

ELIAMANI'S HOMESTEAD  
A film by Vanessa Wijngaarden

Review by Leonard Kamerling

Anthropologist Vanessa Wijngaarden's twenty minute, single-take film, *Eliamani's Homestead*, adds a visual component to the growing body of research on cultural tourism in Maasai communities in East Africa. Much of the existing research focuses on "cultural heritage" tourism, in which tourists are taken to model, pseudo Maasai homesteads where they can observe cultural performances, purchase crafts and take photographs, for a fee<sup>1</sup>. Vanessa Wijngaarden's film takes place in an impoverished rural Maasai homestead (*boma*), a far cry from the cultural heritage *bomas* where tourists have a structured, controlled experience. *Eliamani's Homestead* documents the uncomfortable encounter between a group of Maasai women and a family of Dutch tourists who arrive unannounced at their *boma*, guided by Eliamani's brother-in-law, Paolo. The conversation takes place in four languages: Maa, Swahili, English and Dutch, further complicating the exchange. Three narratives emerge - the Dutch tourist's speculating on what is happening around them; the Maasai women's commenting on the tourist's reluctance to buy their hand-made jewelry, and the cross-cultural conversation between the tourists and their guide, Paolo, who mediates back and forth between the two groups in English, Maa and Swahili. The discomfort of the Dutch family - who are clueless about Maasai culture and the situation at this *boma*, and the Maasai women who are desperate to sell their beads, is palpable. Misperception, miscommunication and misunderstanding define this awkward interaction where no one seems to know what to do or what is expected of them.

Clearly, there is a lot to be learned from understanding the cross-culture / power dynamics of this encounter, but the way the film is shot and constructed keeps the viewer at a distance and makes it difficult to observe the key participants or the elements of the exchange. Much of the uncut, twenty-minute scene that makes up this film is shot from a distance with a wide lens, with very little camera movement. The Dutch woman, a key character, is facing away from the camera for most of the

exchange. While she is examining the jewelry the woman have offered, her back is to the camera. The Maasai women are facing the camera but too far away to clearly see who is speaking. Poor audio quality and wind distortion further distances the scene. Making a film from a single, uncut, twenty-minute take would be a challenge for any filmmaker, but without changing perspective, following action, moving the camera with the changing flow of the event, it is not likely to succeed.

The film opens with information titles that tell us that Elimani lives together with Pendo, and that she and her child have not eaten the whole day. A title tells us that her husband has left them behind to try to find work in Kenya and that she has not heard from him in quite some time. This "back story," rather than creating essential context for the viewer, poses questions and introduces characters that are not addressed in the film. The English subtitles are grammatically awkward and generally on the screen for too long, making it difficult to identify who is speaking.

The scene that unfolds before Vanessa Wijngaarden's camera is widespread and important and has considerable ethnographic value, despite the flawed filmmaking. The continual debate among all the parties about the value of the exchange brings up pervasive and critical issues in understanding the promise and consequences of cultural heritage tourism in East Africa. The Dutch woman is reluctant to pay the price the Maasai women are asking for their jewelry. "You have to start much lower.. It's about the game isn't it?," her husband says. The Maasai women express concern that they will be taken advantage of. A woman identified as grandmother says, "Pay attention now, so that they don't cheat us, like the other day." Taking photographs seems to be of paramount value to the tourists - far more than the jewelry or the money required to purchase it. The Maasai women express their dismay at not being compensated for their images, but this is not communicated to the tourist family who continue to take pictures. "Isn't it enough with the pictures... do you like white people taking your picture time and again?" one woman says. One can surmise that the hundreds of pictures taken during this exchange by the Dutch tourists will only increase in value once they are back home recounting their experience.

Eliamani's Homestead can be an important teaching film for researchers and anthropology students interested in the economic dynamics of cultural and eco tourism globally.

<sup>1</sup> Kalavar, J., Buzinde, C., Melubo, K., and Simon, J., 2014, Intergenerational Differences in Perceptions of Heritage Tourism Among the Maasai of Tanzania, Springer Science and Business Media, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10823-013-9221-6>