just possibly, but even this would have been unlikely at this early stage of my research among them. Somehow over the years, the elaborations of this story seem to have taken over from the reality of the encounter. In my mind's eye, I do not see Hilary Ruben or her two daughters, but only a group of men, studiously trying not to look at me. The story has become part of my self-image. Even in writing about it now, I wanted to substitute a cloth for the (less plausible) blanket, missing and yet effectively demonstrating the point I wish to make. I am equally unconvinced concerning minor details in the other account. Each version gives a different slant on this fleeting encounter. The normal view of the English meeting in remote Africa is of spontaneous warmth that would be inconceivable anywhere in England. And yet here, in an unusually remote area, the very unexpectedness of the encounter appears to have led to a very English reserve on both sides. In my own account, they did not respond to my overture, and in Ruben's account I did not even give them a chance. Exaggerations in each of our anecdotes apart, we appear to have revealed – or rather concealed – something of our national character to each other. We had brought the stiff upper lip with us to Africa, barely camouflaged by brief pleasantries.

A feature of this self-portrayal (but not necessarily of the encounter itself) was that I was setting myself apart from the very people whose company I was seeking, as if unable to resolve the gulf between the two cultures. In elaborating the story – inventing the worn blanket for instance – I suspect that I was trying to insinuate how far I had gone to incorporate myself into Samburu society, contrasting it with the world of maps, expeditions and affluence. This may well have been a pose, but it was in tune with my feelings of ambivalence towards my Englishness at this time.

The period was in the wake of the Suez crisis, which even today is remembered by many as a watershed between two eras of British foreign policy. It was an episode that had split the nation (and my own family for that matter) between the believers in British imperialism and those embittered by the hypocrisy of an outdated paternalism towards the Third World. Decolonisation was already in progress, but after Suez a veil of disinformation had been swept to one side and the moral issue seemed to resolve from a matter of dignified enlightenment to one of naked self-interest. Having already launched on my own anthropological career in a mood of benign and innocent optimism, I now found myself ashamed of my nationality and irritated that
the evidence of Suez had somehow become blurred once the issue ceased to be news. What had been a myth of my own schooling had been exposed and yet remained intact. The believers for the time being – my own kith and kin – could continue to believe. The episode had no direct effect on my approach to research, but it clarified the moral issue. In Kenya, I avoided those who represented in my mind the ultra-believers: the white settlers. In elaborating on my encounter with the convoy in the bush, clothed like a local (according to my story) and unable to make contact with those who spoke my native language, I was implicitly identifying myself with the exploited. Carrying the symbol of my profession – my anthropologist's notebook – I was at the same time legitimising my position there. Wrapping this up as a joke was, of course, a useful way of holding an audience, but it also permitted a certain licence to emphasise the gap between cultures and possibly to exaggerate my own isolation somewhere between them. The breakdown of communication within the society I had left less than a year before was replicated by a comedy of misencounter in the bush.

1.3 Adolescence and the Bottomless Pit

Masiani’s anecdote portrays a true Maasai in spirit, even to the point of defying his all-embracing age-set to save his cattle. As the Maasai say, ‘Cattle have their own law’ and in this case Masiani enhances his self-esteem by straying beyond the strict borders of unquestioned loyalty to his age peers, but he remains a committed member of his age-set. In my anecdote, I presented myself as a cultural hybrid, a wandering soul with no strict borders, no property to defend, and no clear purpose. I was accepted as a member of a Samburu age-set and a family that offered me a precise niche in their society, but this too was a fiction without an all-embracing life-long commitment, which I could not give.

Beyond my anecdote, there was a more serious side to my work that led me to the Samburu in the first place (and later to the Maasai). This section concerns this background as part of a bumpy process of learning that can be seen as an aspect of my ageing in contrast to Masiani’s prescribed path in a heavily traditional society, with its own prescribed beliefs and procedures that my worldview lacked.

If the elaborations of my encounter bore on my response to the Suez crisis, then this in turn evoked memories of my childhood at a deeper level. The Suez crisis can now be seen as a telling episode in the history of changing attitudes towards decolonisation, exposing the ugly side of ideas that so many of us had grown up to accept. Seen retrospectively, history and growing up were entwined, and the uniqueness of my personal experience was in part the uniqueness of the time in which I lived. As a child I had unquestioningly accepted the supremacy of British Empire, along with the sanctity of the family and the unambiguous truth of Christianity. My growing up at a time when these were put to the test was experienced as a series of painful episodes, each leaving me more uncertain than the last, and each perhaps priming
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me towards a value-free discipline, such as anthropology. What had previously been an acceptance of a world that had emerged successfully from two world wars, wrapped in the comfortable certainty of my childhood, was now exposed step by step as a self-deception, piercing the fragile shell of my innocence. For me personally, the Suez crisis in the mid 1950s was not a major watershed, but it hurt and left me angry precisely because it exposed my own gullibility and replicated the truths behind diplomatic lies that I had faced in the late 1940s, splitting the family in new ways.

