

## Meet Kakuta Hamisi

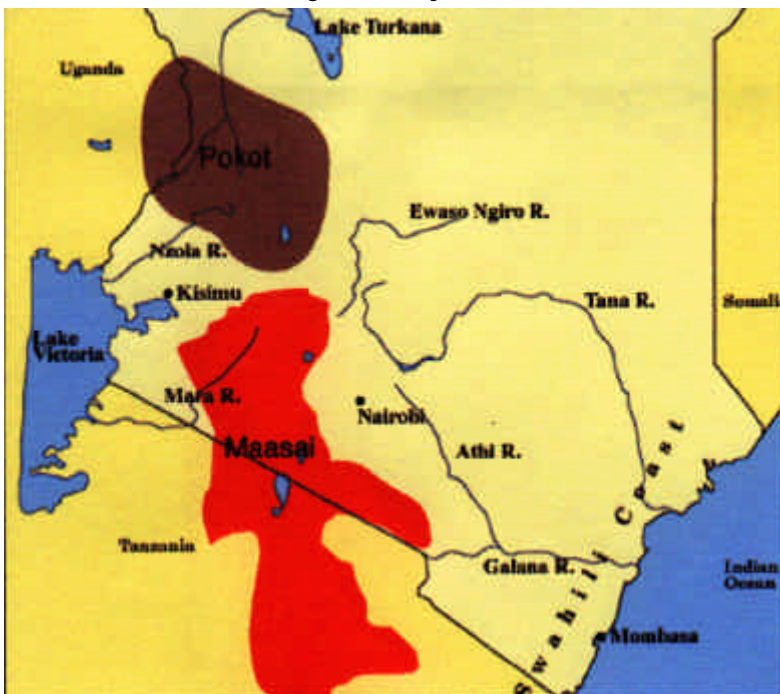


Kakuta Hamisi, a Maasai student in the Visual Anthropology program at Evergreen State College, was an intern at SAM in the summer of 1999. He was disappointed in the way Maasai art objects had been collected and labeled, and proposed that he assemble a collection, drawn from within his home community, that would more accurately reflect Maasai values and reality. Given that they exist without a cash economy and rely on a communal method of making decisions, this transaction required Kakuta to define an appropriate process. All the elders, the laibon (spiritual leader) and members of the Kaputei section decided that the funds from SAM should be used to build the first school to be run by Maasai teachers. In return for this funding, members were asked to bring examples of art that they thought would represent the best of their culture. Elders provided the finest authority staffs, warriors presented significant shields, and women assembled a bride's outfit, which consists of 20 layers of beadwork each with intrinsic messages attached. Kakuta was able to document each object collected by interviewing these donors and recording their responses on videotape. His efforts have resulted in an unprecedented field collection that he documented.

## About the Maasai in Kenya

The Maasai people of East Africa live in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania along the Great Rift Valley on semiarid and arid lands. They're comprised of sixteen sections. The Maasai homesteads are arranged in a circular fashion and usually shared by more than one family. There are distinct roles in creating the Maasai homesteads: Women are responsible for making the houses as well as supplying the water, collecting firewood, milking cattle and cooking for the family. Warriors are in charge of the society's security while boys are responsible for herding livestock. The elders are directors and advisors for the day-to-day activities.

The Maasai are a semi-nomadic people who live under a communal system. Livestock such as cattle, goats, and sheep are the primary source of income. The movement of livestock is based on seasonal rotation. This communal land management system allows the Maasai to utilize resources in a sustainable manner. The



livestock play an important social and economic role for the Maasai. Livestock are traded for other livestock, cash or livestock products such as milk. Individuals, families, clans, and sections establish close community ties using livestock. Much of the Maasai diet comes from the livestock. They rely on meat, milk, and blood from the cattle for protein and caloric needs. More recently, the Maasai have grown dependent on food produced in other areas such as maize meal, rice, potatoes, and cabbage. In areas where plot sizes are not large enough for livestock grazing, the Maasai have been forced to farm, which the Maasai traditionally frown upon. They believe that utilizing the land for crop farming is a crime against nature. Once you cultivate the land it is no longer suitable for grazing.

(adapted with permission by the author from the web site: [www.maasai-info.org](http://www.maasai-info.org))

## What Kakuta would like to share with you about his culture

1. The Maasai way of life is pastoral; the people depend on livestock for most of their food, using the milk, meat, and blood. The social organization of the Maasai is based on age sets, such as the warrior, bride and elder.
2. Beadwork and color symbolism are important to Maasai art. The style of bead and the type ornamentation indicate which age set a Maasai belongs to. What colors mean and how they are placed next to one another also relates to age sets.
3. The Maasai are one of many different groups in Kenya, but the diversity of groups is disappearing. Kenya is becoming a "melting pot" due to Western influences.

## Here are some works of art Kakuta would like to tell you about



### 1. Bull Necklace (Norkiteng)

"Generally speaking, our art is dominated by beadwork. All of the beadwork is done by women. Jewelry carries a great representation of our society. We believe the world is full of patterns. These are patterns of life, and we present them through ornaments. A lot of jewelry is in the circular form, because we believe the universe is in a circular form." (from the audio tour)

1. Bull Necklace  
(Norkiteng)  
*Nalepo ene Matinti*  
Kaputiei section, Merrueshi community, Maasai,  
Kenya  
Collected 1999  
Wire, glass beads, and plastic  
Diam. 34.3 cm (13 1/2 in.)  
General Acquisition Fund,  
2000.12.2



