Anna Grimshaw

CONVERSATIONS WITH ANTHROPOLOGICAL FILM-MAKERS:

MELISSA LLEWELYN-DAVIES

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Foreword

The subject of this pamphlet is the work of Melissa Llewelyn-Davies, an anthropologist who for the last twenty years has worked almost exclusively in television. Llewelyn-Davies is most widely known as the documentarist of the Maasai people, East African pastoralists who live in an area called Loita which straddles the Kenya-Tanzania border. It is her Maasai film cycle which gives focus to both the essay and conversation which follows. It opens with two early films, *Masai Women* (1974) and *Masai Manhood* (1975); these are followed by *The Women's Olamal* (1984) and the five-part *Diary of a Maasai Village* (1984); and the cycle is concluded, though perhaps only temporarily, by Llewelyn-Davies's latest work, *Memories and Dreams* (1993).

Surprisingly, Llewelyn-Davies's films are not much discussed among anthropologists.[1] She herself is aware of this, and attributes it to the fact that she works in television. Part of the problem is that anthropologists are not sure what to do with film, using it, if at all, merely to illustrate arguments established through more conventional means. Thus films are used in departments as teaching aids in introductory anthropology courses; it is unusual for them to be examined critically at any advanced level. For anthropologists, like most academics, prefer to maintain a suitable distance between their specialised professional discourse and what they perceive as a medium of popular entertainment.

Melissa Llewelyn-Davies's career as a film-maker is interesting precisely because it has been driven by this contradiction. In the interview reproduced below, she explains how working in television allowed her to escape from the straitjacket of

scientific ethnography and ultimately to experiment with a remarkable variety of genres, ranging from documentary exposition through dramatic narrative to soap opera and exploration of the mind's interior life. In the process she introduced new subject matter to established television programmes and challenged the medium's formal conventions.

Intellectuals have become so used to denigrating television that it is hard to remember that it was once widely believed to hold enormous creative possibilities. But for the documentary film-makers of the 1960s (people like Denis Mitchell or Richard Leacock) and a number of dramatists and writers (Dennis Potter, for example) television offered a new sort of challenge; and working for a mass public audience stimulated individuals to innovate in both form and substance.

It is this juxtaposition of an anthropologist's sensibility and the discipline of a public medium which has enabled Llewelyn-Davies's work, despite her having operated outside the academy for twenty years, to offer a new perspective on debates at the heart of professional anthropology. Indeed it might be said that the five different parts of the Maasai film cycle encapsulate changes in the postwar history of the discipline itself, which have culminated in a fundamental re-examination of established paradigms and concepts.[2]

In launching the Prickly Pear Pamphlet series,[3] we argued that anthropologists should seek to re-establish active and creative connections with society. Engagement with film and television must surely be at the heart of any such project. For this reason, when anthropologists learn to overcome their distrust of film, Llewelyn-Davies's Maasai cycle will perhaps come to be recognised as an integral part of the ethnographic tradition.

The Editors

Notes

1 – Even among visual anthropologists her work is rarely cited, in contrast, for example with the films of Rouch and MacDougall (see *Prickly Pear Pamphlet No. 9*). Notable exceptions are Liz Brown, Paul Henley and Peter Loizos (see Note to further reading, below p. 20).

2 – See, for example, J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds) *Writing Culture* (University of California Press, 1986); G. Marcus and M. Fischer *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 1986). If a growing concern of anthropologists has been to introduce the world's complexity into their ethnographies through a greater emphasis on subjectivity and history, Melissa Llewelyn-Davies's pioneering career as documentarist of the Maasai offers an outstanding example of this process.

3 – Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart *Anthropology and the Crisis of the Intellectuals* (Prickly Pear Pamphlet No. 1, 1993).

The Maasai Films

There is a striking intellectual consistency in Melissa Llewelyn-Davies's Maasai film cycle. From the beginning she establishes her feminist orientation; and she places questions of gender at the centre of all of this work. But although the film-maker returns us again and again to a number of interconnected themes, specifically women and the reproduction of Maasai society, each time our understanding is changed as she approaches from a different angle and experiments with a new form. In particular, we see a development from Llewelyn-Davies's early attempt to graft film onto anthropology (throwing into sharp relief the fundamental contradiction between a popular form and a professional discipline) to her later experiments, exemplified by *Memories and Dreams*, which exploit the distinctive features of the cinematic medium itself.

This evolution may be expressed as a shift from filmic ethnography to visual anthropology. I contend that Llewelyn-Davies's formal experiments are driven by her own changing perception of the anthropological project. This has emerged in the course of her social practice as a feminist film-maker and anthropologist, and from her changing relationship with the Maasai people.

The first films in the Maasai cycle, *Masai Women* and *Masai Manhood*, were made as part of the "Disappearing World" series. In a number of important ways, however, they are different from the early type of salvage anthropology initiated by Brian Moser and exemplified by *The Last of the Cuiva* and *The War of the Gods*. For the Maasai films are not about a fragile way of life, a vulnerable small-scale society whose internal coherence and reproduction is now threatened by the more powerful forces of world society. Rather they are a celebration of the opposite. The films portray a strong, confident and vibrant community and they focus on its internal mechanisms of social reproduction.

Masai Women lies closest to Llewelyn-Davies's own field research, exploring the roles of women in a pastoral society where cattle are the basis of wealth, and where a man's wealth is measured not just by his herds, but by the numbers of his dependents, wives and daughters-in-law, who look after the cattle but have no rights in them. This is explained in an introductory commentary by Llewelyn-Davies herself, establishing the context for the division she makes between the world of women and the world of men. As the film's title reveals, it is about Maasai women; but it is also the film maker's intention, if only partially realised, that the film be by women. Thus its perspective is explicitly partial — it sets out to present to the viewer the world of women as they experience and describe it to a woman anthropologist.

The narrative of *Masai Women* is structured around two events which constitute the climax of the film and its resolution. The first part of the film is built around the question of the transition from girlhood to maturity and marriage. It is marked by the Maasai with a ceremony of circumcision. Using interviews and commentary Llewelyn-Davies provides the contextual information which informs what we actually see. Most strikingly what we do not see is the circumcision itself; rather Llewelyn-Davies makes the arrival of a new wife at her husband's village the dramatic climax of the film. As a married woman she is expected to increase her husband's wealth through the production of children and to manage her husband's cattle until her sons assume control after their period in the forest as warriors.

The second part of the film is thus concerned with the next stage in a woman's life, motherhood. Llewelyn-Davies seeks to give focus to its meaning through the preparations for the dramatic spectacle which marks the end of warriorhood for young Maasai men. It is a time of celebration for those women who have succeeded in producing children. It marks the reaching of

maturity of their sons. As Llewelyn-Davies notes in the following conversation, she now believes that perhaps the warriors occupy too large and colourful place in a film about women. Certainly it is difficult in the film's latter scenes to remember that we should be watching the warriors with a mother's eye (and with the eyes of the childless women too).

In another sense, however, the warriors' ritual preparations both work effectively to conclude the film and to provide the link to its sequel, *Masai Manhood*. For the ritual marks the completeness of a woman's life, achieved at the moment when she sees her son enter elderhood and take charge of the herds which she has held in trust until his social maturity. Thus, if the film's climax emphasised separation, the liminal moment in a woman's life as she passed from her father's village to that of her husband, the scenes from the warriorhood ritual stress integration, bringing together mothers and sons with Maasai elders to celebrate a successful transition.

This first film, in raising issues of gender and the mechanisms of social reproduction, establishes the central themes of the Maasai film cycle as a whole. It also establishes the different formal devices, events supplemented by commentary and interviews, through which Llewelyn-Davies seeks to open up an unfamiliar Maasai society to a television audience. What is striking is that at the outset all these parts appear to fit neatly together, contributing to a single coherent story. Moreover, we are always conscious of the women telling the official story — this is how things should be. We have little indication of what these individual women actually do or feel.

But, of course, what people say and what they actually do is often at variance. It is the slippages between them which are most interesting and revealing; and this is the area which Llewelyn-Davies begins to explore through her next film, *The Women's Olamal*. It has already been signalled in *Masai Women*

itself. For here we are aware of a discordant note which disrupts the harmony of social relations—the question of married women taking lovers. Young brides, married to old men, subvert the hierarchy of power by illicitly conducting affairs with the Maasai warriors.

