

# Where 'booked' girls find new suitors in education

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*Joe Ombuor received the second place English language Akintola Fatoyinbo Africa **Education** Journalism Award for the following article. Ombuor is the first Kenyan journalist to win the award.*

Cry, Maasai girl, cry! For before you left the warmth and safety of your mother's womb to fill your lungs with the first gasp of the life-sustaining air, a man, probably older than your father, had already proclaimed you his wife!

What if the child born was a boy, or even a freak? No regrets, for whatever happens, the "booking" of young brides puts men on a privileged pedestal in the family. He can still make another go for a wife.

Fifteen-year-old Narinoi Puruo is lucky to be in school at a time when she would have been a wife in a loveless marriage. She struggles to control tears forming in her eyes as she narrates her story – the destiny for many Maasai **girls**:

"When my mother was about six months pregnant with me, a man my father had promised to give a wife to perpetuate their friendship came over and smeared fresh cow dung on her belly. From then, the contract was sealed. I was to be born his wife.

"My father and the man were overjoyed when I was born a girl. God and the ancestors had granted their prayer. My mother had to play ball. Mothers in our community have no voice.

"Occasionally, the man came, gawped on his 'baby wife' as she was breast-fed. The man and my father quaffed calabashes of beer together, hoping that I'd grow up faster.

"I am told that on the day I was born, the man brought a fat he-goat that was slaughtered."

At this point Narinoi breaks down and sobs. My colleague with whom we had gone out for this assignment, Rebecca Nandwa, sobs too. But wait! The worst for Narinoi was yet to come:

"I was about seven. My breasts had not formed when news started circulating in the neighbourhood that a school was to be established in Mosiro location for **girls** to learn free. It was said all school-age **girls** would be targeted. My father panicked and fast tracked my circumcision to prepare me for marriage before it was too late. I was eight when the circumciser's cruel knife ate into my flesh."

Narinoi blinks fast as the painful memory crosses her mind. "I was held tight from the back and my screams were to no avail. I passed out."

That day, beer flowed at Narinoi's home like never before. Song and dance reigned. Her prospective husband was head over heels with excitement. Shortly before Narinoi was fully healed, her prospective husband and his people brought three head of cattle, a goat, a sheep, a blanket and beer to her father who, after a ceremony during which the suitor smeared ghee on her face, advised her never to hate her husband.

Was she finally married off?

Narinoi, brightening up and forcing a smile: "No! Like an inexplicable act of God, the chief came later that night accompanied by the headmistress of the **new** school and took me away with them. They had asked me if I would like to go to school and I had said, yes.

Narinoi is today a Standard Seven pupil at Naning'oi Primary **Girls'** Boarding Primary School located in the plains of Kajiado district. Her dream? Study to the university level and become a lawyer one day to champion the rights of Maasai **girls**.

The culture the Maasai call *Esaiyata* – the booking of **girls** for marriage even before they are born – has been practiced by the nomadic community since time immemorial and is not about to go away soon.

Chief Simeon Keshoko of Mosiro location says the practice, like any other in the community, had its strengths besides aspects that collide with accepted norms of development today. "We decided to pick on those strengths to help our suffering **girls**," he explains.

He says *Esaiyata* bespoke forthrightness and honesty, virtues that the Maasai hold dear. A Maasai elder does not go back on his word – call it memorandum of understanding if you like. If he promised to give out his daughter to a suitor, then that was it. There was no turning back.

"So Narinoi's father cannot withdraw his consent to marry her off to the suitor who **booked** her before birth, more so after "eating" from him."

Using his clout, Chief Keshoko has taken upon himself the responsibility of galvanizing the community to donate toward a dowry refund, at times amounting to several head of cattle, goats and sheep. The Christian Children's Fund, sponsors of the school project, chips in where necessary.

Through the **new** arrangement of "school" *esaiyata*, elders, whose consent matters so much for any undertaking to succeed in Maasailand, felt recognized and appreciated. They readily consented to the booking "for **education**" in return for requisite negotiations and agreement, a token dowry.

Chief Keshoko, his face dripping with satisfaction, says: "We know *esaiyata* is a deeply respected cultural practice and all that we did was to turn it around to favour our purpose. We have learned that accommodation and modification of a people's

lifestyle pay more than repudiation, however abhorrent it is deemed."

"To suit our purpose, we do not book unborn children as our target is strictly **girls**. Our 'brides' can be as young as just a few days old.

"A suitor has to be the same age group with the father and ours usually are agents identified for the purpose. The suitor is then accompanied by the headmistress of Naning'oi **Girls'** Boarding Primary School and the project's social worker as witnesses on this project. Like traditional **suitors**, we spoil the father, albeit minus alcohol. From then on, the girl is ours."

Before they reach the age of going to school, the "**booked**" **girls** spend their time with their mothers if need be, in hubs known as *oloipi*. Culturally, these were shades of trees where nursing mothers spent their time performing simple chores such as mending broken calabashes or straightening sleeping hides. The Naning'oi school project has put up simple structures with roofs to serve as *oloipi*.

The gains are phenomenal. Within seven years since Naning'oi **Girls'** Boarding Primary School was started in 1999, primary school girl population in Mosiro location has risen from four to 350, all of them sponsored boarders. The location has slightly over 100 boys at Oldorko Primary School.

The first girl in Mosiro location to sit for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary **Education** examination is 20-year-old Joyce Linkori, now a teacher at Naning'oi. She attended Ole Tipis **Girls'** Secondary School in Narok.

Linkori's record is set to tumble in 2007 when, in the words of Naning'oi's headmistress Mrs. Teresia Tikoishi Tuukuo, "my current Standard Seven **girls** will stampede into secondary schools countrywide. Expect a barrage in the successive years."

Currently, more than 500 **girls** have been **booked** and cooling their heels in *iloipi* across the perched jungles of Mosiro location, waiting to join the school.