The earlier period of disillusionment occurred during the years of adolescence, dulled by the absence of my father at home and the drabness of an undistinguished Methodist boarding school in Yorkshire. The transition at the age of thirteen from a southern English background to a northern one was itself unnerving. The revelation of my parents’ divorce two years later came as a blow that took years to come to terms with. In the late 1940s, divorce rates were climbing steeply, but within the cocoon of a prudish school that upheld Christian values, divorce was regarded as an outrage. With a sense of utter shame, I kept this family development from my school-friends, hiding it like some inner deformity. At home during the holidays, it was a topic that we simply did not discuss or admit to our neighbours or friends. We continued to live as though nothing had happened. If we had only discussed it among ourselves, then we might have come to terms with it and worked the grief out of our systems. As it was, there was an unresolved feeling of unreality about home. I was surprised that I had always accepted my father’s absence as quite normal. Why had I never sought an explanation or even toyed with the most obvious one? It was as if my whole childhood had been a facade, undermined by an ugly truth that had been so well concealed that I did not even think of asking the most obvious questions.

My education had encouraged me to ask questions and yet at the same time to accept some basic dogmas. To question these dogmas was to lay bare a bottomless pit. Now, with no certainty to draw round me and a sense of divine injustice, I felt cheated and the questions started to flow. If there was no room for divorce in my religion, then somehow I did not belong. It was in this spirit of niggling doubt that the firmly held beliefs I had grown up with started to crumble. Within a year, what had been an unquestioning faith simply evaporated. Belief gave way to immovable disbelief. At first, it was as if I had woken up from the comfort of a dream to find myself confronted by a nightmare. My faith – whatever that had been – was destroyed and I was terrified. There was no Being up there and nowhere to go after this life had run its course. Why should there be? I had discovered the fragility of my own mortality. The great cosmic mystery now shifted from the uncertainties of death and afterlife to the inscrutable fact of life itself. All I could rely on was the unique sense of my own existence to shield me from oblivion.

Once again, I felt that the facts had always been there, and yet my whole upbringing, as in the case of my family background, had blinded me to them. The facade of family unity seemed replicated at a higher level by an empty facade of religious belief in a society of half-believers. It was my own way of adjusting to a new set of values and
to what has, after all, become a commonplace experience in the post-war decades. I was just one of many who encountered and had to accommodate a major historical trend in their own private way. Disenchantment with the assumptions that have surrounded childhood and schooling is perhaps a very general aspect of attaining adulthood, especially in times of change. To become an adult, one has to disengage from childhood. Autobiographical memory is then transformed into a kind of myth, rather like a Kuhnian paradigm. For me, this was the memory of a lifestyle infused with a set of beliefs that served to hold the family together, but it did not stand up to close scrutiny – or to being displaced by a new set of beliefs and perhaps a new myth. It was not so much the historical trend that was so shattering as the suddenness and stark intimacy of the realisation. The process of ageing was a discontinuous series of steps.

Other aspects of my world-view remained intact and I saw no reason to discard these. Scientific subjects at school seemed to hold a sufficient integrity within my grasp, and my inclination was towards some unambitious career in this field, working among fellow beings, but concerned with inanimate problems associated with progress. However, at heart this vague notion of progress seemed part of the myth of my childhood. It did not answer the desire to recreate some kind of order in my mind, some meaning out of life itself that went further than the nothingness of eternity. It was this need for understanding that laid the foundations for a search that was to be realised years later when I encountered social anthropology, which seemed to offer a search for the fundamentals of human existence, and then the Samburu of Kenya, whose collective way of life displayed a certainty that mine lacked. These encounters in themselves entailed a random element of chance. But the way in which I responded to each in turn seemed to make sense in terms of my curiosity for understanding things that appeared hidden from me. Changing the course of my career, prior to the vociferous 1960s, was also a silent form of protest against a system that rang hollow and seemed based on half-truths and self-deception, especially after the Suez crisis.

To express this in Bernsteinian terms (Douglas 1970), it was as if my education encouraged an elaborated mode of thought along channels bounded by restricted dogma that ranged from Christian values to the mindless conformism of my own peer group. Once the dogma had been breached at one point, nowhere was it sacrosanct. An unrestricted mode of thought spiralled out of control, and life itself lost meaning.

