**Dopoi Center Research Protocols**

**Mary Poole, March 9, 2025, for adoption at Dopoi by April 1, 2025**

The Dopoi Center was established in part to create opportunities for collaborative research between researchers and the community, for the purpose of producing information and understanding drawing on the best of both western scholarly knowledge and Maasai cultural knowledge. We welcome partnership on research related to Maasai land, wildlife, pastoralism, culture and other points of mutual interest between researchers and the Maasai community. To express your interest or propose a project, please reach out directly to Dopoi Center Directors, Meitamei Olol Dapash (oledopoi@gmail.com) and Mary Poole (mpoole@prescott.edu).

All researchers working with The Dopoi Center will consider the following Research Protocols, and will agree to work with the Directors and Dopoi Center community on a collaboratively designed research plan. Dopoi will offer direction, translation and various kinds of other support to ensure that the research succeeds in creating mutually beneficial knowledge.

The Dopoi Center fosters *decolonizing* approaches to research, which is:

* Mutually designed by the community and research partner
* Intends to apply knowledge produced through research to a problem of mutual concern
* Equally values western scientific and Maasai Indigenous knowledge

**Maasai Decolonizing Research Methodology and Researcher Agreements**

All research undertaken at the Dopoi Center complies to some degree with what is known as the **Critical Action Research** methodology (CAR). CAR is a particular approach to what has become a widespread desire among many researchers today to include ‘community participation’ in their studies. In contrast to many of these, CAR seeks to not merely gather community opinion or knowledge about an issue under study, but to actually collaborate on the research process with the community, from the questions that will be pursued to the research methodology, and the solutions that the research will support. CAR differs most fundamentally from other research methods in its recognition that research itself is a powerful tool that can strengthen unjust structures but can equally be directed to liberate people from them.

At The Dopoi Center, we have developed our own version of CAR which incorporates elements of Maasai cultural approach to research. Maasai have a whole language for the research process, and mechanisms of vetting and ‘publishing’ information orally, and these are incorporated into our approach at Dopoi.

What we refer to as **Maasai Decolonizing Research Methods** (MDRM) builds on CAR by incorporating Maasai cultural aspects. Dopoi Center Directors and staff will help researchers build these specific aspects into their research plans as appropriate.

1. **Research is undertaken for mutual benefit.** In Maasailand, research is recognized to be an expression of power that can harm or further community priorities. Research projects undertaken at Dopoi will pursue questions, reached through consensus, of mutual interest to the research partner and Maasai community as represented by the the Dopoi Center Directors, and other Maasai people whose expertise is solicited.