In the opening scene of *The Women's Olamal*, a Maasai woman, in conversation with Llewelyn-Davies, states "Women have nothing of their own. Only men own livestock. "Llewelyn-Davies then asks "Women have nothing at all?"The reply comes, "A woman has her cow-hides, her scouring stick, her axe - that's all. Your husband gives you cattle to look after, but they're not really yours - or only in a way. Your husband can't reallocate them to his other wives, but he can give them all away to another man. You can't stop him. He's the owner." The narrative of the film, however, progressively undermines the apparent simplicity of this establishing statement. For it charts an extraordinary battle between women and the Maasai elders, building to a dramatic climax which lays bare fundamental tensions in the society and appears to threaten the very foundations of social harmony.

Olamal concerns the preparations for a ceremony, performed every four years, which is the most important ritual occasion for women in Maasai society. The initiative for the ceremony is taken by the women themselves, who begin to form olamal groups and start to lobby the men. But, as the film quickly reveals, the women face a serious problem. An unresolved dispute in a neighbouring village threatens the progress of their preparations; and the elders will not agree to conduct the ceremony while a claim for compensation is outstanding.

The film, like *Masai Women*, is partial, taking as its primary perspective the activities and organisation of the women. We follow their changing political strategies as the battle for the ceremony unfolds. As with Llewelyn-Davies's earlier film, the

climax of *The Women's Olamal* is the point of maximum dislocation. The elders continue to resist the women's demands. The women respond with great outbursts of crying and threaten a curse, finally forcing the elders to agree to perform the fertility blessing. Thereafter the tension subsides. The remainder of the film, while documenting the different stages of the ceremony, also reveals the progressive integration of social division as the women take up once more their conventionally subordinate position in Maasai society.

Although *Masai Women* contained a narrative, the successive stages of a woman's life, it was not intrinsic to the material presented; rather it was constructed by Llewelyn-Davies - through event, explanation and commentary - in order to illustrate a general thesis about gender and the mechanisms of social reproduction. By contrast, the events which lead up to the fertility blessing in *Olamal* have intrinsic narrative integrity. They are dramatically linked and they develop the action through time. Thus, although in places Llewelyn-Davies supplements the unfolding of the story with information supplied through commentary or interviews, she allows the events to speak for themselves.

She is using what documentary film-makers call a "crisis structure", the notion that filming a situation marked by a high degree of tension or stress exposes features normally hidden from view and the characters themselves are revealed in new ways. This method demands an active rather than a passive spectatorship, since the viewer is expected to piece together what has been seen and heard and to make judgements on the basis of the evidence presented.

The Women's Olamal shares with Llewelyn-Davies's earlier films an emphasis on the integrity of Maasai society. *The Diary of a Maasai Village*, however, represents an important break with this conception. Here, for the first time, Llewelyn-Davies

situates the Maasai in the midst of a large, fluid and complex world. In her five-part series she juxtaposes different stories, incidents and characters in a sort of collage, attempting to express the distinctive texture of contemporary Maasai life. As the title indicates, it was Llewelyn-Davies's intention to use a diary format in order to jot down events as they occur over a short period of time. She describes her approach in a short introductory statement to each film in the series: "We made them as a diary, and have not organised the material into a particular story or argument. Instead we hope that a collection of episodes in the life of the village will describe a moment in its history". But by the final episode Llewelyn-Davies has acknowledged only the partial achievement of this aim.

For there is in fact a single narrative thread which holds together the five episodes. It concerns the arrest of Rarenko, the son of Nariku, and his imprisonment in Nairobi on charges of cattle theft. With each part we follow the progress, or lack of progress, of his case and the attempts by a delegation of male relatives, led by Tipaya, to secure his release on bail. It is finally secured by the intervention of the film crew who pay the amount which Rarenko's lawyer has been demanding. But interwoven with this story are the day-to-day dramas and activities of the village — births, disputes, the exchange of news and gossip, problems with the authorities, the sickness of cattle, divination, healing and so on.

Thus there is a subtle interplay of different rhythms within each film, from the dominant story which evolves through time to the episodic moments and individual scenes. Cutting between them gives the impression of simultaneity, a marked feature of modern life. Life as symbolised in Maasai rituals of circumcision and marriage is orderly and predictable; but it is always cross-cut by unexpected, spontaneous events. This collage, the films' content, is matched in formal terms by the absence of a dominant filmic style, observational or didactic.

Rather Llewelyn-Davies employs equally interviews, commentary, eavesdropping and observation. Moreover, the experiences of a number of key women suggest aspects of subjectivity not normally exposed to view; and Llewelyn-Davies begins to probe beneath the surface of Maasai womanhood as presented in her early films. Now we glimpse something more complex and turbulent. This was implicit in *The Women's Olamal*; but the question of individual identity is most fully addressed in Llewelyn-Davies's last film, *Memories and Dreams* (1993).

There is a movement in the *Diary*'s five parts, from crisis to resolution, from the unpredictable world of an unknown city to the familiar rituals which reaffirm village life; and by the final episode we are once again in familiar territory — Llewelyn-Davies's central concerns of marriage, cattle and social reproduction. Although we now approach these questions anew, there remains in the *Diary* an underlying vision of Maasai social integrity. By stark contrast, *Memories and Dreams* leaves the viewer with a profound sense of uncertainty and dislocation. With this last film, Llewelyn-Davies has returned to the very concerns of Moser's "Disappearing World" which she originally challenged - the destruction of traditional ways of life. The difference is that Llewelyn-Davies takes up this position not as a matter of principle, but as the logical outcome of her twenty-year engagement with the Maasai people.

Memories and Dreams opens with the Maasai gathered around a small television monitor, watching themselves in Llewelyn-Davies's earlier films. The contrast between then and now is the film's central theme; but, as the title indicates, it also strays into previously unexplored areas of Maasai experience and anthropology. For Llewelyn-Davies raises questions of dreams, memories, individual aspirations, fears, anxieties and disappointments - all the dimensions of individual personality

which, until recently, have been neglected by a discipline with a marked Durkheimian orientation.

Memories and Dreams has no conventional narrative as such; rather it is a montage of scenes and conversations, with moments from the past (footage from previous films) juxtaposed with contemporary life. These disjunctions of space and time are used to striking effect, undermining any attempt to develop a single perspective on changing Maasai society. For example, in the first part of *Memories and Dreams*, Llewelyn-Davies returns to questions which animated her earlier Maasai films, interviewing women about marriage and their relationships with co-wives. They express a strong sense of community between themselves, a sort of sisterhood and a resignation to the beatings of their husband. But suddenly the film cuts to Loise, one of the co-wives, who has left their husband and the village in order to find her own life. She makes a powerful and eloquent statement of her independence; and we are forced to look again at the village women and their acceptance of tradition. Yet, as we watch Loise scratching a living with her husband on the edges of a small town, we cannot help but think of the rhythm and community of village life.

Perhaps more shocking are the sequences concerning the circumcision of Kunina, a young Maasai girl. For here Llewelyn-Davies uses sound she recorded for *Masai Women*, but decided not to use in that film because of the political sensitivity surrounding the question of female circumcision. In *Memories and Dreams* she juxtaposes these screams of the 1974 girl alongside the Maasai women's contemporary statements about the happiness of Kunina's initiation.

As with most films about change and peoples' perceptions of change, there is a sense of loss as social integrity weakens, along with an emphasis on lost traditions, an ebbing of confidence as the world becomes more fluid and uncertain. But Llewelyn-

Davies's film raises more complex questions. For we are conscious that the destruction of a way of life is not just a result of forces external to the Maasai village. They are internal too - the rethinking by individuals of traditions held central to a way of life. For this reason the figure of Loise remains an unsettling one in the film as a whole.

Anna Grimshaw

Notes to Further Reading

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M. Llewelyn-Davies "Women, warriors and patriarchs", in S.B. Ortner and H. Whitehead (eds.) *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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Interview with Melissa Llewelyn-Davies

Melissa Llewelyn-Davies talks to Anna Grimshaw

AG Perhaps the first question I could ask you is what is your anthropological background and what sort of anthropology had you done before you went into television?

MLD I did a degree at University College and Mary Douglas was there and Phyllis Kaberry in Social Anthropology. There was also a lot of Archaeology and Physical Anthropology as well. Then I went to Harvard where I went into the Social Relations Department which was a sort of joint Social Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology degree where I was going to do a PhD. I did the coursework; I was there for 3 years and I did 2 years fieldwork on the Maasai and I never completed the PhD.

AG So do you feel that Mary Douglas and Phyllis Kaberry influenced you in the way that you conceived the anthropology you did?

