



Masai herdsmen admire polaroid photos of themselves

Credit: Tina Horne

"SPEAKING OF NAIROBI:" THE MAKING OF A FILM ON FORUM '85

Tina Horne

En décembre 1984, quatre femmes – Norma Denys, Nastaran Dibai, Barbara Doran et Tina Horne – ont formé une compagnie de production de films, Les Nouvelles Cinéastes/The New Film Group. Quelques mois plus tard, après avoir produit une série de vidéos sur l'orientation des survivant(e)s de l'abus sexuel, elles ont lancé un nouveau projet: un film documentant la conférence historique de la fin de la Décennie pour les femmes à Nairobi. Tina Horne rapporte les aventures qu'elles ont vécues dans leur tentative de capturer l'esprit du Forum 1985 et de refléter la participation des femmes canadiennes à la conférence.

Mary Armstrong sits in the back seat listening to Patsy Cline on her Walkman, oblivious to the world.

Our van bumps down an endless arid track, raising a cloud of rusty dust that clogs the nose and lungs and makes the eyes sore; it coats our cases of 16mm

equipment with a rosy powder, to the despair of the camera crew. Behind us, the massive green presence of the Ngong hills is obliterated; ahead, the red road wanders through the flat, scruffy landscape, dodging the occasional thorn tree, revealing now and again a family of giraffe who look at us curiously before galloping awkwardly away on stilt-like legs.

In the front seat Mwitiki, our driver, hunches over the steering wheel, eyes narrowed against the sun, cursing under his breath at the larger potholes. Beside him a young Masai herdsman, wrapped in a robe the colour of the rusty earth, flashes his teeth as he smiles round at us delightedly, pointing out the route.

We are on our way to a Masai village. It is Saturday afternoon, July 13th, the first weekend after the opening of Forum 85. We have just spent a hectic few days filming the arriving delegates, the lineups at registration, the opening ceremonies, and the first of the hundreds of workshops;

and we are about to embark on our most exciting experience in this multifaceted country, Kenya.

A few short months ago, none of us really believed we would actually be here, living this extraordinary adventure. But then, so far, nothing has turned out quite the way we expected it since we first came up with the idea of making a film about the historic End of the Decade conference in Nairobi.

Our fledgling production company, The New Film Group/Les Nouvelles Cinéastes, was formed in December 1984 by Norma Denys, Nastaran Dibai, Barbara Doran, and myself. All freelancers, we had come together at the NFB on the crew of "The Next Step," a series of films about services for battered women in Canada. Our interest in women's issues and the complementary nature of our



Masai women with Sarone Ole Sena

Credit: Tina Horne

talents convinced us we should combine forces and form an all-female film company. A few months later, with a video series on counselling the sexual abuse survivor already in the can, we embarked on the Nairobi film. The objectives: to capture the "spirit" of Forum 85 and to document the participation of Canadian women in the event.

At first our hopes of pulling it off seemed remote: we were told that it was far too late to raise sufficient funds from Federal government sources, since all departments had long since committed their budgets to other projects. Pessimistic voices were confounded when, miraculously at this late date, our idea received strong support from the Secretary of State Women's Program, Status of Women Canada, and CIDA, all of whom agreed to sponsor the film along with Studio D of the National Film Board as co-producer.

But it was not all smooth sailing. The budget crept up ominously as we discovered the costs of import taxes, insurance, overweight charges and brokerage fees. Rumours of inadequate food and accommodation in Nairobi led us to consider, at one point, shipping crates of tuna fish along with the camera equipment. And conflicting commitments made selection of the crew problematic. We thought all these difficulties had been overcome when our team of six, bristling with yellow fever vaccinations and malaria tablets, finally arrived in Nairobi with twenty-eight pieces of heavy luggage (excluding the tuna fish, which we'd decided to leave behind . . .).