### 2. Bride's Headdress (Enkishili)

"For bridal ornaments, women choose pattern after pattern that declares which of the sixteen sections of Maasai territory is her home. Each section maintains its repertoire of patterns, and each generation is challenged to invent a distinctive new ornament. The triangle pattern representing an antennae is the latest design, reflecting the fact that many Maasai are beginning to use radios on a regular basis." (from the catalogue, p.275)

2. Bride's Headdress (Enkishili)  
Ngoto Moris  
Kaputiei section, Merrueshi Community, Maasai,  
Kenya  
Collected 1999  
Glass beads, wire, and plastic  
H. 14.8 cm. (5 7/8 in.)  
General Acquisition Fund,  
2000.12.13



### 3. Bridal Costume (Nasha ene Sipoi modeling bridal costume)

"A bride as she prepares to leave home is adorned in jewelry of an exacting order. Twenty different women contributed twenty different pieces. This is a showcase for the women's talents as beadworkers and their sense of collaboration. A bride's costume is a collection of beadwork, stories, and wishes for the future." (from the catalogue, p. 272) (you can view this costume the Third Floor Galleries)

3. *Nasha ene Sipoi modeling bridal costume now in the collection of the Seattle Art Museum, 1999.*  
Photo © Kakuta Ole Hamisi



#### 4. Shield (Elongo)

"You must have a shield, so when the lion jumps to you, you let the lion land onto the shield, instead of the lion landing on your head. And then you have to slide the lion over your head, so you have to be very strong. And you do that about a few times and you will confuse the lion....Both the shield and spear, those are things that I would like to own for the rest of my life." (from the audio tour)

4. Shield (Elongo), African,  
Buffalo hide, pigment, goat sinue, wood frame  
41 1/2 x 28 x 4 1/2 in. (105.4 x 71.1 x 11.4 cm)  
General Acquisition Fund, 2000.4



#### 5. Mancala Game

"Mancala is a game that is an elder's game, not a young people's game. This game is made from wood, you play using small rocks, pieces of aluminum, stones. And a small pouch is used to store these stones. Elders play this game on a daily basis to challenge one another. The person who play the best then the rest tend to be a very wise person that can see things quickly." (from the audio tour)

5. Gameboard (enkeshui), with leather bags (olbene loo-inkeek),  
counters (isoito le enkeshui), and counting sticks (inkeek e-  
nkeshui)  
Merruishi community, Maasai, Kenya  
Collected 1999  
Wood, rubber, leather, calfskin, rock, aluminum, and glass  
L. (gameboard) 61 cm (24 in.)  
General Acquisition Fund, 2000.2.1-5

### Activities you can do back in the classroom

For the Maasai:

#### *Understanding "Uniforms":*

Time: One class period/45 minutes

Supplies: Paper and (colored) pencils

A Maasai person wears distinctive clothes, like long or short garments, and such articles as bead jewelry or a shield depending on his or her gender and age as well as if he or she is involved in a particular ceremony. We might think of these clothes and articles as "uniforms" for specific moments in a Maasai person's life. A certain outfit or uniform, like that of a bride, might be created by a whole community of people and composed of specific materials and colors that tell others about the person and the ceremony in which she is participating.

Ask your students to think about all of the different kinds of uniforms they have worn so far during their lifetimes, i.e. a bright colored jersey and cleats for a soccer game, a suit and tie for a wedding ceremony, a special robe and hat for a school graduation, etc. Have students write about and draw several different uniforms, including clothing and other articles, and present them to the class. How are these kinds of uniforms different from those of the Maasai? Are these uniforms also related to gender, age, and particular ceremonies? Who creates them/puts them together - an individual, several people, or a community of people? Can students come up with a new type of uniform or one that they hope to wear in the future?

## Learning Bead Laws:

Time: One class period/45 minutes

Supplies: Paper, colored pencils or markers, and/or tempera and acrylic paints or watercolors

Read with the students the following information about use of colors in Maasai art before you begin the activity.

### Primary and secondary colors

The Maasai primary colors are white, red, green, blue, and orange. Other colors such as yellow and black are secondary colors and are used to mediate the primary colors. The secondary colors are often used on ornaments when primary colors are missing. If an individual is making a necklace but lacks one of the primary colors, e.g. blue, she may use black instead. Yellow that replaces orange to combine primary and secondary colors in the same ornament is considered poor work.

### Range of colors

Throughout Maasailand, the range of colors on ornaments is the same but the patterns vary from section to section. The color range is not based on individual preference but by section.

### Color rules

Colors that cannot be put next to one another:  
dark blue with black  
yellow next to white  
red next to orange  
have to put a divider of blue between these two colors

### Meanings of colors

green represents pastures  
red is danger or warriors  
white is milk from livestock  
blue means sky  
(Adapted from [www.maasai-info.org](http://www.maasai-info.org) and  
*Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*  
by Pam McClusky)

Have your students work in groups to create their own rules for the colors white, red, green, blue, orange, yellow and black. For instance, white might be a symbol for a young person, red for a female, green for a male, blue for a student, orange for a teacher, etc. Certain colors might not be used next to each other, i.e. a person might not be young and a teacher at the same time, so white and orange may not be placed next to each other. Ask each student group to create a pattern of colors based on the rules they have created for the colors mentioned above. Using this pattern, students can create drawings using colored pencils and markers or paintings if you have watercolors or tempera or acrylic paints. Each group's pattern can be a "portrait" of the members of the group or a grouping of individual "portraits". Students can use squares, circles, triangles, or other shapes to create their patterns. Students can reference the bride outfit for ideas about creating their patterns. Have students present their work to the class, discussing the rules they created and how they came up with particular patterns.

## To learn more

Check out Kakuta's web site at [www.maasai-info.org](http://www.maasai-info.org)