MLD Oh yes, absolutely, both of them in completely different ways. Well, Phyllis Kaberry - it was her exuberance and enjoyment of fieldwork, plus of course the assumption that women were equally worth thinking about and writing about as men, which wasn't commonplace in those days. So all that was terribly important. I think her *Women of the Grassfields* was fantastic and I really loved her stuff, but Mary Douglas was extraordinary and what can I say? She intellectually was the most stimulating person I had ever met at that time, although I don't suppose - I don't know - she had a wonderful style to her. I don't think I can say how it influenced me in any particular way, but I think it showed you could be fastidious and an anthropologist at the same time.

AG And when you went to Harvard had you already decided that you'd work in East Africa?

MLD No, not at all. The only reason I ended up in East Africa was that I quickly realised when I was at Harvard that I wasn't going to be eligible for any of the grants that the American students were eligible for - because I wasn't an American citizen - so I had to take a particular grant that was specific to Harvard; that was the only kind of way I was going to get money for my fieldwork. And Harvard had a strange outfit called the Child Development Research Unit that was a joint venture with the University of Nairobi and as a result of that you could get permission. It was quite difficult to get permission to do anthropological work in those days, but if you were attached to this unit you were okay on that front, plus you were paid a salary. You weren't actually given a grant and I had to do a certain amount of survey work for them. In fact there was very little I wouldn't have done anyway, so it wasn't very onerous this responsibility, plus you had a sort of semi-position at the University of Nairobi. That all worked out extremely well. But that was the only reason I went to East Africa. I would probably have chosen to go somewhere else in actual fact. And I was worried about East Africa; I was wanting to go somewhere remote - you know the usual stuff - and I was worried that Kenya wouldn't yield up quite what I wanted in that regard, particularly as there was a terribly bad drought in the North at that time or had been in the years before, and my tutor, John Whiting was very unkeen. In fact he said he wouldn't allow me to go to the North because he thought the suffering people were going through would distort the fieldwork; and so he persuaded me to go to some people called the Kipsigis and I went there for the summer before the fieldwork proper started. I didn't feel at

home there at all, although I probably would now, but then - they lived in isolated farms and there didn't appear to be much public communal life and they were very....respectability was a big thing. I just didn't feel at home with them. I didn't take to them, although now I've worked so much in Eastern Europe I think they would remind me of some of the farming peoples there and I would probably get along much better with them. It sounds terribly subjective - I don't know whether I'm supposed to speak like this, but it's all allowed now - but the Maasai I bumped into by chance, not realising they were as famous as they were. They seemed just right for me: they were loud and raucous and regarded themselves if not equal, actually superior to me and I found that much more reassuring as a group of people to work with. So I persuaded John Whiting that he should let me go to the Maasai instead and that's how it all happened, rather haphazard.

AG I think it always is this way with fieldwork. Certainly in my own work I muddled along and made some terrible blunders, but then ended up in a place where I felt comfortable. I think it's right also to go with one's instincts because I know people who stuck it out somewhere they never felt really at home. It sours them somehow.

MLD Also I'm quite a shy person. I think what was difficult about the Kipsigis was I had to make appointments to go and see people and that was terrible for me. Whereas in Maasai you can just see people while they are out. You could just live there and you were automatically....you weren't invited to share people's secrets for a very long time and perhaps never, but they couldn't get around having you there.

AG Had you decided from the beginning that you were going to situate yourself with women and that you were going to focus on things that mattered to women?

MLD I had yes. In 1968 I had run a feminist consciousness-raising group so-called in those days and that had been very important to me; but also I think it gave an ideological justification to my natural bent. I mean, I like the company of women and always have. Feminism allowed one to admit that and to feel it was theoretically OK as well. And also the only serious fieldwork that was done before me in Masaai - there had been some very good colonial officers' reports, which were extraordinarily good - but then there had been an anthropologist and he'd worked exclusively really with the men on political organisation and age grades and it would have been silly for me in a sense to do that, since so little had been done among the Masaai. People think of them as being extremely well-known when actually very little was known of a serious kind and so it made much more sense to look at things connected with women.

AG So was your research on these questions of social reproduction and women going through the series of roles we see in the films and the meaning of them? Was that actually the basis of your fieldwork?

MLD Yes, I think it was. Of course if you're studying women, you're much more immediately studying men than the other way round - you can't sort of exclude them. So then like all anthropologists I became very critical of the person who had gone before me and I spent quite a lot of time trying to work out why I felt that some of what he had said was wrong; and then I realised he was working in a slightly different place and

it was more complicated than I thought. But I did also work quite a lot on men's organisations.

AG At the time, certainly when I was an undergraduate in 1974, this idea of men's worlds and women's worlds had become very topical and it was called women's anthropology. You have indicated that those sorts of things had influenced you. It came out of the women's movement and women in anthropology feeling that women had been neglected. Were you very conscious of this kind of model?

MLD I think that I should be more honest about it in the sense that I was extremely influenced by feminism and I felt like on the road to Damascus, that scales fell from my eyes and I saw the world in a completely new way. So that was very much part of me; but I think I found when I was doing my fieldwork - which is why I have ended up as a film-maker - that I wasn't really suited to....I don't think I'd have made a good anthropologist. The Maasai are extremely articulate for one thing: if you ask them to describe their social system they can do it very well...

AG Yes it comes out very clearly in the films.

MLD ....and I often thought they did it rather better than I did. In the end my fieldwork became very pleasurable and I really spent a lot of the time sitting around and chatting and gossiping and going through various personal redefinitions and so on. I kept forgetting that I was supposed to be there doing a piece of scientific work and I think if someone had told me then that I could think of it as a literary project, I'd have got on a hell of a lot better. But in a way what I should have been doing as a feminist anthropologist ....because there was a much

more serious crisis which was did I really want to be an anthropologist? It would be wrong to say that I was, in any straightforward way, pursuing these goals; but at the same time I felt very identified with the women and interested in their lives. Although I'd read all the stuff, my real technique was chatting and in a way I got overwhelmed with chatting which I enjoyed more than anything else.

AG Would you say that there was a sort of contradiction between the equality of the women's movement, the consciousness-raising groups and this hierarchical professional authority that was certainly very prevalent in anthropology then?

MLD I don't think I thought it through in that way either. I was very conscious that the best I could do personally, not another woman but me, would be to in a way present the people I'd got to know explaining themselves, rather than taking a more over-arching theoretical position. Not because I didn't think somebody else couldn't, but I didn't see my way through that. I did in fact write a couple of academic articles afterwards where I did my best as far as that goes: but I thought after that that I didn't really have very much more to say. I don't know whether theory is the right word any more; I think it was more incapacity than political analysis.

AG Well I feel....I say to my students and it makes me sound ancient, but the change between 1970's anthropology and 1980's anthropology is so dramatic. When I was a student and doing my PhD, it was impossible to imagine that the scientific model would disappear or would....and I also like you left anthropology because I didn't feel

comfortable with it. But now it's a different climate altogether and all these subjective things are legitimate.

MLD Yes. I felt intensely guilty about some of the real relationships that I had. I felt, this isn't right; if anybody found out, it wouldn't do!

AG Exactly. I also...

MLD The advice from one's tutors was always....my tutor was terribly upset that I didn't have a boyfriend or husband, because he felt that would give me the distance that I needed. He liked couples going into the field together because then they don't get too drawn in. Although having read that book I was telling you about - the Rosaldo book (*Culture and Truth*) - it was obvious that they do and to very good effect. When I got back from my fieldwork, I was in a big crisis because I didn't feel that, much as I'd adored my fieldwork, I didn't feel much of an anthropologist. What one earth did one do? So film-making suddenly -it came out of the blue really - seemed the right answer.

AG Had you made any films while you were there?

MLD No.

AG Had you made any films before?

MLD No, I hadn't. I hadn't even taken photographs because they didn't like it.

AG Because it identified individual characters. You make a remark in one of the later films that Maasai have a problem with highlighting particular individuals. Was that the reason why photographs were....

MLD Yes; and also it put you uncomfortably close to tourists although we didn't have tourists in the area I worked, still don't in fact. The men had travelled and met tourists (and the women all knew about it) and it was the tourists that came and tried to rip you off by taking photographs and not paying. I was always distancing myself from that role, and also I was intrigued to discover, when the film started - and of course film crews take photographs and take them back and so on - that until recently, and probably now, people find it difficult to read a photograph; they don't recognise themselves. In the last film, when we showed them the films, it took a bit of time before they were able to read what was going on in the image and then they'd suddenly say "It's me!" and it wasn't the minute they came on the screen. Within an hour people had learnt to read the image. Later on, as the film-making process went on, some Maasai were interested in having a picture of themselves and their family on their wall, because they'd seen this in people's houses. And you'd go to enormous trouble and frame the things and send them back and then you'd find it trampled in the mud a couple of days later because they're just not interested really. But I'm sure that will change.