But now, a week into the shoot, it seems

that our problems are only just beginning. Barbara Doran, our producer, and Sophie Charette, her assistant, have gritted their teeth through many frustrating hours waiting for Kenyan bureaucrats to rubber-stamp our film permits. All week they have waded through a seemingly endless sea of red tape. Our filmstock is still held up at customs, where the officials shake their heads when Sophie waves a letter (from a different government department) that states we may bring in our film without paying tax on it. In the dwindling hope that our appeal for assistance from the UN will unblock the gates, we pay for only as much as we think we will need for a day or two.

There are other, more serious problems: initial tests sent back to Norma Denys, our partner and associate producer who stayed behind to facilitate services at the National Film Board, have revealed that the film is "fogged," probably from being X-rayed in transit. Without knowing whether this applies to the whole batch or merely to the test roll, we must go on filming regardless. There is no way to get fresh footage fast enough, and it will be another five days before we hear the results of our second test. We are all tense; understandably, Nastaran, our camerawoman, is the most worried. It is Nastaran's biggest assignment to date, and a lot rides on it. As a partner in The New Film Group she shares the responsibility towards our sponsors, as well as shouldering the whole burden of bringing in the visuals.

As for me, after a week of seeing each day's timetable shot to pieces by unfor-

seen bureaucratic delays and changes in the Forum schedule; being constantly frustrated by filming conditions in the cramped and inadequately-lit classrooms of the University of Nairobi campus; facing daily the difficulty of setting up appointments for interviews with delegates who are not reachable by telephone . . . the fact that the expensive film stock running at such a great rate through our camera may not even be usable is almost the last straw! I decide that the only way to deal with this latest disaster is to ignore it and hope it will go away. On the brighter side, at least our pragmatic sound-recorder, Mary Armstrong, and cool-headed camera assistant Michelle Paulin, are not complaining; and nor is our patient and indefatigable production assistant, Kenyan actress Esther Njiru.

So on Saturday morning we put the distractions of the Forum behind us and head for the hills. With us in our safari-bus is Sarone Ole Sena, a friend of Sophie's who turned out to be an invaluable connection. Sarone is a Masai; and no ordinary man. Not only does he have a wicked, deadpan sense of humour, but he also studied anthropology at Oxford and McGill, and now teaches in Nairobi and works for a Canadian development institution. He is an expert on the traditions and customs of his people, and we have asked him to help us in making contact with Masai women, whom we want to include in our film. He is not overly hopeful: we do not have time to drive a long way from Nairobi, and he fears that the Masai we come across will have been too frequently annoyed by tourists and film crews in the past. "They will ask you for money, and they will not want you to film them," he tells us.

But Sarone does not know of our secret weapon: my polaroid camera, brought along expressly for such occasions. Three-quarters of an hour outside Nairobi, we have crossed the Ngong hills and are driving along an unpaved road, looking for signs of life. We stop to film some giraffe, and then, towards us on the dusty track come two Masai herdsman with their cattle. At a sign from Sarone we turn off the camera and wait for them to approach. They are shy, but open up when he greets them with the appropriate salutation. For what seems like an age, they murmur a conversation interspersed with long and pregnant pauses and punctuated by a philosophical nodding of the head and a melancholy, infrequent "Mmmm; Ahhhhh; Ehhhh."

We wait politely until Sarone makes the introductions.

The younger one is a tall, elegant teenager called Supeo. I indicate that I would like to take a picture of him, and he agrees. Moments later, the polaroid is in his hands. When his shy friend sees the picture, he too wants one; and after that, they request a group portrait . . . with cattle. Supeo insists that we come back to his village to make pictures of all his friends; we need no second prompting. He climbs into the van with us, leaving his partner to bring home the beef.

We drive for fifteen minutes, following a winding path that was not designed for traffic. Then in the distance we see a high hedge of twigs surrounding a group of huts. As we approach, children run out to meet us, and two or three men. Behind them the women gather, curious. They are tall, elegant and beautiful, as are all the Masai we have seen. They wear intricate bead jewellery with long earrings attached to the top of their ears, and are dressed in red striped or rusty tartan cloths. Most of the women have their heads shaven; the men do not. We sit with our fingers crossed, waiting in the van while Sarone once again goes through the lengthy greeting ceremony with the men his own age, as is the Masai custom. Then he explains the purpose of our visit, and we are invited into the enclosure. But he tells us to leave our film camera behind; it is time for more polaroids, which prove as irresistible to the Masai as to people all over the world.

