Paul Kunoni

GOING SOUTH

Tracing the Maasai from the Middle East to East Africa

Middle Eastern Studies

Collection Editor
KAZIWA SALIH

LIVED PLACES
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Dedicated to young people seeking knowledge and understanding, to families in search of wisdom and direction, to displaced persons and migrants navigating lives across borders, and to future generations whose lives will unfold differently from the realities described in these pages.

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Abstract

Going South is a transnational memoir-ethnography that traces one family's journey across the Maasai pastoral worlds, colonial Kenya, postcolonial displacement, and migrant life in the United States and Canada. Blending lived experience with anthropological insight, the book examines how land, identity, kinship, education, and migration shape social belonging across generations. Through stories of childhood, schooling, labor, exile, and resettlement, *Going South* illuminates how human lives are formed within shifting political, cultural, and geographic landscapes. The narrative emphasizes the everyday realities of displacement, resilience, and adaptation, making the book well suited for courses on migration, anthropology, African studies, and global social change.

Key words

Migration
Displacement
African Diaspora
Lived Places
Maasai Studies
Colonial and Postcolonial Africa
Transnational Identity
Refuge and Resettlement
Family and Kinship
Education and Mobility

Book-level learning objective

By the end of this book, students will be able to:

1. Analyze migration and displacement as lived, embodied experiences rather than abstract policy issues.
2. Examine how colonial and postcolonial histories shape contemporary African and diasporic identities.
3. Interpret the role of place, kinship, and education in shaping social mobility and belonging.
4. Apply ethnographic and memoir-based narratives to the study of global inequality and resilience.
5. Connect personal life histories to broader political, economic, and cultural structures.

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Disclaimer

Some names, characters, locations, and identifying details in this book have been deliberately altered, combined, or withheld to protect the privacy and safety of individuals. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or to specific places beyond their public historical record is coincidental. The narrative remains faithful to the lived experiences and historical truths it seeks to converge.

Content warning

This story includes violence, theft, and risky adventures as well as pregnancy and family conflicts. It also covers hardship, betrayal, and survival challenges, along with references to colonial authority and policing.

Prologue

Geopolitical terms, trade, and historical continuities

This prologue traces the evolution of geopolitical language and the long history of intercultural exchange linking East Africa to the broader Indian Ocean world. It examines how Western powers redefined regional geography through terms such as *Near East* and *Middle East*, while East Africa, long before colonial contact, was already integrated into transoceanic trade networks connecting Arabia, Persia, and the African coast. Through centuries of migration, commerce, and intermarriage, these encounters produced the Swahili civilization, a vibrant synthesis of Bantu, Arab, and Persian cultures whose language and traditions continue to shape East African identity today. By situating East Africa within these ancient global flows, the prologue challenges Eurocentric maps of history and reasserts Africa's central role in shaping world civilizations.

Prior to the Second World War, Western powers generally referred to the area now commonly known as the Middle East as the *Near East* (Fromkin, 2009). The designation *Middle East* gained wider usage shortly before the war, influenced by a British military command based in Egypt. By the mid-twentieth century, the term had expanded to describe a vast area stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf (Fromkin, 2009). Some

writers even extended it to include parts of South Asia and Northeast Africa, though this broader interpretation remains debated among scholars. This naming, however, reflects a colonial worldview rather than the much older networks that connected Africa, Arabia, and Asia.

Long before the adoption of such geopolitical classifications, East Africa had already forged deep and enduring connections with Arabia and Persia. Centuries before colonial naming conventions, trade routes along the Indian Ocean linked the African coast to the Persian Gulf and southern Arabia, establishing one of the world's earliest and most sustained intercultural networks (Horton & Middleton, 2000). By the twelfth century, Mogadishu had emerged as a central trading hub, attracting merchants, sailors, and settlers from across the Middle East and Asia.

Early settlers such as the Shirazi from Persia established communities in Malindi, Mombasa, Pemba, Mafia, the Comoros Islands, and Kilwa (Pouwels, 2002). Over time, they intermarried with local African populations, giving rise to hybrid coastal societies such as the Miji-Kenda, Wanguja, and Wapemba. While much of their original Persian culture blended with Bantu traditions, discernible traces of their heritage remain visible in language, architecture, and ritual life (Pouwels,1987).

Centuries of interaction between Arab, Persian, and coastal African societies eventually produced the *Swahili civilization*, a distinctive cultural and linguistic identity that stretched along the East African coast from southern Somalia to Mozambique. This synthesis created not only a shared mercantile culture but also a common language that embodied centuries of exchange and adaptation.

