

# THE MAASAI GIRL

A film by Charity Resian Nampaso & Andrea Iannetta

 **Robert Bosch**  
Stiftung

LITERARISCHES  
COLLOQUIUM  
BERLIN LCB



 **AIDOS**  
ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA  
DONNE PER LO SVILUPPO







THE MAASAI GIRL is a coming-of-age film about the courage of Resian, a 16-year-old girl living in a remote village in the Maasai Mara in Kenya.

For all the girls in her community genital mutilation is an obligatory rite of passage. Resian, however, inspired by a film she sees at school, decides to oppose the tradition, thereby clashing with her father and older members of the village. Her mother is the only one who supports her. To avoid the practice they plan an escape from the village, albeit without completely cutting off contacts with the rest of the family.

What will be the price Resian and her mother will have to pay for this escape? Will Resian be able to avoid mutilation? And what impact will these actions have on the relationships within the family and throughout the larger community?

The film is based on a true story. The main character, also co-author of the film, is a courageous woman who fights for her freedom and for the power to decide about her own life.

With the support of :



GENRE : Drama, Coming-of-Age Movie

LOCATION : Kenya (Maasai Mara, Narok Town, Nairobi)

DURATION : 100 Minutes

TARGET AUDIENCES : Audiences with interest in human rights, women's empowerment and gender equality ;

Adolescents and young audience (suitable for schools and educational events) ;

Awareness campaigns against female genital mutilation ;

Global audiences with an interest in African culture, Audiences living in Sub-Saharan Africa, African diaspora worldwide ;

Art house cinema lovers and film festival audiences.

RECOGNITIONS : The research video "**Against All Odds**" produced in the framework of a project by AIDOS - Italian Association for Women in Development - **won Le Poulain d'Or (1st Prize)** in the short documentary section of **FESPACO Film Festival 2019** (Burkina Faso) and the **Courage Film Festival Berlin 2019**.

In 2020, **the project was financed with research funds from the Grenzgänger program of the Robert Bosch Foundation**. Due to the pandemic, the research trip was postponed to November 2021 and the final research report was completed in 2022.



*Resian's grandmother and other family members.*





*The Maasai Mara seen from the Rift Valley.*



# THE STORY

The Maasai inhabit the magnificent, vast expanses of the East African savannah. They share this land with fantastic wildlife and their culture is rich in beautiful and ancient traditions. Among these is one that is extremely harmful to girls: female genital mutilation as a rite of passage to adulthood.

In the village where Resian was born, the tradition was that all girls underwent the practice. Once a girl was old enough, the family would arrange a ceremony by calling to their home the circumciser, an elderly woman experienced in performing "the cut". Over the years, Resian and her mother, Evalyne, had actively participated in those ceremonies. Evalyne was one of three women typically enlisted to hold the girl down while the circumciser performed the cut with a razor blade.

As the girl screamed and wriggled, the flowing blood would be collected in a cowhide used specifically for the ritual. Resian would be assigned to pour iced water over the girl's body to ease her pain. After a while, exhausted and as though in a trance, the girl, her legs tied with ropes, was left suffering on the ground for the wound to heal. Outside the house, the community would joyfully celebrate by eating meat, singing and drinking a traditional alcoholic beverage.

Resian's father, James, a cattle rancher belonging to a prominent landowning family, cared deeply about the education of his children and repeatedly told them how important going



*Resian's village community in the Maasai Mara.*



*Resian's mother, Evalyne.*



*A girl is prepared for the ritual of circumcision. ( from the web)*

*Resian's family house.*







*James, Resian and one of her brothers.*

to school was for their future.

However, Resian did not like the local school. Every morning she had to walk many miles to get there. Her classes so often seemed boring and repetitive to her. She and other classmates would stop halfway, and sneak into the bushes to spend many hours playing. Later, at the end of the school day, she would return home, as though nothing had happened.

One day the principal, suspicious of the repeated absence of Resian and her classmates, discovered their hiding place and dragged the misbehaving students back to the school. There he gave them a severe punishment. In front of all of the other students, they were made to crawl across the courtyard on their knees to the principal's office, leaving their knees bloodied and bruised. This was a painful and humiliating experience. As if that



*Schoolgirls playing soccer at the local school.*



*A classroom at the local school.*

was not enough, upon returning home, the students would face their parents.