Word gets around that we are there to speak to the women. We ask Sarone to tell them that we have come to Kenya to make a film about women and issues important to women. He explains about the Conference which they did not know was taking place – and tells them that we want to film them and record their concerns. When he does this, a woman immediately steps forward and begins to speak.

"What is she saying?" we ask Sarone.

"She says, our men oppress us!" he replies, laughing.

"Please, please, let us bring our camera in now!" we plead, jealous of letting any word of this escape unrecorded. Finally, we are allowed to fetch the equipment and set it up. The women and children arrange themselves in a semicircle around us, between the huts; off to one side, a couple of men loiter, watching. We are surprised at how outspoken one of the women is, considering that the men are listening. When we mention this to



"Speaking of Nairobi" film crew

Credit: Tina Horne

Sarone, he says "But of course. This woman can say what she likes. She is past the menopause; nothing can harm her now."

We begin our filming, feeding questions to Sarone: What are the problems specific to the Masai women? Water, and education for the children, they reply. Both of these are the women's affairs; water is scarce and distant, and much of the day is spent fetching it. Education means building the schoolhouse (all housebuilding is the responsibility of the women), providing water and food for the school teacher and clothes for the children.

Sarone asks: "What are the benefits of schooling? Some Masai do not accept schooling." And the women answer him, as we find out months later in Sarone's grave and careful translation: "In the past, the Masai did not like schooling. Most mothers wept when their children were sent to school. But now everybody wants it. It is our shield and our spear. Schooling is good; it is today's spear and shield, which are used to protect the school graduate."

The questions go on: What is women's role in development? What is the function of the women's co-operative? (they have a local women's development group); and finally, we asked them to describe their day in detail.

It begins in the early morning; there is a five mile walk to fetch water; then washing to do, and the preparing of food for the men and the schoolchildren. Then there is firewood to gather for the cooking (and firewood is getting scarce); then there is the cleaning to do, and then the

sheep and their lambs to tend; and the cows and goats to milk when they arrive in the evening; and finally the evening meal to prepare.

We say to Sarone, ask them what the men do. He puts the question to them. There is a pause, then a slow smile spreads among the crowd, and all the women and girls burst out laughing. One of the men shifts uncomfortably and replies. (At this point, alas, our film runs out. But we have his answer on the sound recording): A man's day is quite heavy. He begins the day by supervising the children and women, because all of them are under his authority. Then he starts worrying about who will look after his cattle for that day . . . later he must go and check that his livestock are coming home all right. When the sun goes down he must go in and eat. That's it."

When we have filmed enough, and taken pictures of everyone in the community, one of the women invites us into her hut for tea. One after the other, holding hands to guide us in the darkness, we make our way through the low doorway and along the labyrinthine passage inside, to a part which opened out into a small clear area where a fire smoulders on the ground. We sit around in a circle, on the beds of stretched cowhide polished smooth by the years, our eyes adjusting to the dimness. The tea we are served is fragrant, sweet and smoky flavoured, boiled with goatsmilk in a large pan. We drink out of enamel mugs silently, heads buzzing with a thousand unaskable questions, watching the smoke rise thinly upward to the chinks in the twig and dung



CWS/cf returns to Mitero, a Kikuyu village

Credit: Sylvia Spring

roof; listening to Sarone converse with the gracious and beautiful woman beside us, as the shouts of her children filter in through the walls; looking at each other sitting in the shadows, each one thinking, I shall never forget this.

Back at the hotel that evening, we remember with trepidation that we still don't know whether our filmstock is o.k. We realise we could never repeat the day's experience. But there is no choice: until we know for sure, we must go on. And the next day another adventure awaits.