AG So how did you get into television? Was it by chance?

MLD Well, there was an advertisement in *The Guardian* for people with anthropological backgrounds for "Disappearing World". So I answered the ad. and got the job.

AG And "Disappearing World" ought to have been going two or three years....

MLD Yes, I'm not sure when the title came into being; but maybe it came into being at the same time that I was hired, perhaps not. It was Brian Moser's baby and he had made I think four - he had made other films - but four, I think, must have been called "Disappearing World". I think Charlie Nairn had made one; I don't know whether Brian had done the other three. There was *Last of the Cuiva*, *War of the Gods* and there was *End of the Road*, and wasn't there another one? And the Hugh-Joneses, they were involved with the *War of the Gods*. So there were those; but then Granada had decided to make it a much bigger deal and hire other people in and I was part of that wave.

AG So had the style been established? Did you feel that you were slotting into a series that was already fixed in some ways, formally, or did you feel it was actually time to do new things?

MLD I thought *Last of the Cuiva* was one of the best films I have seen. I haven't seen it for ages, but I suspect I would still think that, if I saw it. I thought it was a wonderful film and I had no problem with trying to make more of them. I was so naive, I probably didn't recognise it in the way I would now....Brian was a very difficult man and I found him above all of us the most difficult to get on with; but I've never for a moment....my admiration for his work was then and remains extremely high. I think initially I was almost trying to copy Brian, or at least his best films - I didn't myself like *War of the Gods* very much. I felt there were unfair tactics of pillorying; I didn't believe the case against the missionaries. I had criticisms of that; but *Last of the Cuiva* remained a beacon for what we were trying to do.

AG What was it about *Last of the Cuiva*?

MLD Well, I saw it as a tremendously compassionate film. It was a film that managed not to make cheap judgements in spite of the fact that the Cuiva were suffering such terrible wrongs, which left you with an enlarged vision of the world and the human predicament. I thought it was a stunning film. I suppose now what I would say -I don't think I would have seen it that way then - is that it also had a very dramatic story to tell, which also helps; but in those days, I think, I would have felt that looking for a dramatic story was not a good thing to do. But now I wouldn't hesitate.

AG What about the role that the anthropologist plays in that film? Was that something that appealed to you, the fact that Bernard Arcand was in the film?

MLD Not really. I think what was wonderful about that film was the real marriage of minds between them: Brian brought something and Bernard Arcand brought something and between them they made an astonishing film. But, on the whole, I'm impatient - very meanly and unfairly -with anthropologists. If I'm making a film, I want to make my own film and that's highly egocentric. So I get very impatient with film-making situations where I can't speak the language. I mean, I have done it; but I don't really enjoy it and actually I would probably be much more tolerant now. The couple of things I've done on Eastern Europe recently, I didn't speak the language and I was able to work through people who - well, in the second case, in Kosovo - who didn't really have ideas about how the film was to go and yet had a wonderful relationship with the people. But working with anthropologists - I've done it twice - was not a huge success. I don't think the anthropologists

would say I was easy to work with either - that's a fault. Someone like Joanna Head works very successfully through somebody else, but I get impatient.

AG So when you were hired by "Disappearing World", was it with the intention of making films with the Maasai people?

MLD No, I wasn't supposed to do that, funnily enough. Hiring us was all ill-thought out. I think we were supposed to go round the world looking for anthropologists in likely situations. It was completely daft actually, and I managed not to take any of these trips, except to America. But some of my colleagues spent ages trying to find them. And I actually did nothing. I really didn't know what I was supposed to do when I arrived and Brian found it difficult to explain to any of us. So, after about six months sitting about doing nothing and trying to avoid being sent to New Guinea, I wrote a treatment for a film on Maasai women. Brian was very anti; he said the Maasai weren't remote enough and everybody's heard of them; but any rate it got made.

AG Did you conceive of *Masai Women* and *Masai Manhood* together as a pair?

MLD No. *Masai Manhood* was completely fortuitous. What happened when we got there, a huge ceremony took place - an age-grading ceremony. It was decided to film it, I think we said for archival purposes. I don't know quite what we said but we got extra footage sent over. I don't think we had any longer in the field, I don't remember. But we came back with all this footage and then it seemed a shame not to try to make it into a film; but it was never conceived as a film. So we ended up using some of the stuff we hadn't used in *Masai Women*

and I think it shows - I think it looks like something slightly cobbled together.

AG It has less integrity, I think, than *Masai Women*, though there are many similarities in the structure of the two of them which maybe I'll come onto in a minute. But did you find it difficult being a fieldworker with a film crew, having done the traditional anthropological fieldwork with a notebook? You went back with a crew. How was that, was it difficult, how did the Maasai respond?

MLD Yes, it was very difficult; but it got progressively easier. The Maasai don't like having their photograph taken or being filmed, so they were extremely....On the other hand, they were always so kind to me. Let me start this answer again. My relationship changed completely when I had the film crew because I became somebody who was taking advantage of them and therefore they should take advantage of me right back, in the friendliest of possible spirits. The Maasai are constantly demanding things from each other, refusing them, grudging them, giving them, demanding of another friend. Friendship and making demands were not seen as incompatible; but I find it incompatible, so when I did my fieldwork I managed to keep them apart by various methods, or in my own head I did. But once you're making a film, people ask you for things non-stop and you can keep it at bay with the people you know, but once you step outside the village to film a ceremony that's taking place in another village or a visitor from another village happens to get in the way of the lens, you can be into....I would spend days negotiating in very little time. But as time has got on, now, the people I know will let me film anything really. But that's also because they're becoming more and more demoralised as people. It is all rather sad in a way.

AG So when you went to make *Masai Women*, did you have clearly in your mind the elements that were going to make up this film?

MLD Yes, I did something I never would do now. I wrote a ten-page treatment. I actually found it a couple of years ago and it was almost exactly like the final film. It was astonishing.

AG Did you know these things were going to happen, such as the preparation and the circumcision?

MLD Yes, there's always the circumcision. If you want to find a circumcision, you can always find one. I suppose that it's possible you could have been there and not happened on one, but if you went at the right season and so on....I suppose we didn't know that the big age-grading ceremony was going to happen. But the Maasai have ceremonies all the time so it wasn't that extraordinary anyway.

AG To some extent those two films are built on ceremonies, on public things happening. Obviously they're very good visually and it's clear that that's what one would focus on; but did you choose them also because those moments revealed something about the society that isn't normally seen or it's not normally so encapsulated?

MLD I think that the ethos of "Disappearing World" was you had to come back with a big spectacle; although personally I find ceremonies quite boring at times. I think it's false to think that people will always watch them. At any rate you had to come back with some pretty exotic footage or you wouldn't have succeeded. But also I think that Maasai ceremonies are not just tacked on to their social life: Maasai see themselves as

people who are at their finest in their ceremonies. I think filming Maasai ceremonies is the right thing to do in many many ways and not filming them in ceremonies is quite an effort. It is partly a sort of politeness thing: they're in their best clothes, they're putting on a performance of which they're proud in a ceremony. If they are staggering out of bed to milk the cows, they're less. I don't know if that answers the question. In a way the ceremonies in *Masai Women* are, I think....the big male ceremony we have at the end of *Masai Women* is wrong in the film. In the actual editing I allowed it to have a life of its own, a rhythm of its own; it threatens to take over the interest in the women, whereas actually it should have been played as pure spectacle. And *Masai Women* is not a serious examination of any ceremonies. I think the only ceremony I've ever done really well in a film is *Women's Olamal*, because there the ceremonial aspect of it is sort of secondary to the desires and hopes of the women who are involved; and therefore, I think, as a viewer, if you can follow subtitles which very few people can, it is not a piece of meaningless ritual, but something which has meaning at every stage. It should and that's the way to do a ceremony, in my view.

AG And you feel that in many ways you didn't do that in the first two films, that you allowed the ceremonies to be in the centre of the film?

MLD The way I conceived of *Masai Women* originally was as a kind of musical, because it had struck me in my fieldwork that the best expression of women's hopes, fears, whatever was through their songs. I wanted each point to be illustrated by a song and that turned out to be more difficult. I would have happened to have written down something and the woman wouldn't have sung it

since two years ago and so on. It was meant to be a musical, not a ceremony film, but inevitably it relied a bit over-much on ceremonies.