1. **Indigenous Knowledge is of equal value to western science.** In Maasailand, research draws on the best available knowledge from all possible sources. All researchers agree to respect Maasai Traditional Ecological Knowledge.
2. **Knowledge is communal**. In Maasai culture, it is impossible to ‘own’ knowledge. This is one of the most significant differences between western and Maasai systems of knowledge: for an individual to claim ownership of an idea, a piece of research, even of writing, is to colonize that knowledge, as an individual’s words actually belong to the community, not to individuals. Researchers working out of the Dopoi Center will share credit with appropriate Maasai people, for what is published, and will make the research available to the community in ways agreeable to all parties.
3. **Sourcing is Transparent.** Only transparently obtained knowledge is valid in Maasailand. Therefore, all Maasai people interviewed will be identified by name.
4. **Research is generative.** In Maasai culture, interviews are undertaken communally rather than individually, and questions asked are generative, changing through the interview process. In western research, interview questions are typically developed and approved by university IRB processes before interviews commence; in Maasailand, research typically begins with broad and open-ended questions, which allows for more specific questions to emerge through the interview process. Researchers working out of the Dopoi Center will explore the possibility of adopting or refining a generative approach to interviews where appropriate.
5. **Knowledge is produced through Age Groups:** In Maasailand, age groups are an institution for creating knowledge specific to that group. Once knowledge has been created, it ceases being the property of that group and becomes knowledge belonging to the whole community. While in western culture, categories of identity such as gender, sexuality, economic class etc. may be critical to understanding how one is positioned in a society, In Maasailand, Age Group membership is the core element of identity comparable to those, especially in the context of knowledge production. Age groups undertake different roles in the evidencing, vetting, interpreting of new knowledge, and so MDRM incorporates that awareness. Ceremonies are important sites of knowledge production and dissemination, especially graduation ceremonies of age groups such as *Olengesherr, Eunoto* etc. Researchers working out of the Dopoi Center will agree to consider incorporating age group knowledge into their approach under the direction and advice of their Maasai research partners.
6. **Knowledge is produced and disseminated through song**: Music is a primary means of creating and sharing knowledge in Maasailand. All songs must inspire the community and cannot be detrimental to the wellbeing of Maasai society. No one can disseminate a song that is destructive by telling lies. Songs are derived from research; agreement must be reached before a song is ‘published’ about the knowledge it expresses. Researchers working out of the Dopoi Center may be welcomed into collaborating on projects that draw on this form of knowledge production in Maasailand.
7. **Benefits of research work.** Dopoi seeks to redistribute the benefits of research in tangible ways to Maasai people, and to do so with cultural competence and recognition of traditional decision making. The Dopoi Center maintains lists of local people who represent a spectrum of community members from different areas with recognized abilities for this important work. Researchers agree that all drivers, research assistants, translators and other local people they seek to hire to support their work will be vetted through the Dopoi Center, and thus the larger Maasai community to whom we are accountable.
8. **Transparency about research.** Distrust has been a feature of research conducted in Maasailand. To counter this history, research conducted out of Dopoi requires that interviewees or other community members invited to participate in research be giving full information about the intentions for the research, potential uses, publishing possibilities, and any other benefits accruing to any individual or institution. Researchers agree to engage community members honestly, and will share their own perspectives and intentions.
9. **Communal knowledge and the interview process.** As knowledge is communally owned in Maasailand, it is also communally generated and remembered, and so the best knowledge is also accessed in communal settings where interviewees think aloud collectively. This process is undertaken in Maasailand through the Maasai court, *Olchani*, and all people present are welcomed to participate equally regardless of their proximity to the issue discussed, their age or status. Researchers agree to explore this interview model as appropriate and where encouraged by Dopoi Center Directors.
10. **Identifying Subjects.** While western research protocols may require researchers to indicate the specific ways that they will involve diverse groups within a community, such as ‘women’ or specifically minoritized subgroups, these requirements may not be appropriate in a communal society such as the Maasai. Researchers will thus agree to work with Dopoi Center Directors and other staff to identify the culturally competent and also most effective means to glean the perspective and knowledge of the community through its membership.
11. **Obtaining Consent.** Distrust has typically been introduced into researcher/community relationships in Maasailand through requests that people sign forms signalling their consent to be interviewed. Maasai people tend to assume that the only place such a signed document would have weight is in a western context, as there would be no way for a Maasai person, with or without a signed document, to seek justice in the case of an exploitive research situation. So the assumption is that such a document may only exist to protect the institution seeking a signature. The Dopoi Center works with individual research projects to meet the needs of researchers and institutions for ‘consent’ without use of standard forms. Researchers will collaborate with Dopoi Center Directors and other staff, and their university partners, to design consent processes and documentation agreeable to all.
12. **Interviewing Children.** Under no circumstances may children in Maasailand be interviewed outside of the process of community agreement facilitated by the Dopoi Center Directors, and without the explicit agreement of their direct parents. However, Maasai children are widely assumed to have rights to conversations among about matters of importance to the community, and it is culturally acceptable to allow children to be present at collective interview situations such as *Olchani*. Researchers agree to collaborate with Dopoi Center Directors to meet the differing needs of typical university IRB stipulations regarding interviews in the presence of children and the Maasai community’s own approach.

**The Role of the Dopoi Center**

* The Dopoi Center is a Community Based Organization (CBO) with a local Board of 20 community members and larger membership of roughly 2000 Maasai people living in broader area.
* Dopoi is accountable to the structures of decision making of the Maasai community through Meitamei Olol Dapash, and has been appointed through those structures to facilitate research in the Maasai Mara regions of Maasailand.
* Dopoi exists to safeguard the interests of Maasai people in the research process. Maasai as a group are a stigmatized people within Kenya and some are more stigmatized by outsiders than others, especially traditional people--those who have not undergone western education--and women are subjected to greater stereotyping and other forms of stigmatization than the community as a whole. Dopoi exists to safeguard Maasai people against coercion from outside or within the community, and to ensure that benefit is mutual, compensation fair, and opportunities distributed beyond any section of the community.
* Equally, Dopoi exists to enable the production of the best possible research by including the insights, knowledge and wisdom of Maasai people about our own land, wildlife, culture and other topics of research. We seek to share the tools and knowledge of western research equally in the community.
* Dopoi offers housing, food, transportation and all manner of research support to those looking to collaborate.