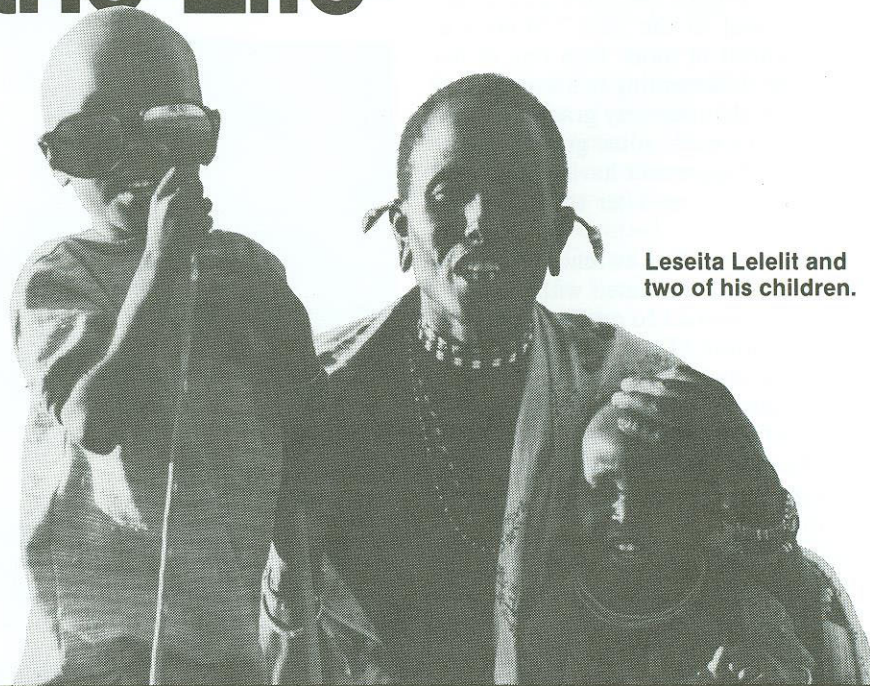


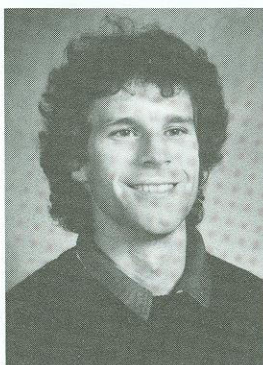
A Day in the Life of a Samburu Family



Leseita Lelelit and
two of his children.

By Thomas F. Tafuto '87

In the fall of 1986, as a participant in St. Lawrence's Program in Kenya, I traveled throughout Kenya during my internship with the *Kenya Times* newspaper. The following



is a story I extracted from the extensive journals I kept during my travels. It takes place in the Samburu Highlands, near Maralal, during the middle of November, when I lived with Leseita Lelelit and his family for two weeks.

Leseita and his family displayed warm hospitality to me while showing me the holistic life the Samburu lead. It is a lifestyle which traces its roots back to Hebrew pre-Pastoralists and has remained relatively unchanged for centuries.

Despite the fact that Leseita and I communicated using the language of Kiswahili

(which I had just learned and of which he knew very little, being a speaker of the Maa language himself), we were able to learn a great deal from each other. I was able to explain and sketch a picture of a typical "high-tech" dairy farm in central Pennsylvania, with elaborate suction devices for milking and electronically monitored feeders to insure the proper diet of the livestock. He, of course, was interested, but showed no signs of envy. He was impressed to find that in Pennsylvania and northern New York, we, too, have a group of people who have so admirably resisted modernization through their hard-working ways of survival — the Amish of Lancaster and St. Lawrence Counties.

What I failed to communicate, though, was the materialistic, fast-paced lifestyle a typical American lives. Even without the language barrier, I would have been at a loss to describe the forces and motives that "green paper" people in my society gravitate towards — often with reckless abandon.

At 5:30 a.m. the first rays of the equatorial sun filter through the cracked cow-dung walls of Leseita's home. At this early hour, the place is alive with barnyard sights, sounds, and smells: cows chewing cud, flies buzzing, and cook fires smoking.