AG Though I like the ceremony at the end of the film because I didn't know *Masai Manhood* was pulled together later, as you said. I actually felt it began the process of the next film. It is the continuation, it provides the link with *Masai Manhood*. But also I felt that your whole angle of course is the role of women and children, mothers being proud of sons. So although, yes, it does occupy a big space, we see it through their eyes. So that in fact the whole film is very successful because we see young girls, we see married women, and then we see mothers; and we've actually gone through the three stages.

MLD I don't know whether this justifies it or makes it worse, but in a way what men do in Maasai is that they sort of blast you with glamour and mesmerise the women into thinking that at one particular stage of their lives these are really very wonderful creatures. You can justify the use of ceremony in that way by saying we will mesmerise you the viewer. But it's perhaps that I just allowed myself to be mesmerised by the footage. You can't resist putting that stuff in, it's so stunning and so you're falling into the game.

AG So you have, I think, in those first two films the ingredients you use a lot which are spectacle, interview, conversation and commentary; and, as I said, I think they are very similar in structure - they're really structured around two events. Each film has two events or builds up to two events, mixed in with explanation. Do you feel - I'm sure you've been much criticised for

the over-use of commentary - do you feel that those ingredients actually work quite well?

MLD I think *Masai Women* and *Masai Manhood* seem very old-fashioned. Actually I think it's come full circle. I no longer feel half so ashamed of *Masai Women* and *Masai Manhood* as I do of *The Diary*. Although I went for many years trying never to have any commentary at all in anything, and I think an honest bit of commentary situates the film-maker. The criticism of commentary is that it's the voice of authority that tells you how to read the image and of course it does do that. But if it's a sort of squeaky middle-class woman giving some rather dubious opinions, it doesn't really do that. I don't know. I felt like a missionary in those days, that the Maasai were completely fascinating and absorbing and wonderful and one had to explain it to people and in a way suppress bad things. I think that the circumcision sequence in *Masai Women* is just absurd, horrible. The girls scream the place down of course; we didn't use it.

AG Do you use it though in *Memories and Dreams*?

MLD Yes. It was a whole different way of making films. You know, I had this ten-page outline and we went there to do this and to get this song and this stage in a woman's life and on until the end. There was a thesis which I now no longer agree with that a woman's problem is they don't own cattle; and I now would see it in a completely different light because the theory has moved on and it sets out to explain that. The wonderful thing about film, if you use the medium properly, is that the image is richer and overwhelms your simple message and commentary. I think the film that really exemplifies that, above anything else that I've done, is *Some Women*

of Marrakech, where the footage is twenty times more interesting than the commentary.

AG But also what I like about *The Women's Olamal* that at the beginning one has the feeling that women don't have any power, they have no rights in cattle, they're actually powerless; but as the film evolves we begin to see that it's much more complicated and at many critical moments women assert themselves in quite a remarkable way. But I know that I've read another criticism of the first two films that they present the conventional roles; I think Paul Spencer said that you end up giving the classic functionalist account.

MLD Yes, I think that's probably right.

AG Do you agree with that criticism now - that you show how things ought to happen, rather than how they actually happen?

MLD Yes I do agree with that, I think that's right. It takes a bit of time to develop courage as a film-maker and also it takes a bit of time to have courage to.... When I showed the Marrakech film to a young Moroccan, he made an absolutely key remark that I try and remember whenever I make a film. He said "you're showing too much sympathy and not enough solidarity"; and actually you have to learn the courage to let things hang out. It is partly that you have as a film-maker to indeed encourage the unexpected, certainly not to be afraid of it. But you also have to have the courage to say "I've worked with the Maasai all these years and some of my best friends blah blah blah, but I'm not going to tidy it all up and snip and tuck it so that people can't say anything against them. I think that this is a fascinating way of life, I'm just going to put what I see on the

screen - sod everybody else." But you can't do that when you are starting out in your career, I don't think, or when you've just spent two years with them and are terribly anxious about it. We used to be all terribly anxious about the effect of saying anything negative or implying anything that was critical. The real criticism I get of *Masai Women* is from Kenyans who say that the interview where women talk about adultery is a scandal, and it should not be there. I mean they're really incensed about it, so you can never tell.

AG Yes, you opened with a song to a lover; you were actually very bold in the area of adultery and lovers, even if you backed off from circumcision.

MLD Yes, but that reflects our own view of the matter rather than theirs, so that again is a kind of cowardice, the kind of cowardice I'm talking about.

AG It's easy now to see one has backed off issues, but were you aware at the time, say around circumcision material, that you were putting forward something that was much more acceptable than what you really knew; and that was an ethical issue for you then.

MLD Oh it was a huge ethical issue, absolutely huge. It occupied months of my life and I had a terrible row with a very nice woman called, I've forgotten the name. Anyway she was doing a big anti-circumcision thing for the minority rights people. I had made the mistake of actually shooting, myself, the circumcision and she wanted to see it and I talked about it. It was all a storm in a teacup really, but I felt very, very bad saying that the Maasai did female circumcision at all because at that time it was a tremendous issue with western feminists. I thought that they were dealing with it in the wrong way

and I couldn't quite think what my own arguments were; and I felt what I did was habit, but not habit in the film. It was there but you'd hardly have noticed. So it was a fudge, yes. I wouldn't do that now.

AG I think also the climate in anthropology, as we keep saying, has changed; and I think if you look at your work of the 1970's it's quite in keeping with the way people were writing anthropology too. It's only now that pseudo-scientific accounts have been challenged; so I think it's wrong to judge films twenty years ago against that kind of standard. *Masai Manhood* as you've explained was sort of cobbled together. It certainly doesn't have the feeling that it mattered as much to you. Your interest, as comes out again and again in all the films, is in women, women's experience.

MLD Yes, that's right. Well *Maasai Diary* was supposed to be about the men. It was a real attempt to make a series of films about Maasai men; but it kept sliding back. It's funny.

AG Well that's interesting, because I've made some notes....

MLD *Memories and Dreams* was supposed to be about men just as much too. David MacDougall came to see a rough cut in which we had a tremendously long sequence which I very much liked with some young men who'd gone off and started work in a tourist hotel; and at the end of it he said "Look, you're just not interested in the men -get rid of them! This is all very interesting, but it's not part of your project." So we dumped that entire bit. I have never decided at the outset, except for *Masai Women* or *Women's Olamal*, to film only women; so you wonder where the men have gone because I haven't sort of decided "right! this is all

about women". I'm forever trying to bring in the men. Also they don't interview very well. I find the common truth with men is that they are not nearly as forthcoming - or maybe just not to me. It's probably largely me, but it's partly that men feel they have to present more of a public face. You get much more stereotypical, conventional answers out of men, so I get bored with the interviews too.

AG So the next film is *Women's Olamal*. Had you gone back to the Maasai in between - seven years between the two?

MLD Yes, I had been back a couple of times, not to do films.

AG So what gave you the idea of making the film?

MLD Well that was a mistake too. It wasn't even intended when we started. We got money to do a soap opera, the money was for a documentary soap opera. I think it was supposed to be six half-hour films or something like that. It was to focus on men. It was supposed to be the antidote to development films. I'm talking about *The Diary* now, because that all changed in the execution as well. But anyway we went to do *The Diary* essentially; and when I got there I discovered that the women's olamal....which was the ceremony I'd been through myself some eight years before, I can't remember how many years. At any rate, I had been through the women's olamal and found it quite the most extraordinary aspect of my entire fieldwork; so I had to dump the soap opera for the time being just to do *The Women's Olamal*.

AG And you'd left "Disappearing World" by this time? You left "Disappearing World" because you felt....

MLD No, "Disappearing World" kind of collapsed. There were tremendous union problems and Brian was fed up with all of us (every single one of us individually and collectively), and I got pregnant and, what with one thing and another, practically everybody left at that point. I think everybody left - Andre Singer stayed on.

AG Yes, I think he was there when I was there in 1981. You had all gone and he was still there and then he left about a year later.

MLD Yes, that's right.

AG So how did you persuade the BBC to....

MLD Well, they were trying to court me and Chris (Curling) before I left. In fact it was probably what gave me the courage to leave. They wanted a series out of BBC Bristol, a sort of BBC "Disappearing World", so Chris and I went down to do that. We were supposed to hire other people to direct them; but we ended up directing all but one ourselves. In fact I only ever did one, but then the side project took over everything and that wasn't what the BBC wanted at all. Anyway that's what they got.

AG So you were originally going to make your soap operas which later became *The Diary*, but then you dropped those and just concentrated on *Women's Olamal*. Also, presumably, you learned a lot through the other films you made for "Disappearing World" because the approach is markedly different. But I've also read that the MacDougall films influenced you tremendously.

