

GEMS OF A V



AFRICAN WISDOM

When Tanya Pergola, PhD, first visited Tanzania and Maasailand, she became startlingly aware that she was in a place and with people who could teach her something profound. 'Trained as a sociologist and wellness specialist in the US, I sensed that lodged within the colourful and beautiful rituals and ceremonies of the indigenous Maasai people were gems of wisdom that could be harvested and shared as antidotes for our increasingly complex, stressful, and often enigmatic modern lives,' says Pergola. This is her story.

The concept of cleansing is central to Maasai medicine – cleaning the digestive system, the cardiovascular system, and the nervous system, using plant-based medicine to physically clean, and verbal and non-verbal medicine to wash the mind and spirit.

I chose to undertake a 10 year apprenticeship with Maasai traditional healers, led by my guide Lekoko Ole Sululu, in exchange for implementing sustainable development projects that would benefit marginalised communities in Tanzania. The Maasai asked me to use my skills as a sociologist, healer and writer to interpret their beliefs and practices and share them with the world; including the younger generation of Maasai, and other indigenous peoples, who have not been very keen to conserve traditional wisdom.

In my book, *Time is Cows: Timeless Wisdom of the Maasai*, published by Oreteti Press, I share my own knowledge and the wisdom of the Maasai through storytelling combined with 'Suggested Practices' so you can enact this ancient wisdom and healing practices in your own daily life.

The Maasai have a profoundly simple and highly-effective philosophy and associated prescriptions for maintaining peace in the community, supporting individuals' gifted purpose while on earth, preventing disease and curing many illnesses. While most of us live very differently from traditional African cultures and have certainly found ways to improve upon those aspects of traditional life that did not work so well, there are some amazing gems of wisdom from what our ancestors and elders have always known that can be harvested and polished up for the benefit of today's lifestyles. In truth, when it comes to powerful insightful wisdom for managing stress, improving relationships and living healthy lives, we only have to look to our own continent for practises that have stood the test of time.

If my learnings from the Maasai are any indication of the rich wisdom of the indigenous peoples on the continent, there is no reason why elements of traditional African medicine should not be on the same stage as the now well-known elements of traditional Indian or Chinese medicine. It is a matter of articulating the techniques with integrity and interpreting them for patients in Africa and

STAYING CLEAN & CLEAR: SUGGESTED PRACTICE

- ✓ When a particular incident in your life hits you hard and you can't seem to shake it off, consider reaching out to a friend, family member, or trusted advisor and suggest taking a walk.
- ✓ Plan enough time. Choose a location in nature.
- ✓ Tell your story fully. Get it all out.
- ✓ Storytelling as therapy is an art form. Let's imagine that you tell a trusted friend or therapist that your problem is something that happened to you that morning – perhaps you had a fight with your son. But that day's conflict is only the most up-to-the-minute scene in a performance that lasts a lifetime. In order to understand both the argument and the way forward, you have to begin in a previous scene. Choose one that feels relevant. As you tell your story you can feel internally whether the story is making sense. Pay attention to the reaction of your listener.
- ✓ Celebrate the clearing when it's complete, the visceral release of baggage. Depending on the issue, of course, it may take more than one pass through – more than a single deep sharing with a trusted friend – to get completely clear.

around the world.

The following are excerpts from the book:

STAYING CLEAN & CLEAR BY WALKING IT OUT

While Freud put people on the couch to sort out pressing issues of the mind, the Maasai take to the earth. Men walk long distances, talking to each other as they go, and travelling to speak with their godfathers, and *olage'lie* or *enage'lie* (trusted male or female advisors). Women similarly walk and talk to each other, sharing from the heart, typically while collecting firewood or water. Maasai