If, as I have suggested, the dilemma of my youth had been the impasse of a search for answers with no fundamentals of faith or certainty, then the highly traditionalist Samburu seem an odd object for study and my enchantment with them as a people even odder. Here, I wish to argue that the erratic course that led me eventually to the Samburu somehow offered a way forward; but I was not exactly aware of it at the time and have never quite been able to spell it out clearly. The impasse of one extreme and a sceptical view of progress led me stumbling towards a people who embraced the opposite extreme, whose resilient traditionalism was highly restrictive. From a family background that had seemed to evaporate inexplicably, I was heading
towards a kinship system that had a benign halo of certainty and encompassed almost endless ramifications that I could explore at length. Emotionally, as I learned to accommodate this system and take my adoption into a particular Samburu family seriously, it was like re-entering the primitive world of childhood. I had to be eased out of my bewilderment, not by my own ill-formed questions, but by the questions that Samburu repeatedly asked me and that I in turn had to learn to turn back on them. Reflexivity was a term I had not then heard of, but the principle was inherent in any attempt to enter an exotic culture, to master the language and make conversation – any conversation – on topics that emerged from the context of the moment. The luxury of selecting my own topics had to wait until I could reformulate them.

Like so many others who have had dealings with the Samburu, I was wholly captivated by them. At times, I felt thoroughly drawn towards them and wanted to stay almost indefinitely. At other moments in the still of the night, I would sense the faint and solemn ticking of a clock, reminding me of the one at home during my childhood, and the ticking would then fade as I listened. Why my childhood? Or was this fantasy somehow bound up with the make-believe watch that beamed me away in my joke? Was it reminding me that life’s opportunities were ticking away? Whatever my feelings for the Samburu or private misbeliefs, I could not completely rid myself of an inner Protestant ethic that always reminded me to use my time and to work to my open-ended brief. I had to separate my personal involvement from the task of research. Only by completing this research, ultimately as an outsider could I justify the whole exercise to everyone concerned, including myself and including the Samburu, whose future was by no means certain in an independent Kenya. I had to transform my involvement with them into an involvement with a model about them as an outsider and disbeliever, aware of the contradictions within their system and of wider issues when viewed from outside. Again this was experienced as a very personal problem and yet is common for the anthropologist whose attempts to empathise in order to analyse entails a moral dilemma. This stems at least in part from the fact that anthropological fieldwork in practice can never be value-free any more than it can be an emotionless experience, for it lies at the interface between two cultures, rather like my joke.

In writing up this research as a thesis (1965), some aspects had a certain autobiographical relevance at one stage removed. These included: the angry reaction of youths (moran) to the narrow constraints of their upbringing; the ritualised nature of knowledge in manipulating the young; aspects of religious conversion in the course of socialisation; and tensions between the nineteenth-century middle-class family and boarding schools which I compared with the Samburu age system. I do not wish to dwell on these here since there were other equally important themes that were less autobiographical. To the extent that this study was unashamedly functionalist, I would question a widespread view that this approach represented a pre-reflexive phase in anthropology and was unsuspectingly caught up in a colonialislt mode of thought (Asad 1973: 18). A more valid criticism of studies such as The Samburu is that...
they reflect too close an identification with a widespread African sense of tradition and too little an awareness of processes of change. In other words, they are too reflexive at the expense of the historical context. Certainly, Evans-Pritchard as my supervisor was more concerned that my thesis should reflect my own personal experience of the Samburu than that it should embody a watertight argument. Today, this advice sounds surprisingly modern, reflexive and unfunctionalist (cf. Pocock 1961: 72).

Yet it remains that the principal thrust of my research was to construct a meaningful whole out of the premises of Samburu society in order to demonstrate to myself that this could be done. Piecing together a self-contained argument out of fragmented field data was like piecing together a fragmented past. If order could be made out of chaos, then as a matter of faith other things could make sense. If this was a functionalist stance, then at least it echoed the self-awareness of such peoples as the Samburu for whom the concept of tradition was strong and implied no change. The warmth that they exuded was one of absolute certainty in their way of life within an unquestioned system of beliefs. There was a widespread sense of wholesomeness, of wholesome integrity that I needed to replicate in my writing. It was the anthropology of Durkheim with collective representations, collective sentiments and a collective life in which society itself rode above the fragile dilemmas of the individual.

There was, need I say, a strong element of transference in my attachment to the Samburu, which built up as my relationship to one clan became firmer and more secure. Correspondingly, writing this up entailed an element of disengagement with all the difficulties of disentangling my emotional experience. Or a better metaphor perhaps would be that I had fallen in love – not with any individual – but with an idea that I associated with a community at large and the way of life of a people who had cast their charm over me. Writing this up was not so much a falling out of love, or grief at the loss of a loved object. It was more a matter of consummation, a necessary fulfilment of the relationship I had formed and of the conditions on which that relationship was based. The whole experience had been contrived, and yet its creative potential had led me towards a sense of completeness. I would suggest that this total experience was not idiosyncratic, but must be very common in the early careers of social anthropologists.

