

Camden Roy
Prof. Golomski
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Catalog Essay

“Entrepreneurship means ownership and self-determination, as opposed to simply being dependent on somebody else for your livelihood and your future,” Barack Obama stated in an address to the Global Entrepreneurship Summit held in Kenya in 2014, “The challenge is – as many of you know – it’s very often hard to take



those first steps.” The first steps that Obama spoke of underly the rich cultural history of these statues, one defined by a legacy of self-determination.

These statues, acquired from members of the Maasai cultural group in Kenya by Ben and Betty Werner, depict three Maasai people going about everyday tasks, such as carrying food and water. In this way, they represent the base struggles of life: How does one feed themselves and their family? Where do they get water? What do they clothe themselves with? There may have been a time where the answers to these questions were simple, but in a rapidly changing Kenya, the Maasai had to turn to entrepreneurial forms of self-leadership.

Approximately 900,000 Maasai live in Tanzania and Kenya. They are a partially nomadic people, travelling with their herds of cattle while also cultivating crops. In recent years, the Maasai’s way of life has been threatened by the sale and privatization of traditional Maasai land

by both the Kenyan and Tanzanian governments. In addition to land factors, Maasai's economic power has decreased relative to a growing middle class in a rapidly modernizing Kenya. Today, 80% of Maasai living in Kenya and Tanzania live below the poverty line.

The Maasai face two major economic issues. First, the privatization and sale of traditional Maasai lands creates a feedback loop where Maasai can no longer support themselves with their own agropastoralism, thus forcing them into other markets. And second, Maasai culture is being appropriated abroad for exorbitant prices, the profits of which never reach the Maasai people.

These statues represent a partial solution to the first problem. Since the time when Ben and Betty Werner visited the Maasai, the Maasai have been involved with the tourism industry in Kenya and Tanzania. Statues, such as the ones displayed here, are thus created not just as a piece of art but also as a form of entrepreneurship. The Werners' direct acquisition of this object from the Maasai meant that they were supporting the Maasai economy. However, with the practice of selling cultural objects coexisting with the sale of Maasai lands for over 50 years, it is clear that another avenue of self-determination is necessary for the preservation of Maasai culture.

The Maasai population has not been unaware of the appropriation of their culture by international markets. Isaac ole Tialolo, a Maasai warrior, in partnership with Lightyears IP (a global intellectual property advocate), founded the Maasai IP Initiative Trust Ltd (MIPI) in 2009. The MIPI works to enforce the intellectual property of the Maasai in international markets, with the goal of collecting licensing revenue "to support the Maasai community in health, education and in buying back water rights and rights to grazing land to sustain the culture." Thus far, it has been successful in asserting power over the Maasai cultural brand. In 2012, a Louis Vuitton exhibition included scarves and shirts modeled after traditional Maasai attire. Each of these

pieces sold for over 1,000 euros. None of this money ever reached the Maasai in Kenya or Tanzania. After the establishment of the MIPI, legal action against Louis Vuitton's usage of Maasai cultural products has been taken, asserting their agency on the global stage.

Look at the faces of these statues with the above story in mind. They easily encapsulate the embodied "ownership and self-determination" of entrepreneurship that President Obama mentioned in 2014. In a rapidly changing global environment, ethno-entrepreneurship represents an avenue for cultures such as the Maasai to assert themselves.