The young livestock are chased out of the tiny rectangular dwelling by the energetic efforts of Leseita's three-year-old son. He rounds up the small lambs, goats and calves across from the large thornbush enclosures (or *bomas*) where Mama is standing. She is collecting the family's breakfast of goat's milk from the adult animals that are kept within the *bomas*. Leseita's five-year-old daughter sweeps manure that has accumulated throughout the night out of the hut with a handmade grass broom, adding the manure to the huge mound surrounding half of the compound.

The oldest daughter quickly drinks her milk and prepares for a long day of herding in the sun-scorched fields by wrapping two yellow cotton cloths around her thin, jet-black body. Herding stick in hand, she slowly makes her way to the distant grazing land, trailing behind Leseita's herd of 120 sheep and goats.

Though seemingly chaotic at first, the beginning of a Samburu day is one of the most beautifully efficient cycles to observe. Their Pastoralist lifestyle (the life of shepherds or herdspeople) is centuries old; they simply live for the well-being of their animals. There is little, if any, talking, because everyone knows what it is he or she must do. One hears only the clanking of livestock bells and the voice of Mama singing morning songs.

Leseita stoops his five-foot-seven-inch body beneath the low, cowskin-covered door to the outside, and fills his nostrils with the morning air. He smiles contentedly, explaining that the four-month-long dry season will end tonight as *Ngai* (God) will bless their highlands with rain.

Leseita walks majestically with his three-year-old son to a small herd of lambs and demonstrates

how to remove thorns from their hooves. The tiny child pays close attention and practices as his father leaves him to his herding duty for the day.

Returning to the hut, Leseita tells his wife that he will make a journey to the Naibor Keju forest today. His main herds of 120 beef cattle are there with two of his brother's sons. The forest provides an excellent dry-season grazing resource for people who are willing to take the risk of sending their livestock there. The greatest threat is large, nocturnal predators such as lions, leopards, and hyenas who live there.

The harshness of the past season has forced many otherwise conservative Samburu to take the risk of the forest or face a certain loss to starvation on the grassless plains. Now, with the possibility of the short rains beginning, Leseita wants to bring his herd back to the relative safety of home as soon as possible. Collecting his eight-foot-long spear and his throwing sticks (or *rungus*), Leseita embarks on the three-hour trip to the forest over the dusty

plains under the increasingly hot sun.

"*Apaayia, supa*" ("Father, good day"), says Leseita in greeting to an old man resting beside a termite mound a few kilometers from home. In Samburu society, Elders are treated with the utmost respect by all members of society, especially the Junior Elders (the age set below Elders), of which Leseita is one.

Resting occasionally under the shade of a nearby tree, Leseita takes the time to point out uses for every root, plant, and tree in sight, from medicine to making fires. Part of the reason the Samburu have survived for centuries in this harsh, semi-arid country is that they are able to make use of everything in their environment. There is the sense that adult Samburu know practically everything there is to know about their surroundings and the place they occupy within them.

For a forty-year-old man, Leseita has the spirit and energy of a teenager but the wisdom of a man twice his age. As he moves into the first section of forest, he motions for silence, meaning there's danger ahead. Off in the

St. Lawrence students and Samburu elders.



distance is the sound of trees being crushed and swept aside by a passing herd of elephants or buffalo, the most dangerous wildlife in Samburu land. In a few moments, Leseita moves on, looking for the direction in which the danger has moved and for signs of the cattle herd.

Within an hour, Leseita has located the herd and begun to discuss his plans with his adolescent nephews. Solemnly nodding their heads, the two boys agree that if the rains continue steadily for three days, they will move the herd homeward. Shaking hands and exchanging a few last-minute prayers and instructions, Leseita leaves the boys under the eye of Ngai and turns home under the early afternoon sun.

At the edge of the forest, Leseita comes upon two young wives collecting firewood and preparing to carry it home. Exchanging a few warm greetings, the colorfully beaded women smile under the heavy weight of the wood hanging on their backs from leather straps fastened around their foreheads. Women bear the burden of labor, childcare, and productivity in Samburu society — the men supervise and direct.