THE FAMILY MEETING: SUGGESTED PRACTICE

- ✓ When trying to resolve a problem with a friend, family member, or co-worker, take a moment to consider all the people who are related to that problem, even tangentially. Consider inviting everyone involved to a meeting at which you seek resolution.
- ✓ Consider where to bring people together, whether inside a house or outside in nature. Plan the location carefully.
- ✓ Sit in a circle, elect a chairman or chairwoman whose job it is to keep everyone on 'power point'.
- ✓ Open the meeting with a blessing to appeal to a higher force to guide the group towards a healthy resolution of the issue at hand.
- ✓ Before beginning the discussion, go around the circle and ask each person to take five minutes or so to describe how she is and what is focal in her life at the moment.
- ✓ Create a literal 'talking stick' out of an object close at hand, to help everyone stay focused on the person speaking, offering her undivided attention with no interruptions. This also encourages the person speaking to say something that is worthy of the listeners' valuable time.
- ✓ Do not serve food or alcohol until after a resolution has been reached. Refreshments can be distracting and encourage people to fall asleep or lose focus.
- ✓ Take time to celebrate at the meeting's conclusion. Then, take time to rest.

women discuss a wide array of topics, often about how to deal with men, their husbands, and relatives. These heart-to-heart conversations, in which they speak and listen without judgment, keep both men and women clean and clear of emotional baggage.

When a Maasai has a problem, he or she is taught

In the Maasai world, the health and happiness of any individual family member is inextricably linked to the health and happiness of the whole family. It is truly impossible to ignore the well-being of a family member, and if you try, your own well-being will eventually begin to deteriorate.

during initiation to adulthood that you do not blurt out your troubles to just anybody. You have to reach out to the right person and let this person know there is a serious issue you want to discuss. When this person agrees to be your confidant, it's important not to wait long to begin the conversation, because issues that are not discussed can quickly become toxic to the body and the mind. Almost invariably, the person on the receiving end listens compassionately with undivided attention, empathising without taking on the trauma and drama itself, and playing a vital role in the problem's resolution.

The concept of cleansing is central to Maasai medicine – cleaning the digestive system, the cardiovascular system, and the nervous system, using plant-based medicine to physically clean, and verbal and non-verbal medicine to wash the mind and spirit. Creating and nurturing catharsis can either become the cure itself, or the first step that leads the unwell person to further medication. Cleansing the body-mind-spirit is a prerequisite for regaining health in the Maasai world, as it is in most traditional wellness systems.

THE FAMILY MEETING

Fundamental to knowing who you are in Maasai culture is understanding your interactions within your extended family. Magically, healthy and happy families do not exist in Maasai culture any more than they do in modern Western societies. Conflicts and suffering arise in Maasai families just as they do all over the world. What became apparent to me, however, was the fascinating way in which issues are addressed and problems worked through in the Maasai families I have had the privilege to get to know.

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impossible to ignore the well-being of a family member, and if you try, your own well-being will eventually begin to deteriorate.

When I first arrived in Africa, I had some knowledge of the importance of family members who have died and the huge amounts of time and effort people in traditional cultures spend on family matters. In fact, I was curious to learn the truth about 'ancestor worship', which as far as I knew, may have been related to some people's ability to actually interact with the spirits of the dead. The Maasai helped me understand that honouring and continuing to engage with your entire extended family – including those who are deceased – is not a spooky activity at all. We all should really be more aware of this realm of understanding; in fact, it can shed great light on our own present-day thoughts and behaviours.

I like to refer to African ancestor awareness as 'primordial genetics'. The physical genes of our ancestors literally live within us, of course. The behaviours that are coded by these genes form the foundation of who we are – our wants, needs and actions. Each one of us is the sum of the genes of our ancestors, passed on from generation to generation.

Throughout history, parents and children, brothers and sisters grow as branches of our family tree, and we display our foliage in unique yet quite predictable ways. Yet no one pays too much attention until the wind blows and branches get tangled or a branch breaks off and dies. Then family conflict – and sometimes crisis – emerge.

In Maasai culture, family meetings are called only when circumstances beg for one. When there is a series of unexplained illnesses or accidents plague a family, for example, a meeting is called to discuss what may be disturbing the roots of the family tree. Or, at those times when there is unrest and problems arise in relationships within the family fabric itself, it is time to gather together, take a step back from daily activities and look at and discuss the bigger picture.

Who is not pulling his or her weight? Who is disrespecting his or her power? This process of investigation and reflection involves both people who are alive and those who have passed on. The spirits of family members who have died remain vital parts of the family, and those who are still living need to take the time now and then to 'talk to their nature' and tap into the plan *Engai* (God, the Creator) has laid out. □

***Time is Cows: Timeless Wisdom of the Maasai* is available at [here](#).**



