ELIMANI'S HOMESTEAD

A film by Vanessa Wijngaarden

Review by
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This is an ethnographic film observing and exploring the encounters between Masaai women and children and a family of tourists from Europe, in one long take. The tourist visit is part of a local, small-scale project in which they can "book" a homestead visit, pay an entrance fee and purchase local crafts, beaded jewelry in particular. The encounter takes place in the small homestead of Eliamani and her infant. Eliamani's husband has left searching for work in Kenya. Her brother-in-law arrives at the homestead together with a family of tourists. Eliamani and her child are living in relative poverty; they have no food in the homestead on the day of the visit.
This is the context of the film, provided in information titles at the very beginning. The ensuing one-take film follows the interaction between the tourists and Eliamani, and visiting women and children from neighboring homesteads.

In the opening section, the filming anthropologist positions herself in geographical space behind the father of the European tourist family. He takes pictures of the Masaai women and children who stand behind some empty sacs placed on the ground. On them are displayed a few pieces of jewelry for sale. The tourist moves closer and closer towards the Masaai women, taking pictures continuously until one of the children begins to scream, presumably afraid of the approaching stranger.

For the audience, the position and angle of the camera suggests that we arrive with the tourists. This is slightly surprising because the information titles invite the audience to identify with Eliamani as the film's protagonist. The counterpoint between the opening titles and the first scene may function for audiences as a reflexive moment, but distancing them from the entire situation and raising the problematic question of European consumption of exotic images of poor, rural Africans.

A social drama unfolds from this point on, revolving around the sale of beaded jewelry and photographing people and their houses. The father and the mother of the European family are the chief actors, their teenage children playing a lesser role mostly observing their parents' actions. An interesting dimension of the drama is that, not knowing each other's languages, the Masaai comment on the Europeans and the Europeans comment on the Masaai. The guide is the interpreter, but he translates just a minimum of information in order to aid the sales of beaded jewelry. The filming

anthropologist – in proper ethnographic filmic realism – translates the interaction between the two groups using mostly total and half-total framing rather than close-ups. She places herself one step behind the people who stay close to one another while talking. It is difficult for the audience to identify who is speaking. The filmmaker identifies the speakers by color-coding the subtitles; white for the Masaai speakers, and yellow for the English-speaking tourists and interpreting guide. In addition, the names of the speakers are noted in the subtitles.

Uncertainties arises among the Masaai women about whether or not the tourists will buy their beaded jewelry. The mother of the European family intends to buy, but appears uncertain about the authenticity of the jewelry. The audience does not learn exactly what the tourist considers to be authentic Masaai jewelery. In a later event, the woman tourist laughs at a Masaai woman who wears a lock as part of a necklace. Here the audience gains a distinct understanding that in the tourist's imagined idea of Maasai culture, the lock seems out of place.

Also, a conflict emerges in relation to the tourists' excessive photographing. Eliamani's grandmother seems to have had enough and leaves the homestead. Others follow, and Eliamani and a few remaining neighbors become the primary objects of the photographer.

Contrary to the tourist, who do not understand the content of the ongoing conversation in Masaai, the audiences understands from the subtitles of the Masaai's growing discontent. Audiences may feel that the tourists should leave, but the tourists, who are not aware of the growing discontent, continue to take photos. They also become inquisitive about the houses, husbandry and so on. It turns out that Eliamani does not like to have photos taken of her. Audiences will understand that the tourists are intrusive, and that the asymmetric power relationship between the European tourists and Masaai women becomes even more accentuated.

Following the sale of beaded jewelry, the tourists move in the direction they came from, whereas the filming anthropologist more less remains at the initial spot. More likely accidental than planned, remaining on the same spot implies a switch of vantage point from the Europeans to Masaai. The audience is now, so to speak, looking over the shoulders of Masaai rather than over the shoulders of the European tourists. One may speculate whether this shift constitutes a turning point in the audience's identification, perhaps, siding with the Masaai.

Through two information titles at the end of the film the audience is informed that Eliamani was not the recipient of the cash sale from the jewelry. Although the jewelry was jointly displayed, they did not share the revenue; it is the individual jewelry makers who are paid, in this case, a woman from another homestead. Eliamani did not receive any money that day and remained without food. Much later, she received the

homestead entry fee, which is usually given to the male head of the homestead. The audience is also informed that the tourist family was very happy with the visit, but that they were unaware that there was no food in the homestead. If they had known, they would have bought more jewelry. They also remarked that if they had know they would have felt very uncomfortable visiting at all.

From a perspective of teaching social anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking, I find the film most valuable and I would recommend JAF to publish it. The observational style captures the story of the event itself as it unfolds. This is the strength of the film. However, I have few reservations regarding the one-take style. In this reviewer's understanding, the filming anthropologist had not planned such a film, e.g. comparable to the aesthetics developed at the Harvard Media Lab / Sensory Lab. To the viewer, the camerawork is annoyingly unsteady at times, including zooming in at high speed, at TCs 04:15-04:16, 06:31-06:40, 06:54-07:09, 08:35-08:44, 08:58-09:04, 15:23-15:3919:04-19:11. I believe jump cuts could replace all these moments of poor camerawork without compromising the story of the event. Jump cuts may contribute to a Brechtian verfremdungseffekt, which may enforce the cultural critique implied in the film of European exotic consumption.

In addition, I suggest that that the filmmaker revise the subtitling. It is too comprehensive for audiences to follow, particularly at the beginning. A more efficient use of language and, perhaps, eliminating individual's names with the exception of Eliamani and the grandmother who are central characters. This would help because the audience cannot identify people at the homestead by their names.
The filmmaker should also replace the word "ladies" with "women" in the initial information title. It is common to use the word "lady" in Tanzanian-English, but the word also represents colonial legacy and is an archaic form of expression.