While most students were punished once again, Resian's father had a different response. He remained calm and told Resian that since she did not like the local school, he would send her to a better one. The next day he took Resian to the barbershop to have her head shaved; a requirement of the new school. He had her pack her belongings in a metal trunk and then drove her to the Saint Mary's, a boarding school for girls located in Narok, the main town in the region.

This was the beginning of a new life for Resian. Saint Mary's was run with strict rules and codes of conduct. Resian did not adapt well to the structure. She often felt alone and had difficulty fitting in and was not making any friends.

One morning a group of missionaries came to visit the school,

bringing with them an object that Resian had never seen before: an old movie projector. The schoolgirls were gathered in the large dining hall. The windows had been covered with thick black sheets. Resian sat in the front row, curious and excited to watch a movie for the first time in her life.

The film shown was about female circumcision, the ritual that Resian was so well acquainted with. The setting was a small village. As women sang and danced, a young girl was laid out on a leather mat and with the help of three women holding her down a circumciser performed the cut. Right after, however, something did not go right. The girl was losing a lot of blood. The women tried to stop the bleeding, but the wound was too deep and the girl bled to death. In the final scene her lifeless body was carried in a funeral procession throughout the village.

The lights in the dining hall came back on. The girls were now stunned and frightened. Resian was horrified. She never thought that what she had many times participated in could lead to such a terrible outcome. Following the screening, one of the



*Children watching a film. (from the web)*

missionaries went onto the stage and showed the girls technical drawings and explained in detail the harmful consequences of what he did not call "circumcision", rather "female genital mutilation". This experience troubled Resian deeply. That night in the dormitory she was unable to fall asleep as the terrible images flooded her mind.

A few weeks later when Christmas vacation began, Resian returned to her parents' home. One afternoon, while washing clothes at the river, her mother, Evalyne, informed Resian that she was now old enough to be circumcised, which would be performed before returning to school from the Christmas holiday. This announcement terrified Resian, but she remained silent, uncertain how to respond. Later, while on their way home, she found the courage to tell her mother about the film she had seen at school and that she did not want to be circumcised. Her mother smacked Resian's head and told her not to tell anyone about the strange ideas the school had put into her mind.



*Saint Mary boarding school in Narok.*





*Razor blade used for the female circumcision. (from the web)*

A few days passed and James instructed Resian's mother to arrange the ceremony. But Resian again said that she did not want to do it. Embarrassed, Evalyne reported the news to her husband and a conflict erupted in the home. Enraged, James called the maternal grandmother to come by to convince Resian to accept what everyone in the family considered to be her destiny. The grandmother spent an entire day speaking with Resian in the courtyard, trying hard to encourage her to give in. Without circumcision Resian would not become a "real" woman, the community would marginalize her, she would be unable to marry and, most importantly, shame would be brought to the entire family.

Resian felt lost and confused. That evening she could not eat anything and retired early to her room. Worried, Evalyne came to comfort Resian and found her in tears. She was now telling her mother that if the honor of the family was at stake, she would accept her destiny. But Evalyne reacted in an unexpected way. Making sure that no one was listening to their conversation, Resian's mother confessed that she herself was having doubts

about circumcision. Having spent a lot of time studying the Bible with other women of the village she had noted that the Bible only mentions male circumcision. This led Evalyne to question the practice on women.

In the coming days James, under pressure from one of his older brothers, decided to organize the ceremony anyway. Without telling his wife, he instructed the grandmother to call the circumciser to their home the next day. But Evalyne eavesdropped at the bedroom door and learned about James's plan. To save her daughter, Evalyne made the difficult decision that she and Resian would run away from home, together.

Early the next day, following her mother's instructions, Resian wrapped her belongings in a sheet, as though she was going to wash clothes at the river. She then joined her mother who was waiting for her on the main road. With a "matatu" (collective taxi) they traveled to Narok town and took refuge in a coffee shop. However, Evalyne did not know what to do. Luckily, through the shop window, she spied a priest who she thought she could trust and confided in him. The priest responded that he was unable to help her, but asked if she could turn to any members of her family who opposed the practice. At first



*A matatu (collective taxi).*





Street view of Narok Town.

Evalyne could not think of anyone but then, two distant relatives came to mind. After a short telephone call with her Uncle Mark, he and his wife arrived to pick them up.

Evalyne remained hidden at their home for several days while Resian was taken to Nairobi, to the home of her paternal uncle, David; her father's older half-brother. Uncle David had studied in Germany and was a well-traveled man. He led a more modern and progressive life and had not allowed his two daughters be circumcised. Evalyne and Uncle Mark believed that Resian would be safe in David's home. Moreover, in this way, they would not completely cut off relations with her father's family.

