

# TIME, SPACE, AND THE UNKNOWN

Maasai configurations of  
power and providence

*Paul Spencer*

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## TIME, SPACE, AND THE UNKNOWN

Uncertainty is an aspect of existence among the Maasai in East Africa. They take ritual precautions against mystical misfortune, especially at their ceremonial gatherings, which exude displays of confidence, and generate a sense of time, space, community, and being. Yet their performances are undermined by a concern for clandestine psychopaths who are thought to create havoc through sorcery. Normally elders seek moral explanations for erratic encounters with misfortune, viewing God as the Supreme and unknowable figure of Providence. However, sorcery lies beyond their collective wisdom, and they look for guidance from their Prophet, as a more powerful sorcerer to whom they are bound for protection. This work examines the variation of this pattern, associated with different profiles of social life and tension across the Maasai federation.

**Paul Spencer** is Emeritus Professor of African Anthropology at SOAS and Honorary Director of the International African Institute. He has published extensively on age systems and pastoralism in East Africa; and the present work follows from his earlier books on *The Samburu* (1965) and *The Maasai of Matapato* (1988) both now reissued by Routledge.

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TO BENET AND RUTH



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## PREFACE

This book is based on research that was conducted at the same time as my work among the Matapato Maasai in 1976–7, extending to other Maasai *tribal sections*. It was originally conceived as Part II of a single volume on the Maasai, exploring the degree of variation beyond the Matapato model that had been developed as Part I. Earlier drafts of the present work (Chapters 3, 5–8, and 11) were prepared with this in mind. But it became increasingly clear that the whole conception was overloaded and needed to be broken down into separate, more manageable publications. My research interests and teaching responsibilities were expanding, and I decided to publish the first part as *The Maasai of Matapato*, which was already clearly a volume in its own right (1988). The second part was more comparative and could usefully wait until forthcoming work on the Maasai by other authors had been published. Meanwhile, my attention was drawn to the urgency of broader aspects of pastoralism in East Africa and the transition to the modern economy; and it was these aspects that were published next. This was in part to clarify my understanding of change among the Maasai-speaking peoples, but I also needed to collate the strands that underpinned my teaching before my retirement in 1997, while my grasp of the growing mass of published material by other authors was still fresh. The present volume could then have my undivided attention. Elsewhere, I have referred to earlier drafts of this work as ‘Models of the Maasai’, before it acquired its present shape with a more comprehensive title. Extracts from ‘Models’ have been borrowed for incorporation into various articles over the years, responding to the opportunity or the occasion, but always with this volume in mind (Chapter 2: Spencer 1985b, 1993; Chapter 5: 1991, 1992; Chapter 11: 1989). Chapter 10 has been adapted from sections III, IV, and parts of V of an earlier article (1976) and I wish to thank the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland for permission to reproduce this amended piece here. In its original form, this volume contained an extended appendix, collated in 1981 and entitled ‘A Survey of Variation among the Maasai, 1977’. This was derived from material collected in ten communities across the Maasai area. While this survey was a necessary step towards the present volume, the concentration on detail made it essentially archival material for the specialist on Maasai practices. I would invite any readers who are interested in a copy of this survey to contact me, whether it is for

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their personal collection or to delve into the wider pattern for themselves and perhaps suggest alternative ways of analyzing it, especially if they have further material of their own on the Maasai.

I must again express my gratitude to all those individuals and bodies who have made this extended enquiry possible. They are listed in the prefaces to earlier volumes. To these I would add colleagues and students in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at SOAS, where I have valued the critical climate of support as I have worked over these problems. I would also express my debt to other authors whose findings among the Maasai are cited in these pages. Their writings have contributed to my understanding, probably more than I realize. At Cambridge, Dr Jack Trevor first set me along the road leading to the Maasai with the rare gift of a first edition copy of M. Merker's *Die Masai* (1904). It is fitting therefore that this classic study inspired a whole chapter towards the end of this volume – just three Maasai age-sets later.

In addition to the Maasai of Matapato, whom I have previously thanked, I would like to express my gratitude to those whom I met among the Purko, Loitokitok, Loonkidongi, Loita, Kisonko, Siria and Uasinkishu, for their hospitality and unremitting enthusiasm concerning their social system and worldview. While I toyed with the idea of extending my work to the Maasai of Tanzania, it became increasingly apparent that there was altogether enough variation on the Kenya side of the border, with the Loitokitok representing a northern branch of the Kisonko of Tanzania. The Kenya Maasai provided me with as much data as I could handle. My lasting memory is of writing up my notes between bouts of conversation with Maasai on the topics discussed here. Meanwhile, my companions would elaborate on these among themselves, debating the point, recalling further aspects, and leaving me struggling to catch up when I was ready to rejoin their gossip, reassured that these were live issues of concern. As exhaustion set in, I sometimes wished they would lose interest, setting a limit to the amount that they had to offer. But it was not to be, and I was constantly guided into new channels, leading to further questions on the next occasion we met. It was the differences throughout the Maasai region that arose out of this discourse and seemed to hold the key to so many lines of enquiry. This led me to pay further visits to the Purko and Loitokitok, and to seek out a second Loonkidongi community, because these emerged as high points in this search. In short, this publication has to thank the Maasai for their willing collaboration in the one way in which they excel: open and generous conversation.