1.4 Conclusion: The Confusion of Historical Time and the Experience of Ageing

Let me conclude by returning to Masiani’s autobiographical encounter as compared with my own, each of us concerned with ambivalent views towards our own society. Both accounts were narratives in which the author presented himself to his own culture, stepping into a realm of partial fantasy. The contrast between Masiani’s account and my own stilted attempt here seems to be broadly the contrast between restricted and elaborated modes of thought: an older man conforming in his own way
to an exaggerated but acceptable Maasai stereotype, and a younger man out on a limb and making a joke of an episode of his career to impress his audience.

However, the Maasai are restricted only up to a point, since as I have noted, there is a competitive edge to their society that is generally lacking among the Samburu. Masiani’s brand of nonconformity set out to stir a receptive audience. He emerges as a Maasai, competitive and thrusting among his peers, but perhaps a little more so than normal, and confident that his boasting has not violated the ultimate constraints of Maasai decorum. The flavour of his account was not just his own irascibility, but also his faith in the certainty and strength of Maasai society. His reminiscences generally and his boasts were tinged with Maasai ideals. In the above episode, as elsewhere, he was using the latitude permitted an elder in late middle age to project himself as an undaunted spirit, clinging to youth with all the bravado of a committed morani, while maintaining his claim to seniority and respect as the occasion demanded. In a highly age-conscious society and within the restrictions of Maasai convention, he was playing with his age to an extent not permitted to younger men.

In my own joke, I seem to have been projecting myself as a serious-minded research student who had lost contact with his own culture. In emphasising the unbridgeable gap, I was implying how far I had gone in identifying myself with the Samburu, and perhaps tried to give the impression that living among them had been an end in itself. But in making this a joke of my past self, I had clearly come back to my own culture and the end lay in my research. In an odd sort of way, preparing my doctoral thesis was a replication of the joke, reliving episodes of my life among the Samburu, identifying with them in an attempt to understand; and yet now in the telling, slanting this experience as a bridge across the gap between their culture and ours for the benefit of my audience: the hypothetical western reader in my mind’s eye. The flavour of the joke was only made explicit in a brief preface: ‘By adopting me into their numbers ... accepting me. ... as a morani ... Time meant something quite different; and under this spell, three years of my life slipped past unnoticed’ (1965: xiv). Note again the element of fantasy in expressing my enchantment. It was after all largely an adoption on terms of my own choosing. What about the breaks in my fieldwork? What about that inner ticking reminding me of the seconds – and years – slipping away? Wrapped up in a joke or tucked away in a preface, I was projecting this whole episode of my career into a timeless limbo, suspended between a troubled youth and settling down. In a sense, like Masiani, I too was playing with my perception of ageing. Implicitly, I seem to have been viewing my development with its liminal period of separation as a rite of transition that had its counterpart among my Samburu peers: bush-loving moran in their twenties, socially suspended between childhood and elderhood. Once I had completed my thesis, I could settle down to whatever lay ahead. This left me apprehensive of the future, but with a sense of completion in respect of the past and a renewed confidence. Disengaging successfully from the Samburu had a therapeutic effect. It replicated and in some ways marked the end of disengagement from my childhood.
Masiani’s self aggrandisement is oddly reminiscent of some biographical commentaries on Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Margaret Mead (to name but three). These pioneers of anthropology are now seen to have cultivated their own images as our hero ancestors, manipulating the historical record in the course of establishing their careers. From Malinowski especially, we have inherited a discipline in which the claims and expectations of something new outstrip the record of history and trigger polemic responses. But this is the essence of myth and says something about the subject of anthropology and its excitement, in which our careers too are embroiled. The Malinowskian flame lures us like moths, and in the pursuit of new interpretations and a personal sense of achievement, we are all vulnerable.

Ironically, this raises the question: to the extent that we misconstrue the past – even our own pasts – is it because we too are caught up in restructuring the process of our ageing? Is the perpetual rearrangement of anthropological fashions really a development of the discipline or is it in part a false time perspective, a construct of our developing careers as successive generations reach for the fruits of middle age? Who is maturing, the discipline or us? And how will our future biographers view this confusion between the history of ideas, our intellectual development as individuals, and our academic rivalries? Beyond this, how will future generations of Maa-speaking scholars view earlier attempts to understand their society by outsiders who write for a non-Maa audience and are biased by personal experience and the influence of contemporary theories? How will our anthropological models of their society compare with their perceptions of colonial history?

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