Uncle Mark took Resian to Nairobi and as the matatu ascended the winding mountain road from the Great Rift Valley, Resian looked back and marveled at the immense expanse of the Maasai Mara. Taking in the breathtaking landscape, she could not avoid thinking how simultaneously beautiful and cursed her homeland was.



The Great Rift Valley, view point.

Once they reached Nairobi she felt overwhelmed by the noise, the traffic and the pollution of the city. A local taxi took them to Uncle David's home, where she was taken into the bedroom of her cousins. Meanwhile, her two uncles had a long conversation in the living room at the end of which Uncle David agreed to take Resian under his protection.



A street in Nairobi.





*Uncle David and his family.*

The “bourgeois” manners of the family, the way they behaved at the table, how they dressed and the presence of servants in the home were all new to Resian. During her stay, Resian’s cousins took care of her. They took her to the market to buy her new clothes and to have her hair done, and showed her how to put on make-up. During the following days they even taught her how to ride a bicycle. For the very first time Resian felt like a modern girl; she felt light and happy. However, the moment was short lived.

Soon thereafter, Resian’s father came to take her back home. But before they left, Uncle David made Resian’s father promise that he would respect Resian’s wishes and refrain from pressuring her about circumcision. He agreed. However, on the way home her father appeared to be in a terrible mood. Not a single word was exchanged between them during the entire journey. The atmosphere was tense and heavy.

Meanwhile, Evalyne had also returned home. The family was reunited, yet everything had changed. James was angry with his wife for having arranged the escape and because things had not gone the way he had wanted. Within a few days, he resumed



*Nairobi at sunset.*



talking about circumcision and put pressure on Evalyne, telling her that Resian was the eldest daughter and, therefore, it would make sense to circumcise her and then, maybe, drop the practice with the two younger daughters. The conflict returned.

One morning as Evalyne was sweeping the courtyard, James, filled with frustration, erupted, screamed at his wife and accused her of being his downfall. He asserted that she was responsible for their daughter's transgressive ideas. Frightened, Evalyne tried to ignore him, but James lost control and beat her.

School resumed and Resian returned to Saint Marys'. She soon sank into a state of deep sadness, suffering at the separation from her family and consumed by a strong sense of guilt. Meanwhile words about Resian's refusal had spread throughout the village and people on the streets began giving her parents disdainful looks. One afternoon when Resian was back home for Easter holiday, she accompanied her mother to the market and experienced directly the state of disgrace into which the family had fallen. People looked at her and her mother strangely. She could sense the venom and gossip swirling around them. A woman refused to sell them fruits, claiming that Resian was "impure". Another woman echoed these words. Resian felt deeply ashamed. Back in her home, she retreated to her bed and did not want to get up.

Over the following months she felt lonely and depressed. She withdrew and had no desire to socialize with peers. At night she was overcome by nightmares. In the meantime, the relationship between James and Evalyne remained extremely tense. They were sleeping in separate beds and James was now threatening to repudiate Evalyne and remarry. This situation continued for a while.

Then, one day after a class, a teacher who had noticed Resian's



*The street market close from the village.*

state of distress took her aside to speak privately. Her name was Mrs. Kina. She belonged to the Mijikenda, a tribe that lives on the coastal area of Kenya and, unlike the Maasai, does not practice female genital mutilation. Mrs Kina took Resian to her office and asked her to share what was troubling her. Initially, Resian was reluctant, but thanks to Mrs Kina's kind and loving manner Resian found the courage to open up and told her the whole story.

Mrs Kina listened to every word carefully, showing support. She told Resian that what was happening to her was far beyond what a girl of her age should be dealing with and that she should not feel guilty about her situation. Before letting her go Mrs Kina also assured Resian that she would do everything in her power to help her. Resian exited the office and felt immensely relieved.

A few days later, James was summoned to Saint Mary's, for a meeting with the head of the school and Mrs. Kina. Following the meeting James went to see his daughter. Resian was surprised to find him looking calm and peaceful, as he handed





*Resian and her teacher Mrs. Kina.*

her a small gift. She opened the colorful package. It was an ink pen. Once again, her father emphasized that doing well in school would make a difference to her future. He then went back to his car and drove away.

Sometime later, Resian finally received some good news from her mother. At home things had begun improving. James seemed to have changed his attitude toward the family. Evalyne's determination was finally paying off. James had come to understand that holding to his traditional views about circumcision risked destroying his family.