I wish again to thank the Samburu from whom I first acquired a sufficient fluency in the Maasai language and culture to pursue these studies. Indeed, I sometimes feel that I had more training in research methodology in their hands than anywhere else. The present work begins appropriately with a model of the Samburu age system as they saw it, and this is further elaborated in Part II. The Samburu also have a significant role in Chapter 4, which draws on my first (unpublished) conference paper concerning aspects of their religion (1959a). I revisited the Samburu in 1973 and 1976, and this suggested no substantial change in their

## PREFACE

practices or beliefs since 1960. For present purposes, my references to the Samburu and the Maasai proper may therefore be regarded as essentially contemporaneous.

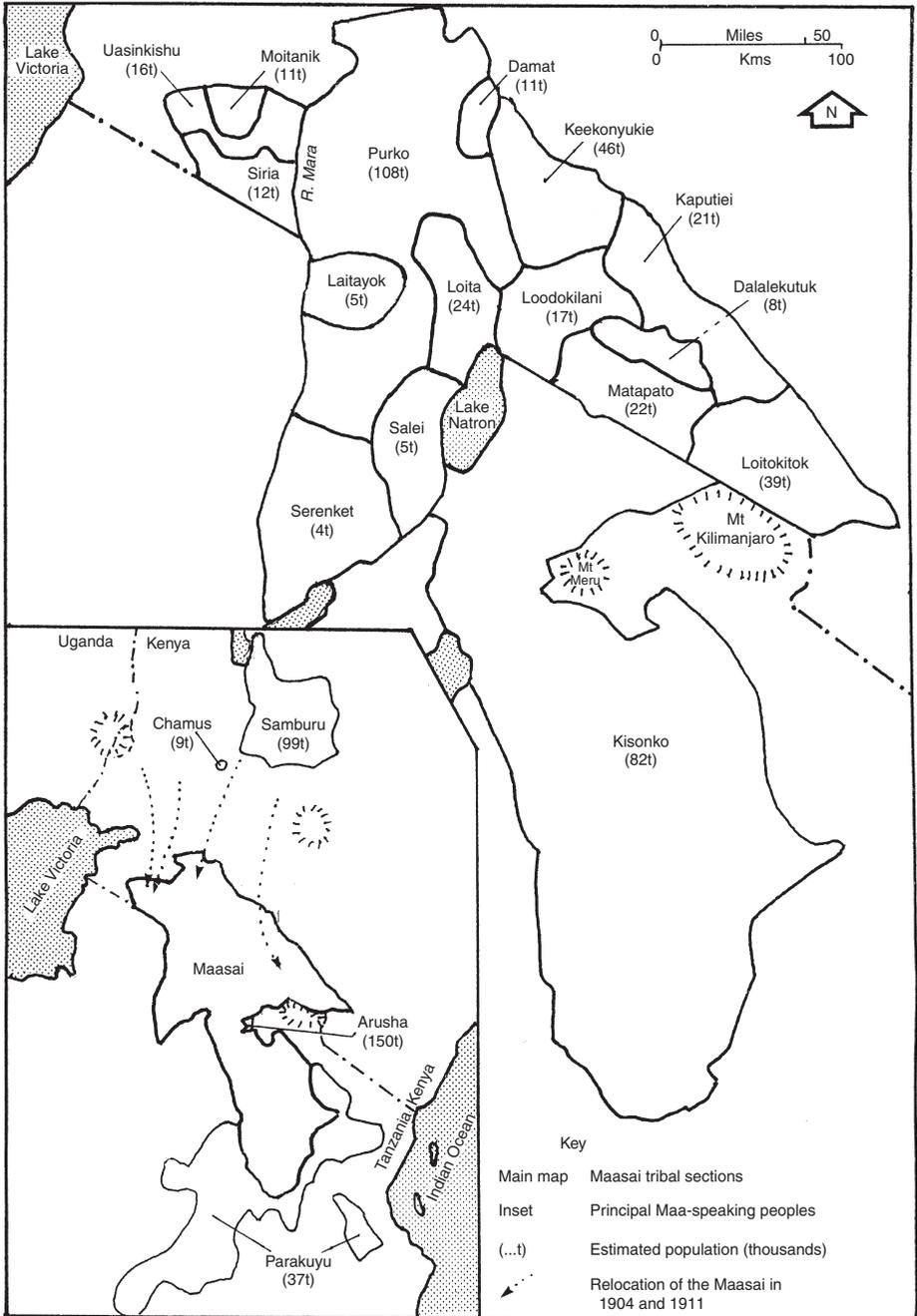
This work, then, arose out of my earlier volumes on *The Samburu*, and then on *The Maasai of Matapato*. The re-issue of these two books as paperbacks by Routledge to coincide with the publication of the present volume provides two detailed case studies that complement the broader view that I attempt here. This joint production of all three works was quite beyond my more limited aim when I approached Routledge with the present volume in mind, and I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Julene Knox, as Commissioning Editor, for proposing that they should be linked in this way to form a trilogy.