Leseita anxiously continues towards home. As he reaches a rise in the landscape, he points down to a set of hyena tracks. These animals suffer during the dry season, too. As hyenas become more desperate for food, they move in on the Samburu settlements, hoping to catch an unsuspecting herdsboy not paying attention so they can make off with a leg of lamb.

Leseita usually gives little consideration to the tracks. Today is different because these tracks are freshly made. Leseita explains that hyenas usually travel only at night, and that these fresh tracks, in the middle of the day, are a bad sign.

After returning home, Leseita sees that things are in order, and assumes a more relaxed posture. Re-emerging from his hut, he carries a Phillips portable radio that he acquired in Nairobi many years ago. A radio station tunes in

and out with static snaps and pops. Leseita is not bothered with the quality of reception, though; he is concentrating on the Kiswahili broadcaster giving the news.

He smiles and places the radio on his bare shoulder. Walking to the back of his hut, Leseita replaces his spear and *rungus* with a long, whip-like herding stick. Pointing it towards the northeast, he again smiles and begins walking towards his ten-year-old daughter returning with the herd of small livestock.

Out on the plain near his compound, Leseita seems truly at ease in the late afternoon. Dark, rain-filled clouds begin to appear over the hills to the east, while the sun drops into the orange and purple bands to the west.

Leseita begins snapping his fingers and jokingly dancing "American style" to the Nigerian JU-JU music playing on his radio. His three young children run out of the compound to view this rare spectacle. Laughing and pointing, they sit cross-legged and become absorbed in their father's playfulness.

Mama calls everyone home to help prepare dinner. The girls fill smoked gourds with sour goat's milk while the young boy builds a small cooking fire inside the hut. The oldest girl secures the thorn-

bush gate, safely enclosing the adult animals for the night. She then follows Leseita and Mama into the hut, herding the newly born lambs, goats, and calves inside as well.

With forty living beings inside the thirty-square-foot hut, Leseita's family eats, huddled around the small fire. A smoky haze sets in; eyelids grow heavy. Mama cleans up the tin cups and plates while a tiny infant gently suckles at her breast.

The family moves into its single cow-hide bed. The seven Samburu bunch up to accommodate their clumsy guest while he feebly tries to fit his six-foot frame on the five-foot bed.

A soft sprinkling sound is heard over the breathing of sleeping animals. The long-awaited short rains beat wonderfully on the cow-dung roof of the home. Leseita breaks into a quiet prayer and his family answers after each verse by whispering "Ngai" in unison to the Kenyan night. They thank him for the special day that has passed, and the one that has just begun. STL

Tom Tafuto's home is in Palmyra, Pennsylvania. In addition to a semester in Kenya, he also participated in St. Lawrence's program in London. He was a Dean's List student in his senior year.

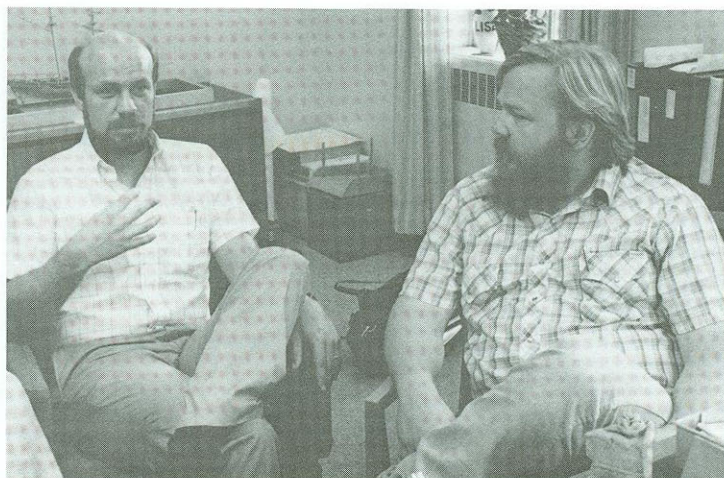
Leseita Lelelit's compound.



The Kenya Program:

A Conversation with the Directors

Howard Brown, left, and Paul Robinson, associate director and director, respectively of the Kenya program.



The rural homestay is but one component of St. Lawrence's Program in Kenya. During their annual visit to campus in July the program's administrators, director Paul W. Robinson and associate director Howard W. Brown, discussed other aspects of the program.