As was the tradition, a few days before end-of-year examinations, all Saint Mary's parents were invited to the school for a ceremony to wish the students good results with their final exams. On this occasion, Resian unexpectedly asked that her mother remain home, so that Resian could meet with her father alone. Following the ceremony she and her father went for a walk in the school garden. They remained silent for a long time. Resian could feel that something was now different, her father's presence no longer felt threatening to her.

They sat on a bench and Resian finally found the courage to express her feelings. She told her father how his behavior had negatively affected her, and that because of the way he had treated her and her mother she had stopped loving him as a father. James was struck by her words. After a long pause, he responded that he was very sorry. In truth, he had behaved out of fear of judgment from his elders and had been worried about Resian's future. He then took her hand and asked for forgiveness. Resian could not hold back her tears.



*James, Resian and a schoolmate.*

A few days later, at a large family gathering, James officially announced that none of his daughters would be circumcised. Reactions among family members were mixed. Some celebrated his new position, while others strongly disapproved. An older brother stood up and loudly said that he did not agree with James' choice and reasserted that circumcision is a fundamental ritual in the Maasai culture and that an uncircumcised woman cannot be considered a real woman.

THE END





Schoolgirls at Saint Mary Boarding School.





## STYLE

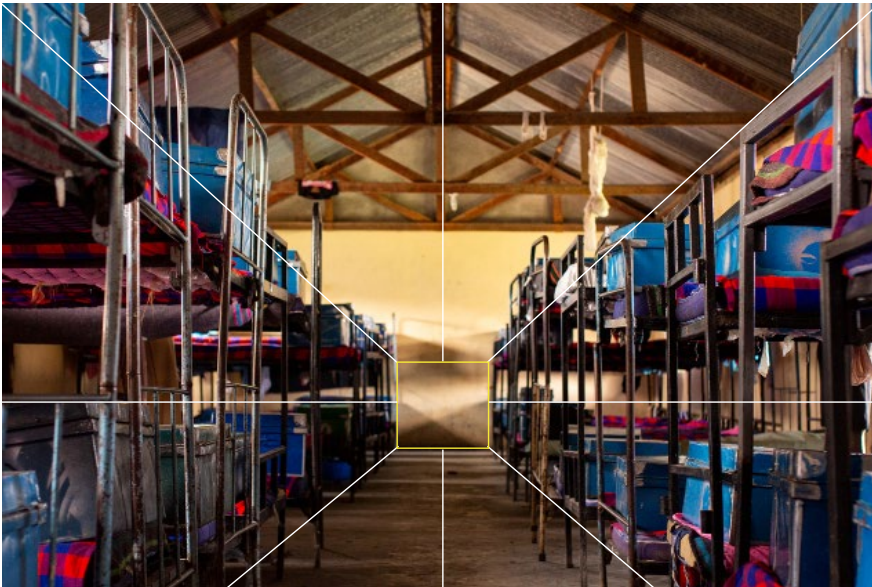
The story is told from the protagonist's point of view. Peaceful and dramatic moments alternate, reproducing the complexity and sudden succession of emotions typical of adolescents. In order to set a contemplative mood, the camera remains static, with slight breathing and a prevalence of wide shots. In this way, the environment plays a significant role in establishing the atmosphere. In moments of intimacy, the camera then is placed closer to focus on details and emotions. A special emphasis will be given to moments of silence and reflection. Dialogue will be kept to a bare minimum, to their mere narrative function.

The film begins in the fantastic setting of the Maasai Mara with the vast expanse of the savannah, containing wild animals, shepherds and their livestock, the picturesque Maasai village and the Maasai in their traditional clothing. This is the ordinary world of the protagonist, where she is characterized by her pleasant aliveness.





The film then shifts to the Saint Mary's girls boarding school with its structured atmosphere: the discipline and uniforms, the shaven heads of the students, the straight lines of the buildings, the perspective of long corridors, the canteen and the dormitory. All of these combined to create a setting reminiscent of a military organization. This is the moment in the story when the protagonist's personal battle begins.





As the story moves to the city of Nairobi with its tall buildings, chaotic traffic, crowded markets and intrusive nighttime lights. Visually, this setting adds a new layer to the story, reflecting the emotional state of bewilderment and alienation of the protagonist. In this sense, the film is also a journey from the countryside into the city, then back to the home village, in advance of the final resolution.