Emerging between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, Swahili developed as a coastal lingua franca linking traders, sailors, and settlers from Africa, Arabia, and the Indian subcontinent (Alpers, 1975). The term *Swahili* derives from the Arabic *sahil*, meaning "coast," reflecting its geographic and social foundation. Its vocabulary reveals its hybrid nature: approximately 40 percent of its lexicon is Arabic, 20 percent Bantu, and the remainder incorporates Portuguese, French, German, and English influences (Alpers, 1975).

More than a language, Swahili became the cultural thread connecting diverse communities along the Indian Ocean rim. It symbolized not linguistic domination but creative fusion, an enduring example of how African and Asian societies coproduced meaning through mutual exchange.

The Sultanate of Muscat and Oman under Said bin Sultan expanded this network further, making Zanzibar its capital in 1832 (Pouwels, 2002). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Arab caravans transporting slaves and ivory carried Swahili inland as far as northern Uganda and western Congo. Later, European colonial administrations reinforced its prominence: German officials standardized the language in Tanganyika, while the British promoted it as a unifying medium across East Africa (Alpers, 1975).

Today, Swahili is spoken by roughly 200 million people across 15 African countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Mozambique, and it is now being introduced in South African schools (Horton & Middleton, 2000). Beyond language, Middle Eastern influences continue to permeate religion, architecture,

and social customs along the African coast. Centuries of trade, migration, and intermarriage have woven Africa and Asia together through both material and spiritual threads. Many ethnic groups, including the Maasai, preserve oral traditions suggesting Middle Eastern ancestry, reminders that Africa's history cannot be confined within Western geographic boundaries (Horton & Middleton, 2000).

The story of East Africa's coastal evolution underscores that history is neither isolated nor linear. Long before colonial frontiers and modern geopolitical designations, Africans, Arabs, and Persians cocreated enduring systems of exchange that shaped religion, language, and commerce across the Indian Ocean. The Swahili civilization stands as living testimony to this fusion, a culture that absorbed external influences without surrendering its African essence. Its resilience and adaptability illustrate how communities forged unity from diversity, transforming geography into a meeting ground of civilizations.

In contemporary times, when the term *Middle East* still carries political and colonial weight, recalling East Africa's older connections to Arabia and Persia repositions Africa not as a periphery but as a participant in, and often a progenitor of, global history. The linguistic and cultural continuities between coastal and inland people, including the Maasai, reveal that Africa's heritage is not bounded by imposed borders but by centuries of shared human movement, memory, and meaning.

Introduction

This chapter of *Going South* examines how Maasai origin stories, both mythical and historical, reflect broader African experiences of migration, adaptation, and resilience. By weaving oral tradition with historical and ethnographic evidence, it argues that the Maasai, like many East African people, forged their cultural identity through movement, memory, and moral continuity. Far from being static pastoralists frozen in time, the Maasai emerged as historical actors whose identity was shaped through long journeys, ecological negotiation, spiritual interpretation, and political struggle. Their migration narratives therefore belong not only to local history but also to global debates on African origins, spirituality, and modern transformation.

Early European anthropologists advanced widely differing and often contradictory theories about the origins of the Maasai (Spear, 1993). Some argued that the Maasai migrated southward from the Nile Valley and southern Sudan (Beidelman, 1960), while others speculated without empirical foundation that they were a splinter group of the Roman Empire displaced through ancient warfare and maritime trade routes (Beidelman, 1960). Other scholars placed their arrival in East Africa as late as the fourteenth century, and a few even described them as one of the so-called "lost tribes of Israel," citing biblical parallels and ritual resonances within Maasai oral traditions (Fratkin, 2001). These early theories, shaped as much by colonial imagination as by evidence, often sought to explain African civilization by linking it

to Europe or the Near East rather than recognizing indigenous historical development.

Yet Maasai elders themselves preserved a far more nuanced theological and migratory memory, one that did not neatly fit colonial anthropology but carried a profound symbolic depth. Elders often invoked Enkai Pasinai, the "God of Mount Sinai," and Enkai oo Israeli, the "God of the Israelites," expressions that reveal deep symbolic and theological resonances with ancient Semitic traditions (Kipury, 1983; Fratkin, 2001). In moments of drought, famine, or communal distress, they offered the prayer: *Enkai incho iyiok mana* ("God, feed your children with manna"), a supplication that closely parallels Old Testament imagery of divine sustenance and covenantal compassion.