St. Lawrence: What is the principal goal of the St. Lawrence program in Kenya?

Brown: I think I can best illustrate that with an experience we had. During one of our times with the Samburu, the Pastoralist people with whom we have our rural homestay, we were on a hill overlooking a magnificent vista of northern Kenya, with several of their Elders. They are very curious about world problems and they asked us about violence, about repression, about our feelings about South Africa and Afghanistan. Then they told us about a disaster that befell them in the 1890s. They depend on their livestock for survival, but in 1889, 95 percent of their cattle died in less than six months. Essentially, their food supply was gone, overnight. The Elders posed this question to our students: What do you do when you suddenly have hungry people? The students had a very long discussion and the consensus was that you choose individuals that you want to survive. Then the Samburu told stories of their grandfathers, who had enough milk left each day to fill half of a tiny cup. And they said to their families, "Let each of us dip his toothbrush stick into the milk and lick

the stick. We will survive together, or no one will survive." I think the students truly saw how two different societies can approach the same problem.

St. Lawrence: What's new about the program this year?

Robinson: We are particularly excited about a field course in behavioral ecology in the Maasi Mara Plain, which many consider the finest natural biology laboratory in the world. This will augment our field biology course, which, incidentally, program alumni who have been accepted by medical and veterinary schools tell us was a major factor in their being accepted. We're also incorporating more internships into the curriculum; students spend four weeks at the end of the semester doing work designed to integrate their academic backgrounds and career goals. Several of the newer internships have been related to the issue of world hunger and food production, in response to student concern. Students not only work in famine relief, but also investigate the causes of famine and its future prevention through appropriate development.

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— Howard Brown

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— Paul Robinson

St. Lawrence: What distinguishes our Kenya program from those at other American colleges?

Robinson: We're the only truly independent program. The others are integrated directly with the Kenya national universities. We've elected to be independent in order to give students wider experience in the field and to be able to alter the curriculum in keeping with St. Lawrence's growing emphasis on international studies.

Brown: Another thing that sets our program apart is that we have developed firm relationships with people in diverse Kenyan communities — pastoral, village and urban — and thus can place our students in three distinct African societies. This total immersion in initially alien environments is a cultural and intellectual experience that allows for tremendous personal growth.

St. Lawrence: That must demand a fairly rapid adaptation.

Robinson: Most definitely. We're confronting them with a society, for example, that is based entirely on the renewable products of livestock as a way of surviving arid conditions. They are confronted in their rural homestays with polygamy and with much larger, more

integral families, where there is more responsibility but also much more mutual support than they are accustomed to.

Brown: Students face a whole new set of religious and ethical standards, which are not uniform across Kenya. We orient them, but we don't try to tell them everything — just to be prepared for the more difficult things.

St. Lawrence: What do your former students tell you is the most important benefit of the program?

Robinson: The thing that comes out most often and most clearly is that they come away from Kenya with an understanding that people are people no matter where they are, and that the bonds that tie us together are much stronger than those forces that would tear us apart. It gives them a fresh perspective on the ways in which different people approach life.

Brown: I think the program forces the students to address some real issues of human survival: If the rain doesn't come, how do people eat? If a family can't afford a term of school, how do they educate their children? The immediacy of nature, the immediacy of the future is right there, and students can't avoid it.

Robinson: Let me share one student's response. This student was on the program several years ago. His parents were well placed with a major multinational corporation. He displayed a total lack of sensitivity toward the third world, toward black society, toward Africa in general. I think he came just to see something primitive and exotic. Anyway, we placed this student in the three homestay situations, which were all very positive experiences. The urban homestay was tremendous; the host family was articulate, well versed in whatever the student wanted to know, and anxious to exchange ideas. Later, the student's parents visited, and we got them together with the urban homestay parents. The natural parents exhibited that same lack of appreciation; when the natural father learned that the homestay father was employed by the same major multinational corporation, he asked, "What is your position? Grounds-keeping?" Well, the man was in charge of the company's international sales throughout all of eastern and central Africa. Later, the student came to us and asked, "Was I really like that when I arrived?" It was one of the most moving experiences I have ever had as director of the program.

Awaiting the short rains.