MLD Well, they had no commentary [they had cards] which I liked; they seemed to be a more serious kind of

enterprise than the "Disappearing World" films, I then thought, because they took far more seriously the perspective of the people in the film, those kind of things. And you could do that and still make a film that was absorbing and mesmerising. But I was very contemptuous then of the audience, with *Olamal* and *Maasai Diary*. I also felt I'd done very well out of the Maasai films and they didn't really reflect the Maasai point of view; and I had this sort of pompous notion that I had, in a way, to give things back to them and ignoring whether anyone in England was going to be interested or watch. I wanted to make some films that would reflect life as they saw it; and *The Diary* was a way of doing that, although I don't think it does in anything like the same way. *Olamal*, I think really, if you were a Maasai and watched it, you would recognise yourself. I believe it looks at life as far as possible from a Maasai point of view, while obviously at the same time it has to be comprehensible to a committed audience. It takes their preoccupations seriously.

AG And *The Wedding Camels* film in the *Turkana Trilogy* obviously gave you the idea....

MLD Although my favourite is not that. It is *To Live with Herds* by far and away.

AG Why did you prefer it when the MacDougalls themselves have criticised *To Live with Herds*? I mean, they think it's too observational, it's kind of spying on them; they moved more to this interactive, conversational type of film.

MLD Brian Moser got hold of *To Live with Herds* and showed it in the Granada theatre to me and the rest of the "Disappearing World" team and I couldn't believe it, I

was so overwhelmed by it; and I didn't realise you could just take a camera and listen to what people were saying and put it on the screen and that it would be so thrilling. There was an honesty and seriousness about the whole enterprise. It was an extraordinary thing for me to see. Obviously, I've never tried to imitate it; I think what I do is very different. But as something that you could do it was very, very important, much more so than the *Turkana Trilogy* ...

AG Had you seen any of Jean Rouch's films?

MLD Yes, I don't know what it is about me and Jean Rouch. There's a sort of resistance there. The thing I like best that I've seen is *Les Maîtres Fous*, extraordinary. I feel Jean Rouch's work is the opposite of what I'm trying to do. I'm trying not to be the narcissistic, quirky, charming film maker. I don't have the capacity or talent to do that. I probably shouldn't say this, but I find some of his stuff irritating.

AG Well I feel that there's something terribly egotistical about all his films; they're all Rouch relentlessly. He's of course held up as the great example that everybody should follow; but I actually think that they are films about himself....

MLD They are; and they're none the worse for that and actually he's brilliant. I think with all the criticisms I'm making, when you see a Rouch film, you don't take your eyes off it. They are extraordinary and he clearly has a most weird and inventive sensibility and imagination; but I think, like many things from French culture, it doesn't influence me directly.

AG So were any other film-makers influencing you at the time, apart from the MacDougalls, that you feel that you used in your work or you tinkered with things?

MLD I'm sure other documentary makers, Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill were extremely influential; and Jana Bokova I think is a wildly underrated film-maker -she's extraordinary and again it's this courage. I think how you use yourself making your films is very crucial; and, in spite of everything I've said about Jean Rouch or I'm glad you said rather than me, if you look at work by Nick and Joan, you see that they bring out in their characters something which is true about them as well as true about the characters. Molly Dineen could never do anything remotely like Nick Broomfield and Bokova again. Joan and Nick bring out the absolute worst in everybody, bring out the latent fascist in everybody they run across. Molly brings out the nicest side, the philosopher in everybody. I think through looking at those kinds of things....the MacDougalls are more detached, but I began to have to try and think about what it was about myself that I could use without pretending that it wasn't affecting the material, that who I am is irrelevant to the kind of stuff that I'm interested in or the way people present themselves. I had to try and use myself to get to the truth about other people. I think that's what all these film-makers do in a brilliant way.

AG So do you feel that your own experience of going through the olamal gave you the depth of experience in terms of relating to the women?

MLD Oh yes. It also made me realise how much the Maasai elders manipulate the ceremony to make the most emotional effect on the people going through it. I mean,

I can't take the sun and I wasn't prepared to wear a hat and the reason was because they want you to be kind of freaked out by the experience and so on.

AG So the kind of crisis structure, to use the Leacock term say, that unfolds in *Women's Olamal*, that is actually something that happens each time the olamal is performed or was that unusual?

MLD No, that's a thing that this technique can't deal with. There was a bad crisis, a particularly bad one; but it's always used as an opportunity for settling old scores. The year of the olamal that I'd not been in the country for, there was probably an even worse crisis, because some woman had attempted to murder her husband by putting cattle dip in his tea; and so all the women, which was about half women in Loita who were part of that thing, weren't allowed to turn up. They couldn't have the ceremony.

AG And this you couldn't know in advance, when you went there to make the film and conceived of it as a long struggle between men and women and peculiar twists and turns?

MLD Oh, I had no idea what was going to happen. I was only really doing that from what I realised about the crisis structure. All the way through the film I kept thinking this is unique to this, and what a shame we weren't going to do the ceremony. Although by the end I was rather upset that something did happen. It would have been rather good if it was cancelled. We were also completely exhausted. It is a crisis structure, but it's not one that the participants see. Every time it is a real crisis. And maybe there are some where there is no crisis; there must be. Sometimes it just gets organised

in a straightforward manner. But all the elements are there for a crisis, if there's a crisis pending.

AG And is this the first film that you had made using, quite consciously, the idea of a narrative of a crisis structure? Had the others been much more event- or argument-based?

MLD Yes, everybody always wants that; but it's so difficult to find.

AG And one gets the impression from watching the film and from what you just said, that you actually stick with it at every point, which becomes totally absorbing and gripping.

MLD And absolutely exhausting. I don't know whether at my age now I would have the stamina to go through something like that again. The cameraman was physically ill by the end of it.

AG As I mentioned earlier, it does open with this statement which implies that women have no power and then of course we see this great event unfolding. Were you conscious of that?

MLD I don't think I really agree with that. Sure, they got their ceremony and they terrified the men with their curse; but elderly women had to agree "Yes, we are children". They got it on the men's terms. They got it; but the whole ceremony reinforces women's helplessness, I think. It's a two-edged sword, of course; but I don't think it shows women having much genuine power. It shows them as stroppy and troublesome.

AG Yes, there's the wonderful old woman who really heads the negotiations with the men....

MLD Yes, amazing woman....

AG ....incredible, so shrewd, thinking all the tactics.

MLD She's a most unusual woman though; I'd have loved to have done something, but she's so terribly elderly. She's still alive though, but she has a very atypical history. She ran away with an Indian at one point and has some half-Indian children and then came back having accumulated a herd of sheep. She's a most unusual woman; and there's a whole story there.

AG Certainly, what it begins to open up - which the early films don't - is the ambiguous area between what ought to happen and what really does happen. It seems to me that there is a very interesting transition between the early films and the late ones in which you increasingly reveal what does happen and the consciousness people have, between what they're supposed to think or feel and what they really think and feel. Were you again aware of that and was that partly what intrigued you?

MLD I think as you get older you get more interested in biography and how individual lives have gone, because you're more interested in assessing your own life and how yours has gone. And I think it's partly an ageing thing that you want the nitty-gritty, you want what actually happened to such and such a person, what hand were they dealt and how did they play it. I think it's as much that as anything else. But also I'd done the public thing. Finding new ways of approaching the Maasai material is quite a struggle.

AG Oh, but I think all of the films are very, very different. I like the way, just watching them as a group, that we're going somewhere new with each of them. I think that that's very striking. And one of the things that does start to emerge - and I think is completed in the last one - are these particular characters. Some of them like Nolpeyeiya we have seen right in the first film; but increasingly we recognise their names for example; and the person that these fully-fledged people really are emerges in the course of the films. You mentioned that you think biography becomes more of a preoccupation than you are aware of.

MLD Yes. One thing is, in *Olamal* there are four main characters and people don't recognise them. I hadn't realised how difficult it is for people to recognise them. I think *Women's Olamal* is more biographical than it seems. It's a story of a rather fat woman who is barren that goes all the way through the film; and on the whole people don't pick that up at all, which is a great disappointment to me. But, yes, absolutely, what I didn't include in *Memories and Dreams* is the great tragedy of Nolpeyeiya's life. I don't know whether that should be the springboard for anything I do in the future. It's frustrating, I'd like to do much more; maybe I should go back and do a biography, but Maasai are very frustrating because they don't like to talk about the past and they don't cultivate their memories; they feel a person shouldn't go around thinking about their childhood - it's over. It's very difficult to do anything directly biographical.

AG It would be an interesting thing to conceive of as a future film. So how did the critics or the anthropologists responded to *Women's Olamal* at the time it was transmitted?