Some oral traditions extend these resonances further, noting that the Maasai appear in certain East African interpretations of 1 Chronicles 4:22, where pastoral lineages associated with the descendants of Shelah and Jokim are said to have migrated southward. While such readings are symbolic rather than genealogical, they illuminate how Maasai spirituality situated itself within a broader sacred geography of migration that bridges Africa and the ancient Near East. These connections do not claim biological descent so much as shared spiritual memory, an indication of how African societies interpreted their place within global sacred histories.

Contemporary ethnolinguistic and cultural studies further suggest that a substantial portion, sometimes estimated at up to 40 percent, of Maasai linguistic and cultural patterns display affinities with Cushitic and Semitic groups of the Horn of Africa,

pointing to long-standing zones of interaction, exchange, and intermarriage (Spear, 1993; Fratkin, 2001). Yet such external interpretations often overlook the deeper cultural meanings embedded in Maasai oral cosmology. For the Maasai, origin stories are not merely accounting of where people came from, but they also serve as moral frameworks that regulate identity, land use, cattle keeping, social order, and the human-divine relationship.

According to Maasai oral history, a devastating drought once drove the community westward from the East, away from a land of suffering and scarcity. They settled in a fertile country they called Misis, meaning "no hurry," a name that mirrors both abundance and reprieve from hardship. At the heart of this land stood a bustling city they called Kaji-iloito ("where to?") named after the question they asked travelers as they journeyed toward it. In time, they joined the Israelites in escaping centuries of enslavement in Misis, a departure they named *Aibayie rindikisho* ("I am done with slavery") (Spear, 1993).

When the Israelites reached Mount Sinai and prepared to continue their own covenantal journey, they asked the Maasai to part ways. The Maasai replied with a phrase that would come to define their destiny, *maape kop kop* ("let us go south"). This moment marks not only a geographical decision but a philosophical turning point: the choice of movement as survival and migration as moral renewal.

Long before colonial encounters, these oral traditions preserved both migratory memory and moral instruction, linking divine purpose to human movement. The southward journey itself became a spiritual metaphor for endurance, hope, and

rebirth. When the Maasai arrived in a land of rich pasture and clear water, they named it Kitum Isidan ("we are hopeful"). Later, they entered a deep valley where a wide, shining river flowed, which they called Naitil ("the shining one"). Along this valley they remained for generations, building herds, families, and sacred landscapes.

When they later attempted to ascend through the escarpment known as Endikir-e-Kerio, they encountered fierce resistance from the Ilumbwa warriors who controlled the pass. Barred from passage, the Maasai were forced to spread throughout the valley, consolidating their pastoral systems and warrior institutions. It was only after the Ilwausin Inkishu clan eventually defeated the Ilumbwa that the Maasai emerged from the Kerio Valley and began their historic expansion across much of East Africa (Beidelman, 1960). Their rise as one of the region's most formidable pastoral powers was therefore forged not only through cattle wealth but through struggle, displacement, and strategic adaptation.

Colonial education systems later distorted these origin traditions, teaching that the Maasai "descended from heaven on a huge hide with their cattle", a simplified tale that reinterpreted indigenous belief through a biblical and mythic lens. In authentic oral traditions, however, the Maasai do not trace their origin from the sky but from the sacred valley of Endikir-e-Kerio, where the first people and their herds are said to have ascended to the earth through the will of Enkai (Kipury, 1983). This riverine ascent signifies an emergence rooted in landscape rather than heaven, linking people, cattle, and divinity through a covenant of balance, stewardship, and ecological reciprocity.

By recasting this narrative as a heavenly descent, colonial schooling replaced an ecological theology grounded in place with an imported cosmology that positioned divinity above the land rather than within it. The original Maasai cosmology located sacred power in rivers, valleys, rain, cattle, and community continuity. Colonial reinterpretations detached this spirituality from the environment and reanchored it in abstract theological space. This shift had lasting consequences for how Maasai knowledge was taught, valued, and remembered.

In this sense, Maasai origin narratives are not simply stories of beginnings; they are living philosophical maps. They encode historical movement, political struggle, ecological ethics, and spiritual covenant into a continuous moral geography. Migration becomes memory; memory becomes law; and law becomes identity. *Going South* therefore situates the Maasai not as isolated pastoralists but as integral participants in Africa's long history of movement, encounter, and transformation, where survival has always depended on the courage to move, the discipline to remember, and the faith to endure.