We are invited to accompany a group of the Canadian NGO delegates on a visit to Mitero, a Kikuyu village an hour north of Nairobi where a Canadian social scientist, Patricia Stamp, had carried out a study of women's co-operatives. (Patricia Stamp is a guest editor of this issue). There is to be a celebration for one of the women in the farming co-operative, and also a presentation of the issue (Vol. 6, No. 1) of the *Canadian Woman Studies* journal in which a report of the study appeared. We set off in our own van, loaded as usual with equipment.

The scenery is different in this direction; gone are the wide plains and stunted thorn-trees, the grassy mountains; here the land is rolling and rich, covered with neat coffee plantations and lush gardens, bursting with fertility and colour. As usual the clouds are magnificent, rivalling the cloudscapes of the Canadian prairies; but today they hang suspiciously low, and the air is heavy with moisture.

After a couple of false turns, we arrive at Mitero. It is a place of such profound ruralness that we feel amputated; we have

come with the skin of the city still on us, and the values of the city inside us, and we need time to adjust. The village is intangible, we are there but we have not found it. Nastaran and I get out of the van and begin to look for it, leaving the others to wait for the tardy Canadians.

We climb up a muddy bank and follow a path leading between plots of giant maize. A young man shows us the way. It seems he is taking us to the Chief's house... and the Chief is waiting. Samuel Gethimbo is an old man with sparkling eyes, an overwhelmingly enthusiastic handshake and a very prominent, lonely tooth. He sits in a semi-official-looking hut with an imposing picture of the president, Daniel arap Moi, and various certificates on the walls. He is surrounded by women whose affection and respect for him is evident, and who welcome us delightedly. With great difficulty we persuade them that we are not, in fact, the official guests, who have yet to arrive; indeed we are not important at all, and we probably should not even be there; we try to blend into the greenery, embarrassed. Nobody speaks English, and our Kikuyu is abominable. We long for Mwitiki, our driver, fluent in six African languages. Eventually we are taken in charge by a pretty woman in a bright green shawl, and we walk back down the path. At the bottom our van still sits, alone. But now it is surrounded by a crowd of children, ranging in age from three to ten or eleven, who have emerged from the invisible village. As we climb back inside, we notice something strange about this crowd of thirty or forty: they are nearly all boys. Only one or two young

girls are visible, and they have babies strapped to their backs.

"Where are all the girls?" we ask, and Mwitiki translates for us. The boys shrug and laugh. "At work, of course." They are at work in the fields and in the home, in charge of the gathering of food and the care of children smaller than they. The boys, many of whom wear school uniforms, are ragged and happy and cheeky, shouting out English words they have learnt at school. The few girls who are present hang around the edge of the crowd, their eyes lowered, curious and yet too shy to come forward.

After half an hour the crowd has grown larger. We are wondering what to do when around the corner comes a bus, followed by several others. The Canadians have arrived, the celebrations can begin.

There is a great welcome for Patricia Stamp, her Kenyan colleague, social worker Rebecca Chege, and all their friends: Lyse Blanchard from Secretary of State (and our staunchest ally in the fight for funding); Shelagh Wilkinson from *Canadian Woman Studies*; some women from CIDA; a journalist, a photographer, and assorted members of the Canadian NGO delegation. In the square between the chief's house and those of his several wives, an impromptu concert starts up: at first the Kikuyu women dance and sing a traditional song, in which the braver Canadians join in. Then it is the Canadians' turn, with *their* traditional song, "Alouette," sung with great gusto by Lyse and Shelagh, in which the Mitero women womanfully participate. We film it all; it will turn out to be the most lively sequence, cinematically speaking, of the entire film.

As the clouds drop lower the light begins to fail, and we pack up before the celebration has ended, to head back to Nairobi. We know that the following week – the final week – will be the most important in terms of NGO-Forum content in our film. We also know that if everything turns out as we pray, we already have some wonderful material.

In the five remaining days of the Forum we pack in a lot of scenes: Betty Friedan under her fig-tree; workshops large and small; the exhibition "Tech and Tools"; Margaret Fulton interviewing two Russian women, and, later, two women who belong to the Democratic Alliance of Iranian women; a reception by the Quebec delegation, and a briefing and information session by the official Canadian delegation, headed by the Honorable