For the soundtrack, we plan to use traditional elements of the Maasai musical world (mainly singing, percussion and horns), incorporating them into electronic music tracks with a contemporary and modern appeal suitable to a young and global audience.











## AUTHORS' NOTES

We are convinced that the courage and fortitude of the film's protagonists will inspire audiences and spread the message that change is possible when one really fights for it.

Female genital mutilation continues to be a widespread cultural practice that impacts the lives of many young girls and women around the world, not only in Africa. Resian and her mother are two women fighting for their integrity and freedom. In this sense, they perfectly embody the need for evolution in today's world, particularly in regard to gender inequality and women's rights.

The film immerses the audience in the fascinating reality of the Maasai people, with its customs, colors and traditions, offering a journey which we believe can capture the interest of a global audience. What is unique about this story is that it explores in depth the complexities of family relationships, showing common traits that can be found in many African tribes, especially in the Sub-Saharan area. Our aim is to offer a better understanding of the deep-seated resistance that obstructs efforts to eradicate harmful cultural practices.

Another important aspect of the film is that it is a coming-of-age story and, as such, recounts the experiences of an adolescent and her adventures and tribulations. In this phase of life, one grapples with discoveries, experiences, strong feelings and emotions, at times feels fragile, other times strong, and throughout struggle to comprehend what she or he really wants. Moreover what is at stake here is the physical and psychological integrity of a young girl, and this has the effect to push these typical adolescent themes to their limit.

Last but not least — and this is an aspect that particularly interests us — this story shows the deep impact films can have on a person's life and how they can change their own destiny.





## PROJECT TIMELINE

- 2017 First research trip to Kenya and shooting of the video AGAINST ALL ODDS in the frame of the program Building-Bridges-to-Tackle-FGM/C, produced by AIDOS Italy with the support of the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the eradication of Female Genital Mutilation.
- 2018 Completion of AGAINST ALL ODDS, screening in raising awareness programs on FGM/C.
- 2019 AGAINST ALL ODDS wins the POULAIN D'OR at FESPACO FILM FESTIVAL in OUAGADOUGOU and first prize at COURAGE FILM FESTIVAL in BERLIN.
- 2020 The project is selected by the GRENZGÄNGER PROGRAM, from Robert Bosch Foundation in Germany, and receives an international research grant to conduct a second round of research in Kenya, to collect material for the development of a screenplay about the story.
- 2021 Second research trip in Kenya to collect material for the script development. Interviews with all the persons involved in the story and visits to all of the locations in the Maasai Mara, Narok Town and Nairobi.
- 2022 Completion of the research report and preparation of the dossier for applications to script-development funds.





## THE AUTHORS

CHARITY RESIAN NAMPASO grew up in a Maasai village in Mara in a community where girls' education is of less importance. At the age of 16, she was the first girl in her village to refuse to undergo genital mutilation. This choice was not without consequences, as she was obliged to face the strong opposition of her father and of the whole community. The struggle to defend her integrity and rights, a battle which she won, marked the further course of her life. After finishing her studies Resian became an activist promoter of women's rights in her home region. She also starred in the play *Cut the Cuts*, by Robert Jelinek, presented in Kenya and Sweden and based on true stories of women on the issue of female genital mutilation (including her own). In Sweden and the Netherlands, Resian completed a master's degree in *International Humanitarian Action* and took part in the *IPPF Charter on Sexual and Reproductive Rights* project in Tanzania, in collaboration with the African Department of the Swedish Church. Resian believes in film-making as a means of raising awareness through sharing powerful personal stories capable of speaking directly to the hearts of audiences. She starred in the short documentary *Against All Odds* and wants to actively participate in the development of the film, *THE MAASAI GIRL*, which is based on her personal story.



**ANDREA IANNETTA** is a freelance filmmaker and director currently based in Berlin. Born and raised in Rome, he graduated in philosophy from *La Sapienza University*. He then studied film direction at the *Film and Television Institute of India* in Pune. His graduation film *Allah is Great* was screened at over 25 film festivals worldwide and won 6 awards in Asia and Europe. He is currently working on several films and video-production projects on social issues such as migration, integration and women's rights, as well as on issues related to the plurality of European society today. The Italian film *Babylon Sister* (2017) was his first credit as a feature film screenwriter.



# THE MAASAI GIRL

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all images in this mood-board, unless specifically indicated belong to our personal archive  
or were taken during our research trips in 2017 and 2021

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