

THE CEREMONY

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Blood simmers in an aluminum pot over a log fire. Urgent flames lick and dance.

Sparks fly, logs crackle, resin oozes out of twigs, and a goat's head sizzles in the ashes. Eucalyptus fragrance mingles with the metallic-smelling liquid. Two men squat on the ground near the incandescent coals. Each wears a red-and-blue-checked *shuka*, the traditional Maasai blanket. The fabric draped over their shoulders falls between their knees. One, a holy man, has orange stripes down his cheek. He takes a bunch of dried neem leaves—recognizable by an unpleasant sulfurous odor—from a pouch around his neck and throws them into the dark red liquid. Between his palms, he whirls a wooden spoon as swiftly as an electric whisk.

I'm on a hiking and camping vacation in Tanzania's Maasai Mara National Reserve, when my guide, Medukenya, and I stumble upon this ceremony while tracking a pride of lions. Medukenya, who is also Maasai, greets our hosts in Maa—the local language. The holy man looks at me, lifts his hand in greeting, and gestures us to join them.

"The medicine man says you can take photos if you wish. We are very lucky they let us watch. This is my first time," he says.

"It's my privilege. *Asante*, thank you."

Minutes later, the holy man pushes his beaded headband higher on his perspiring forehead, dips a plastic cup into the frothy liquid, sips, sighs long and deep, and passes it to the other man hunkering in his circle. He wipes his blood-stained lips, turns to glance at me, and my mouth suddenly feels dry. His broad eyes are welcoming yet distant, filling me with a sense of being home and out of place at the same time. Medukenya crouches close to them, gesturing to me to sit on a rock a few yards away.

"It's only to make *men* strong." He drains the cup and smiles; my clenched jaw relaxes.

The holy man pours the remaining congealing liquid from the pot into a plastic bottle. The other man stands up, places the goat's roasted head in an impala-skin bag, picks up the goat's hairy headless body which he nestles into the crook of his elbow, and kicks sand over the

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fire with his rubber sandals. On this silent midday, as lions doze, baboons nap, cuckoos rest, and the fire dies, my breathing and swallowing sound noisy—even intrusive. Dust from the ashes creates a sense of godliness. I’m in a sacred place that isn’t mine and yet, somehow, I feel imbued with a longing to believe in something.

My host rises, throws his shuka over his shoulders, and nods. He strides downhill, the grass whooshing around his long, sinewy legs, and tucks a traditional wooden staff under his elbow. I’m left with a sense of wanting more. More acceptance and intimacy. More reverence in my atheistic world.

Our next stop is the local Maasai market where I’m the only foreigner. Draped in different colored *shukas*, men and women wearing beaded necklaces, bangles, and headbands sell cakes of soap, rubber sandals made from car tires, matches, plastic jerry cans, goats, donkeys, and importantly, piles of *shukas*. Medukenya chooses one, drapes it over my shoulders, and closes his eyes.

“It is a blessing for you,” he whispers, “so you keep healthy and have many children and grandchildren.”

The blanket is scratchy yet comforting, heavy and protective. In the evenings around our own campfire, I drape my new *shuka* over my shoulders. That week the new moon is a thin crescent. The milky way dominates the black sky with enough light for owls to hunt, hyenas to sound their strange staccato cackle, and for me to sleep long and deep in my pup tent.

Back in my Seattle home, that red-and-blue-checked *shuka* covers my bed. When I wrap it around me before dozing off, I feel the holy man looking at me with those bloodstained lips. I float back to those silent moments when glowing coals turned to dust. I can hear his sigh. A sigh that calms my own spirit.

BIO: Susan Bloch is a freelance writer living in Seattle. Her essay “The Mumbai Massacre” (*Blue Lyra Review*) received notable mention in *Best American Essays 2017*. Her writing has also appeared in *The Citron Review*, *Entropy*, *Huffington Post*, *The Bella Literary Review*, *STORGY*, and *Tikkun*. You can find more of her work at susanblochwriter.com