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# **The Wisdom of the Maasai**

*Oral Literature as  
Entertainment  
Education*

Benson P. Fraser

Steven L. Kiruswa

William J. Brown



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*To Lewis Frank Wilson,  
mentor, professor, and minister*

*To Kenneth John Fraser,  
brother, educator, and confidant*

*To Monica Simaloi Kiruswa,  
mother, adviser, and storyteller*





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# Acknowledgments

Years ago, my uncle, Dr. Lewis Wilson, sparked my interest in the people of Africa with stories of places and events about his time as a missionary building a school in South Africa. Years later, as he finished his doctoral degree at the University of California at Berkeley, I had the opportunity to work with him and his family at a small church in Oakland California. I then followed him to southern California where he taught at a small Christian college that I attended as a student. Always in the background of our talks together were the people and land that made up the continent of Africa. Needless to say, his stories and his work in Africa captured my imagination.

However, it was not until Steven Kiruswa (one of the authors of this book), a tall young student, showed up in one of my classes that I seriously considered visiting Africa and more specifically, Tanzania. Many of my foreign students have asked me to visit their home countries, but Steven and I established a strong relationship and when he told me that his mother (Monica Kiruswa) was the one who requested my visit, I was interested. However, what finally convinced me to journey to Africa for the first time was my brother.

In the late 1990's on a visit from the west coast to the east coast where I was teaching, my brother Ken, and his wife Marty, joined my family and Steven for a barbecue at my house. By this time Steven was a family friend and my brother had heard much about him. During that evening meal, Steven asked Ken if he wanted to travel with us to Tanzania. I was still not sure, but after Steven left, Ken strongly advised that we should visit the Maasai.

With Steven's invitation and the chance to have an adventure with my brother I decided to visit Tanzania. Steven had also asked the Dean of

our College and my colleague and friend, Bill Brown, to come to Tanzania to visit his family and community. So, in 1999 my brother, Bill and I traveled to Tanzania and visited Steven and his mother. Few experiences have been more important and life changing as the two weeks we spent in Kenya and Tanzania. We all fell in love with the land and the people.

The minute we got to Longido, Tanzania to “chew the news” with the Maasai elders, I was captivated by the people and the culture. Our overnight visit to Steven’s boma (village) where they had to walk three miles to get any water stirred my interest. That evening, as we finished dinner, the children from the village came and sang outside our window in the twilight—it was magic.

The next year Bill and I went back and worked on producing a film on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention with the Kenyan military, which was sponsored by the U.S. government. The following year we did the same thing with the Tanzanian military. During these trips we began the first of many research projects in East Africa. Eventually, Steven began to collect Maasai stories for his master’s thesis. After he successfully defended his thesis, we continued collecting stories at the encouragement of the Maasai elders who are concerned with preserving these cultural artifices. So, even after Steven completed his doctoral degree and moved back to Tanzania, we continued collecting Maasai stories.

Today, we have many friends in the Longido district of Tanzania as we continue to travel there and work on development projects through a non-profit organization we created called Friends For African Development (FAD). We work helping the community develop water sources (either through drilling wells or capturing the water in the mountains and bringing it down to the 50 some villages in the Longido district). FAD also works in the area of education by building schools, supporting teachers, providing student grants, etc. Of course, we continue to collect stories as the community elders asked us to do.

During our many visits to Tanzania, there have been several people who have encouraged us and provided support for our efforts in collecting these stories and writing this book. Foremost, among these people is Justin Caplan, who has selflessly given much of his time planning and accompanying us to Tanzania and in so doing inspired us to complete this endeavor. Also, Bob Thornton, Lee Woodard, and Jim Ward have continued to be a strong source of encouragement as we worked on this book.

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We are so grateful to all the Maasai storytellers that have contributed to this project. Their stories helped us understand the culture and life of the Maasai people. Finally, we would like to thank the people at Carolina Academic Press for their help and encouragement in publishing this project.

Benson P. Fraser  
June 6, 2024





# Series Editor's Foreword

The *Carolina Academic Press African World Series*, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

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