MLD It was extraordinary. There was a huge furore. I mean, lots of people really hated it and some people loved it, fortunately; but my boss was taken to task for allowing such a thing onto the air. It was extraordinary. It all turned out all right in the end; but then several critics went to town on how terrible it was; and, because *The Diary* went out subsequently week after week after week, the ones who hadn't liked it kept coming back and reviewing it again and saying how terrible it was.

AG Because they thought it was long and boring and didn't know what was going on, kind of thing?

MLD Who cares? They even argued among themselves and people wrote to the papers. I never experienced anything like it before or since. It was weird. In fact, I remember I got fantastically good previews for *Women's Olamal*, fantastically bad reviews. And I remember thinking I was just going to go to America for the next six weeks. I couldn't bear it!

AG And what about the anthropologists, had they taken it up as well?

MLD I don't know.

AG I must read the reviews; I haven't done that yet. Certainly I've never come across it in my teaching or reading, which I think is a scandal.

MLD Yes, people ignore the Maasai stuff, it's odd. And yet other films I don't think are quite as interesting.... I don't know why that is.

AG It's partly because film itself is just marginal in anthropology; but I think that the fact you've been

filming there for twenty years makes a very interesting body of work.

MLD But also it's not on the academic circuit. It's telly.

AG Was *The Diary* shot at the same time as the *Women's Olamal*?

MLD No, it was shot a year later.

AG And you give the impression that you weren't actually all that happy with the idea of doing a soap opera.

MLD No no, I was. But for me it's a great failure is The Diary. I feel embarrassed watching it now.

AG Why?

MLD I think it was terribly pretentious: very little of it really works or sticks together. I mean, I think if you're forced to watch it all you do come away with something quite interesting. But who's going to sit down and watch nearly five hours of film? Well you do, you have to. I think that the commentary at the front is so embarrassing, I half think I'm going to pay to have it removed.

AG Your recapitulation....if you hear it again and again, I suppose. I think it's very intriguing the way that you say this is not going to be an argument or a story, but a series of episodes in the life of a village.

MLD There was a whole intellectual agenda which I never got straight in my head, which is why I'm not an anthropologist. I'm not very logical, not very good at thinking through an argument; and I think that there are

strengths and weaknesses to that if you become a film-maker. You had to be either against or in favour of development in that period; and I was trying to make a film which didn't....it was a negative thing. We won't look at development as a phenomenon; we will look at how individuals in their everyday lives deal with some things that could be called development, some things that couldn't. In the event, the only thing that remotely resembled development was somebody being put in prison; but maybe that's interesting in itself. But they were supposed to be much more about land rights. The Maasai have been threatened with losing their land ever since I've been working there. They still haven't; but I keep going there expecting to film meetings. It's a terribly subtle process and you can't really film it.

AG So was part of your stimulation for doing this film the fact that the outside world hadn't really impinged on the Maasai in your other films?

MLD Yes, I deliberately - for perhaps reprehensible reasons in the first two, *Masai Manhood* and *Masai Women* -cut out reference to the outside world; and *Women's Olamal* too, for perfectly valid reasons. There was no outside world, given the project of the film. That's why *Diary* is supposed to be about men, because it's men who interact more with the forces outside the village, outside Loita, outside Maasai culture, however one wants to define these things.

AG Did you have a model in mind? It's difficult to think that you did, because it seems very unusual?

MLD Yes, I wanted it to be like a genuine soap opera; but that proved impossible because I didn't realise....it wasn't until I was in the thick of it that I realised that actually

to explain to a white audience what's going on is very complicated and you can't use the best stories because they're incomprehensible. You can take something complicated and make a whole film about it; but, if you're using strands of different stories which are supposed to build up over time, it's just not possible. I couldn't use anything to do with age grades, because you would have had to have a five-minute lecture explaining what was going on; and that was against the whole ethos of what we were trying to do. So it just proved very, very difficult to do; and a lot of stories begin and end on one episode, so-called stories. In the end it just became literally what it was called, *The Diary*. We'd hang around the village and watch what was happening, although of course that's rather problematic, what I thought could be defined as an event.

AG So you literally went there and said "OK, we'll just see what turns up"?

MLD Yes, absolutely.

AG And was that very terrifying whilst you were there?

MLD No, things were always happening.

AG The problem was, when you were editing, to find things that had some continuity?

MLD And mostly what happens in Maasai villages is the organisation of ceremonies. As I say, that seemed to me not a good thing to do in this particular format because of the weight of explanation. There's a rather good scene at the end of number two where some warriors come and have to placate an elder; but even then the

rather flimsy little sequences were overwhelmed by commentary explaining what was going on. That was not what I had intended, but it was a compromise.

AG But the arrest certainly provides you with the strongest narrative. At the time were you aware that that was going to be the dominating story?

MLD Yes.

AG I actually find it a very intriguing series. I love the fact that some things don't get resolved and that it is a mixture of everyday, little things and these bigger issues; and I think that it actually works remarkably well. I think it's very subtly constructed - for example, *The Two Journeys* and *Two Mothers*. Presumably these really came together in editing.

MLD Yes, but of course we were terribly constrained by time. There was a tremendous debate in the editing room and I must mention Dai Vaughan who's edited everything except the last one, without whom none of this would have been possible. But literally, Dai's been fantastic throughout; and he felt strongly that in order to reach some higher truth we should feel free to occasionally change the dates, change the order of things; and eventually I agreed in a few, very minor ways. But I basically felt - I suppose the old anthropologist in me - one had to be telling the truth about when things happened; that what one was doing was making a record. He said that we had monkeyed about so much with the story to make it palatable and to make the rhythms right, you should be able to play around a bit. And, as I say, we did occasionally change the date; but, broadly speaking, we stuck to it and that's very

confining also in terms of making the thing work dramatically. It was a real struggle.

AG And you feel you didn't get it right, you're not entirely satisfied?

MLD Well, when I had to look at them again to show them to the village, in *Memories and Dreams*, I thought "Oh my God!", I really felt quite appalled by it. I don't feel it really works.

AG But don't you feel that it was....

MLD I think that if you were a student studying the Maasai, it would be invaluable if you wanted to discover what the people were doing in the village. I mean there's nothing else quite like it. But as a general viewer I think it shows. But people adored it by the end; critics who hadn't hated it really loved it by the end and felt moved by it.

AG I think it does reflect the quality of everyday life: it never is neat and orderly and resolvable in the way maybe your other films convey. That for me is what's so satisfying about it.

MLD That's what is was supposed to do. But when you take that central narrative about the arrest, I didn't film it properly because I didn't have a clue what was going on. What I didn't realise till a long way down the event was that the Maasai didn't understand the difference between bribe, fee and fine. They were operating in terms of a different set of categories as to what was going on than I was. So I couldn't figure out what was going on at all for ages; and what was going on was rather nebulous. The lawyer just wasn't taking any

notice. He was just taking their money and not doing any work and utilising the fact that they didn't understand anything. I suppose I maybe should have explained that; but then we couldn't film the lawyer. It was all so difficult.

AG But you do make it clear in this film that they can ask you for money or a loan. It's hinted at in some of the other films - maybe in the *Olamal* where there was some suggestion you bring some tea. But you actually make it explicit.

MLD Yes. Well, I think it's very important; and also the people say it on film, so you have to take the decision whether to cut it out or leave it in. I would never have left it in, obviously, in *Masai Women* and *Masai Manhood*; and also it wouldn't have happened on film because the thing's filmed in so much more of a structured, formal kind of way. But once you start filming in a more casual way it begins to come out.

AG What also I like about it is that we're back in the familiar territory of the early films. We see the organisation of the marriage. I think that the sequence where the bride walks from one village to the new one is very dramatic. It's most extraordinary, just her walking.

MLD And then she's so sweet in the subsequent film. It's my favourite moment in *Memories and Dreams* when she says she was pregnant all the time.

AG I thought just in terms of symmetries of journeys and people going one way from the familiar to the unfamiliar, there were some very interesting structural things.

MLD Maybe I'll come round to it in another ten years.

AG Alright, finally let's go to *Memories and Dreams*. I had a feeling about this film that it was the last one you were going to make; but now you suggest it might not be....

MLD Well I don't know, who knows? I don't know if anyone would give me any more money.

AG But I felt there was a feeling of finality about it. Did you feel that yourself, that maybe you'd come to the end?