Finally, I would again like to express my warm gratitude to Rosalind and our sons, Aidan and Benet, who tolerated my restless search for data and yet more data, charming our hosts as they entered into the spirit of the exercise. As we uprooted ourselves from our Matapato base and travelled to other tribal sections, constantly pursuing what must have seemed an endless trawl for odd ends, they were my constant companions, and I still treasure this memory.

Paul Spencer  
SOAS

## NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

In this work, I have followed the style previously outlined in *The Maasai of Matapato* (p. xii). The spelling *ch* should be pronounced as in *change*; *nk* represents a sound between NK as in *thinker* and NG as in *finger*; *ng* is used for the velar nasal sound as in *thing*, and not as in *finger*. Thus the term *Loonkidongi* pronounces the K implosively and does not pronounce the G at all. In other respects, I have tried to follow Tucker and Mpaayei (1955) to indicate Maasai usage, ignoring dialectical variation between different parts of the Maasai area. Frans Mol's extensive dictionaries (1978, 1996) have been especially useful for re-assessing Maasai terms in my fieldnotes.



Map 1.1 The Maasai and Maa-speaking region.

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Interest in the Maasai as nomadic pastoralists has generated an extensive literature since the mid-nineteenth century, when they dominated the hinterland in the emerging map of East Africa. This cumulative search for understanding a particularly resilient society poses a number of questions that the present volume seeks to address. The study is based on material that was collected in remoter parts, before commercial tourism and media attention raised the additional question concerning the authenticity of Maasai ritual performances in a global setting, where they are patently out of place.

There are two principal areas of concern. The first relates to the sheer variety of different accounts, reflecting changing traditions over a period of transition, and also a considerable diversity among the Maasai themselves. The need is not so much to establish some pristine and authentic version, as to discern patterns that underlie the variety in space and time. The second area of concern is the general absence of Maasai views and perceptions in this literature to match the wealth of description of their ceremonial activities. Generally, the religious beliefs of nomadic pastoralists below the Horn of Africa have aroused little interest among social anthropologists, and the Maasai are no exception. This reflects the way they present themselves in visual terms. They discuss their ritual practices avidly and in detail, but they are diffident about their myths and they do not respond easily to questions searching for explanation. Nevertheless, when pressed, they are adamant regarding the relevance of these practices for their survival as a people.

The point to stress here is not the tenacity of particular traditions or their consistency across the Maasai area. The details of ritual performance are matters for debate, and also reinterpretation as times change. The crux of the argument does not concern the details as such, but rather the human relations that are highlighted by the debates and the ritual event. These are grounded in social institutions and bear on the dynamics of community life and the involvement of different roles and points of view. Their ritual behaviour gives substance to the premise of their existence as Maasai; and any account of their ceremonies that overlooks the accompanying perceptions and beliefs misses a vital component and reduces the essence of tradition. There is a need to portray a Maasai world view and cosmology in terms that relate to their daily lives and community experience.

There have been two direct influences on my research in this area. The first was my earlier study of the Maa-speaking Samburu (1957–62). The Samburu warrior organization still persisted despite the general absence of intertribal warfare at that time. This led me to examine links between their age system – a form of stratification by age – and other aspects of their society. Polygyny was extensive among older men, and this led to a shortage of marriageable women and a prolonged bachelorhood up to the age of about thirty years for ‘warriors’ (*moran*, s. *morani*). In these times of peace, the age system could be viewed as a gerontocracy that placed *moran* in an extended state of social suspension; and in response to the tensions of this regime they displayed delinquent tendencies. By the time ageing youths were eventually admitted to the responsibilities of elderhood and marriage, they had acquired a stake in perpetuating the system, when they too would aspire to further wives (Spencer 1965, *Samburu*).

