

Amina Ali
An Essay by Masha Hamilton

So there I was, with my bottled water and organic dried fruits under the seat of the Land Rover, already dusty but expecting to get a shower at the hotel at day's end. And there she was under the unforgiving sun, prayer beads dangling around her neck, a flamboyant red dress hanging from her thin body, describing what it was like to go four days without food or water.

"Amina Ali," she said, pointing at herself.

Sometimes I think we don't understand a thing until it stares us straight in the face, until we can reach out and touch it. Before traveling to the isolated North East Province of Kenya, I'd read about this drought and famine. I'd read 3.5 million people affected in the northern reaches of sub-Saharan Kenya. "The world has not appreciated in last 60 days how serious this situation is. We are now in a crisis. We are in a life saving mode," World Food Program chief James Morris said this month.

At what point do numbers become so vast that they lose meaning? At what point do we need multitudes reduced to just one?

Amina Ali was 80 years old. She'd raised nine children in the African bush. She was illiterate; she'd lost teeth; she was malnourished. Still, she could talk, she said. That's one thing she could do; she could talk, and God willing, it might help, because nothing else seemed to. Nothing else in a country where the rains wouldn't come, except in spits, and where food aid ended up in shops, due to corruption, and where Amina Ali, a lifelong nomad, had already watched her entire herd of 40 goats starve to death and now had nowhere left to roam.

She sat down on the ground and gestured for me to sit, too.

That alone was a minor act of bravery. I was a strange sight in the North East Province. I was sometimes told I was the first white face the children had ever seen. I would extend my hand, and they would back away in alarm. After a while, a braver one might reach hesitantly forward to touch my fingers with their own. And then, like a rain cloud releasing a downpour, they all rushed forward then, giggling, touching my shirt and my arm and my hair.

Sometimes in unfamiliar places, I've been so moved by how quickly women welcome me into their company, sweep me into their circle even when we don't share a culture or a language. But here, among a loose collection of a few scattered grass huts, many of the women were reluctant to speak; they were shy or afraid or distrustful.

Not Amina Ali.

It wasn't that she hoped for anything tangible from me. I'd already given away all the maize and cooking oil I'd brought. I had water in my pack, but kept it out of sight. How could I bring it out, unless I had enough for all of them? And I didn't.

Because of the drought, livestock – the sole basis of most livelihoods in this area – also are in large numbers: in some places, travelers can smell the stench of cattle carcasses that lie rotting on dry, cracked ground.

But getting food and water to Amina Ali and her neighbors and grandchildren is not a simple matter. Nomads tend to be on the move, and corruption is a perennial problem in Kenya that impacts the arrival of food supplies to remote places.

Amina Ali grew up a nomad girl, traveling with her parents and their camels and their livestock in a desert land where borders on printed maps don't count, where one is not considered Kenyan or Ethiopian or Somali. Water rights do matter, though. Water rights matter so much in this arid land, in fact, that sometimes tribes battle and people die over them.

There is a rough and violent beauty to this land, something that makes you feel wild and eternal at once. A bit to the south, visitors go out on safari to experience it. In the North East Province, where safaris are not offered, it is a beauty perhaps best experienced on foot, walking next to a camel.

The nomads understand that beauty; in some ways, they live for it. That's why they've endured the hardships of their lives in a place where the only way to survive and support a family is to raise goats and cattle and camel, as their father did, and his father before him and so on.

Amina Ali had only a loose sense of her own history. Dates were impossible and there was much she couldn't remember. But she vividly described her life as a young mother, living close to her children, close to the land. Amina Ali would give anything for a return to that life, but her children say she must stay in one place, waiting for food deliveries.

"I had my animals, my milk and meat," she said. "My children looked after the herds. It was the best life. Now all that is gone. Now I wait for food, and I dream of the freedom of the old days."