MLD I don't know. I kind of made that film with my eyes closed. It's a very strange film; I didn't really make it with any effort. It's odd, that film; I don't know quite what to make of it myself. I went there with a particular intention; but, owing to various things going on emotionally in my life, I kind of shut my eyes and just let it happen. So it's quite different, I think, than the other films. It was made without any sort of intentionality on my part - it's weird. It was meant to be more personal than any of the other ones -sort of "how have I done, how have you done, how do we feel about being middle-aged?" is really what it's supposed to be about. But it isn't quite about that; I don't know what it's about. And then it's a general "What's happened to people?" kind of thing.

AG Well, I certainly find it a very unsettling film, because it reveals choices and anxieties and fears; and of course the character of Loise is a very unsettling one. The film begins to reveal the gaps between people's expectations and what they really have.

MLD That's what I meant to do. Loise, what we reveal about her is, such a shallow version of what's really going on.

She would have done better I think.... she's in a far more unhappy situation than it appears from the film. She has been taken up by some appalling Christians....Anyway, yes, that is exactly what it's meant to be. It's meant to be a rather sad, melancholy film, because I was in a rather sad, melancholy mood and it was to be a sort of assessment. But again, because of the editing for drama and so on, the really bad thing which had happened is that Nolpeyeiya's daughter had died of what I think is AIDS and left two orphaned children since her husband has disowned her. I didn't use that in the end, because again I suppose of the sort of reasons that I didn't use the circumcision. If you mention the word "AIDS", it sort of overwhelms. I mean she was dying in the film; she died shortly after. I filmed some stuff around it, but not with quite the conviction I should have. It may not have been AIDS, but I very strongly suspect that it was. So again one tells sort of half-truths in the end. It's around that, I suspect, if I ever go back, I will have to do something around Nolpeyeiya. I don't know....

AG It's certainly the most biographical film. I mean, it would be a natural development to make such a film. We see the characters not only talking about their social roles, but actually about the unconscious or about memories, dreams - the things that have so often been completely excluded from anthropology - not just what people think, but what they fantasise about and dream about.

MLD Well again, another failure I think of the film, a really massive failure, owing to my lack of concentration, is that what I should have made clearer. I mean, it really fascinates me and I'm very sad that I didn't do it better; but the way Maasai think about themselves is very different than we do; and, for example, as I've said to

you before, if you ask for memories, they can't really give you any or they give you completely conventional memories. The only way you can get at them is to ask for a dream and then you get something that is halfway between a memory and a dream. Unless you get a real dream, sometimes you get what we would think of as a dream; but often, if you want a memory, you get at it through this notion of a dream. There's something very interesting about all that and about the way they see their lives as age-graded - that when you're a woman, it's childish to think about when you were a child. They don't think of themselves like we do as sort of heroes of their own story, in which you cultivate your memories that make you a unique individual. They are, though, the whole time, trying to be a conventional representative of the stage they're supposed to be at. And for Maasai, the great tragedy is that they fall short of that. Loise, she has no children; she hasn't made it to that stage and it's not that she hasn't made it as a unique individual, on the contrary. And I think all these issues are kind of there but not there. I wish I'd been able to do something slightly more along those lines. But yes, getting a fantasy was the interesting part of that.

AG Had you had those kinds of conversations with them before?

MLD No. All the best material was in the research for this film. I had wonderful conversations. But again, if you're going down this no commentary route and you're trying for mood and beauty and melancholy and if a woman has a memory about her husband slaughtering a goat with her, you have to put in quite a lot of commentary explaining why it's significant. It's quite difficult.

AG And what do you feel about the material that you used in past films that was in the film?

MLD I intended to use about twenty minutes; but in fact it got dwindled down to about nine minutes, I think. It's funny because there are snatches in the end. It's intellectually very dubious because what are we saying? Are we saying "It's what happened" or are we saying "It's the memories of the people"? We use it in a slipshod way; but there we are, that's what we did.

AG The film does have that potential of you being able to juxtapose things.

MLD Yes, I think there's two bits I really like in that film. One is the girl who says she looks terribly beautiful. I adore that. Again that's interesting because we were squashed into a bed, about half the size of the stable, her bed, me and the cameraman with whom she was flirting. That whole thing came out of a particular situation; but nevertheless it has a truth. But the other bit I adore is Sayeen, who is the woman who sings in the *Masai Women* to a cow, who's had a very, very sad life in the interval, talking about the glory days and how strong and big the young men used to be. And to me there's something really universal about that. I mean of course she talking about a society that's in decline and I'm sure it is now; and a culture that's losing its centrality and its richness. But she's also talking about what is missing. The men are all so young now and puny.

AG So in fact you've come back almost to where "Disappearing World" was at the beginning, in that you're concerned with the encroachment on or disintegration of native life.

MLD For "Disappearing World" it was a matter of principle. I think if you go to Masaai land, you can't but weep over it. I mean they no longer feel they're the centre of their own universe; that has a very, very profound effect on everything.

AG I feel that all the films are very personal films; they're all your films and I think there is something very distinctive about them. But we hardly ever see you in the films. Now it's become very fashionable for us to see film-makers. Do you feel that you've revealed enough of yourself in the films as they are?

MLD Well we used to shoot stuff of me in the films, but I've given up now. Partly because it never got used. Actually I'm in *Masai Manhood*; but I think I spoil the view. I think there's something very beautiful about the Maasai way of life and a great white woman in the film sort of spoils the effect. It sounds deeply frivolous, but it's actually the truth; that's what I think.

AG It would actually distract people....

MLD ....being absorbed, yes, I want people to see what I see; I don't think I really want them to see me seeing it. And once you see a white person in a film about black people, it gets so complicated and difficult and the effort of understanding another culture and so on, you kind of latch onto the white person, you start thinking about them, I think. We always used to make the attempt, but then it would end up on the cutting room floor.

AG You don't have any more plans to make Maasai films, except the possibility that maybe you'll do a portrait?

MLD It's all related to money, isn't it? I wanted to do a very short series on Maasai poetry, but I don't know who would give me the money. Trying to illustrate visually .... Their poetry is so densely metaphorical, nobody would watch it in England; but somebody needs to go and take one, maybe a short verse of five different sorts of thing very seriously and film around what it means, film the trees that they're comparing people's hair styles to. Just so that there's a record of it before it all disappears. That's the only thing I have immediately in mind.

AG Do the Maasai people themselves have any notion of your films as being an important record?

MLD No I don't think so. Well so-called educated Maasai do; but I think they're on the whole rather anti them, not all.

AG Why, because they feel it shows them as 'primitive'?

MLD Yes. Having said that, there are people who like them. They also show, as they would see it, the disreputable side of them, not behaving as they should.

AG One last question which I should have asked you, concerns the use in *Memories and Dreams* of the girl's screams from the circumcision which is very shocking. Why did you decide to include it in this last film when you couldn't use it in *Masai Women*?

MLD Because I thought I could. I thought it was possible now. I just had the courage to say this. The main reason is we had the woman who is screaming eighteen years later looking terrific, healthy and raunchy and she'd survived it and so it seemed possible to use it. Whereas, if you're thinking "Is she going to die?", it's actually

probably unusable. I mean, not all girls scream, obviously. Actually, I'll tell you another reason we used it - this is really shameful, but anyway - because I was in such a dream making *Memories and Dreams* and also because I feel desperately guilty about filming circumcisions anyway, I got everybody up too late to film. We needed a shot of the little girl going into the hut and we all arrived at the village five minutes too late; we were on a camp two minutes away and I somehow fluffed it, half on purpose I think; so we were left without a dramatic centre. So I had to do something pretty dramatic to make you feel she'd been circumcised, that was the other reason.

AG Well it certainly works very well....

MLD I think it does work well.

AG ....to have these women saying what a happy occasion it all is. And I actually feel that it's the right place.

MLD I think it's OK. I feel OK about that now.

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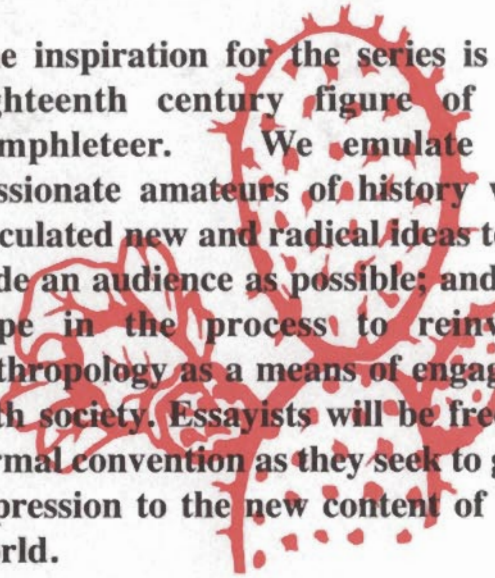

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