The second influence on my work was Philip Gulliver’s analysis of the Arusha (1963). The Arusha were settled agriculturalists with a distinctive pattern of land ownership vested in patrilineages that was not shared by the nomadic Maasai. However, they followed the Maasai age system, and Gulliver provided the first coherent account of this cyclical system in which men over a span of some fifteen years are grouped together to form an *age-set*, and are promoted together through a series of stages – *age grades* – rather as a class of children progress in a school. Whereas my understanding of the Samburu had focused on tensions between elders and *moran* as the two principal *age grades*, Gulliver drew attention to the dynamics of relations between successive *age-sets* of elders, leaving the *moran* politically on the sidelines. This provided a radically different type of explanation that did not appear relevant for the Samburu. Did our contrasting viewpoints perhaps reflect different phases of the cyclical age system? Or had Gulliver delved further into a model of the age system as perceived by elders, whereas my own analysis as a younger colleague had identified more closely with the *moran*? Or were the Arusha and Samburu simply quite different?

Both the Arusha and the Samburu were on the fringe of the Maa-speaking area, and questions raised by our alternative findings prompted me to turn my attention to the Maasai proper. At a time when others were looking beyond the Maasai to problems of development and adaptation to a new order, I set out to fill gaps in the ethnographic map of their institutions and tradition. The prospect of change in the area was of less concern to me than the need to explore contradictory aspects of Maasai society before these were obscured as they merged into a changing world. A variety of evidence suggested that much of Maasai tradition would persist. They still had warrior villages in Kenya despite attempts by successive administrations to abolish these; and the time-span of their age-sets had remained doggedly constant since pre-colonial times, despite repeated predictions of their demise. Again, there was widespread apathy towards education, which undermined attempts to enrol growing numbers of children in schools.<sup>2</sup> But increasingly, influence was slipping to Maasai who had some education and were developing networks in the wider region, pastureland was being displaced by agriculture, and herds were becoming

confined to grazing schemes. These were signs of change that were creeping inwards from the borders and outwards from the growing townships. Meanwhile, dispersed over an area equivalent to Scotland and Wales combined, most Maasai lived in remoter parts where traditional pastoralism persisted and persists, adapting as necessary to new demands. Because of the resilience of this tradition, the ethnographic present is used in the earlier chapters of this volume. These refer primarily to the 1970s, but draw on material collected over a longer period. It is this sense of persistence that I wish to convey here, avoiding overuse of the past tense, which refers to topics that clearly belong to the past or concern a particular period in time (Chapters 7–10).

The terms *Maa* and *Maasai* have a variable usage throughout the region. Here, I use *Maa* to include peoples, such as the Samburu and Chamus in the north and the Parakuyu in the south, who cannot claim to be pastoral Maasai proper, although they belong to the Maa- (or Maasai-) speaking cluster with traditions of common origin. Besides language, these fringe Maa have similar social institutions to the Maasai proper, but their age systems are quite independent of one another and this corresponds to being separate political and ritual entities. They contrast with the core of this cluster, which consists of sixteen (territorial) tribal sections. These are indisputably Maasai in the sense of a ritually united federation that subscribe to the same age system.<sup>3</sup> Historically, some changes of alignment between these tribal sections have taken place with circumstance, but the general notion of a Maasai federation persists. So too does the sense of continuity in a tradition that still holds the clue to the way in which Maasai respond to changing circumstance.

The Maasai recognize common bonds of clanship throughout the federation, but the configuration of clans and sub-clans varies quite strikingly. The Laitayok clan, for instance, are numerous in the south but are absent in the north; the Uasinkishu Maasai have their own quite separate set of clans; and so on. The nub of the Maasai sense of unity is not their clans, but their shared age system. Within this system, peers of the same age-set grow old together and owe one another clear obligations, extending beyond the tribal section to all Maasai proper, binding them uniquely as a people. This vital link is lacking in their relations with outlying Maa-speakers, such as the Samburu or Parakuyu. Table 1.1 summarizes differences between fringe Maa-speakers and the Maasai proper, indicating some of the variables that are discussed later. Three tribal sections that live to the west of the River Mara fit uneasily into this scheme: they are the Uasinkishu, Moitanik, and Siria. These ‘Trans-Mara’ Maasai are fully integrated into the Maasai age system, but they also have their own independent Prophets and separate histories (Waller 1984).

The progression of this volume broadly follows my own research interests from 1976, when I undertook my principal fieldwork among the Matapato, who were more or less at the geographical centre of the Maasai federation and probably as typical as any other tribal section (Spencer 1988, *Matapato*). Aspects of the earlier studies of the Samburu and Arusha seemed relevant to Matapato, but the Maasai age system was altogether more elaborate, and a different explanation seemed necessary to account for its persistence. The patriarchal family emerged as a key