Methodological statement

Going South is grounded in long-term oral historical practice rather than extractive interviewing. The narratives in this book were gathered over several decades through sustained relational engagement: family storytelling, community conversations, ritual settings, pastoral migrations, and diasporic encounters across Kenya, the United States, and Canada. Stories were told, revisited, corrected, and re-situated over time, reflecting the iterative nature of oral transmission rather than a single moment of data collection.

The voices represented include those of elders, family members, ritual specialists, peers, and community interlocutors, whose lives intersected with the events described. While the narrative is anchored in the author's lineage, it is not a private family memoir. Individual lives are presented as entry points into wider social worlds shaped by pastoralism, colonial disruption, labor migration, education, and diasporic survival. This book deliberately centers on perspectives often absent from written archives, particularly those of rural, pastoral, and non-elite narrators, while situating their accounts within broader historical and scholarly contexts.

This work does not treat myth, prophecy, genealogy, curse, and history as competing epistemologies. Instead, it approaches

them as distinct but overlapping registers through which Maasai communities interpret moral order, causality, responsibility, and belonging. Mythic and cosmological elements are presented as symbolic and moral frameworks rather than empirical biography or literal causation. Where historical events are referenced, they are triangulated through oral testimony, colonial records, and existing scholarship. Memory is understood as a socially embedded practice that reveals how the past is lived and transmitted rather than merely verified.

The author writes from a position of dual engagement: as a community member shaped by the histories narrated and as a trained researcher working reflexively across anthropology, history, and memoir. This positionality enables the text to move between lived experience and critical interpretation while remaining attentive to ethical representation, narrative responsibility, and the limits of retrospective knowledge. *Going South* thus offers a situated, interpretive account of history as it is remembered, narrated, and morally understood rather than as a claim to detached or totalizing historical authority.

Book structure

This chapter examines Maasai origin narratives as historical, spiritual, and moral maps shaped through migration, ecological adaptation, and resilience. By weaving oral tradition with ethnographic and historical scholarship, it situates the Maasai movement within broader African and global debates on identity, spirituality, and transformation.

Part I: Roots, knowledge, and the becoming of an Empire

Chapter 1: The lineage of smoke and iron

This chapter traces the emergence of a Maasai spiritual and political lineage shaped by conquest, mercy, and colonial disruption from the sacred authority of Kidongoe to the prophetic era of Mbatiany and the fracture of leadership under British rule. Through the story of Kunoni's sanctified birth, it shows how power, memory, and survival were reforged through ritual, restraint, and coexistence at the margins of empire.

Chapter 2: The prophecy of a mysterious calf

This chapter follows Kunoni's family through prophecy, exile, and colonial disruption, centering on the command "Do not harm the male calf" as a moral law-binding lineage, mercy, and survival. Through the adoption of Ntete, a child spared by interwoven Maasai, Ethiopian, and Judaic traditions, it shows how memory becomes inheritance and mercy becomes the enduring test of a people under empire.

Chapter 3: The prophetic lineage

This chapter traces the descent of prophecy from Ntete to Parpai, showing how drought, exile, interethnic marriage, and colonial labor reshaped Maasai inheritance and moral authority. Through Parpai's ingenuity, relationships, and quiet defiance under colonial rule, it reveals how prophecy survived not through power, but through resilience, adaptation, and hidden forms of dignity.

Chapter 4: The hippo's tale

This chapter explores how prophecy, jealousy, polygynous rivalry, and colonial law converged within Parpai's household, culminating in the tragic death of Thera and a colonial trial that exposed the clash between Maasai justice and imperial authority. Through women's labor, Naini's testimony, and Soloi's dual cultural naming, it reveals a fragile moral rebirth in which compassion and ancestral obligation endure despite violence and imperial disruption.

Chapter 5: The Inheritance Dilemma

This chapter examines a crisis of inheritance and kinship through Soloi's ordeal in his father's ancestral household, where cruelty, rivalry, and exclusion test the moral foundations of Maasai lineage. Through Soloi's endurance, restraint, and acts of mercy, it redefines inheritance as ethical responsibility rather than property, showing how *enkanyit* survives betrayal, colonial disruption, and familial fracture.

Chapter 6: The feast and the curse

This chapter follows Parpai's final moral descent as drought, hospitality, and unresolved spiritual burdens converge in a fatal