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Oreteti. Connecting humans to God

Article

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ORETETI. CONNECTING HUMANS TO GOD

Lorenzo D'Angelo, *University of Reading*

ABSTRACT
This film explores the difficulties faced by a Maasai agro-pastoral community in Tanzania, as a time of climate crisis stimulates cultural and economic changes. Through the voice of Philipo, a young Maasai man, it describes the importance of a rain-making ritual. At the centre of this ritual is a plant that is sacred to the Maasai, the Oreteti. This is not a common plant in the semi-arid regions of East Africa. Often, it is found near water sources – particularly valuable for agro-pastoral communities, especially during drought. For this reason, the Oreteti is associated with the possibility of overcoming difficulties in times of crisis, as well as with fertility and women. It is no coincidence that women play a fundamental role in the rain-making ritual; without their presence and their prayers, it would lose its meaning.
The film bears witnesses to a crucial change in Philipo's community, a change that also affects the meaning and indeed the existence of the rain-making ritual. Much of Maasai cultural life revolves around pastoral rites and symbols. Indeed, the Maasai consider and define themselves as "people-of-the-cattle", although, over several generations, they have increasingly added activities such as agriculture to their livestock keeping in response to shifting economic and political circumstances. In Philipo's village, the arrival of the Lutheran Church and successive famines and droughts have accelerated processes of change. As Philipo himself points out, all of this, in turn, has had palpable effects on economic decisions and cultural choices as well as on gender relation. Ultimately, this changes the meaning of the Oreteti ritual itself.
In conclusion, we are presented with a reflection by a young Maasai on how his community can overcome current difficulties, given that connections between humans, and between the human and the divine, have been exposed to new meaning.

Keywords
Maasai, Tanzania, climate change, rain-making ritual, pastoralism, church, women.

BIO
Lorenzo D'Angelo is a senior postdoctoral researcher at the University of Reading interested in natural resources and extractive industries, environmental and economic anthropology. Lorenzo is co-founder and co-convenor of the EASA Anthropology of Mining network and has conducted field research in Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Tanzania. In Tanzania, his ethnographic research focused on agro-pastoral systems and climate change among Maasai communities.
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Produced and directed by Lorenzo D'Angelo
Edited by Eugenio Giorgianni
Narrated by Philipo Kaai Laitayock
Camera operator: Baraka Danison
Filmed at Mkuru, Uwiro Village in Tanzania (January 2019)

Watch video with Italian subtitles here: https://youtu.be/B6zxlYHUl9o

Watch video with English subtitles here: https://youtu.be/rWr3_DpP5fE