

Maasai

PRONUNCIATION: MAH-sigh

LOCATION: Kenya; Tanzania

POPULATION: Over 150,000

LANGUAGE: Maa (Olmaa)

RELIGION: Traditional beliefs

1 • INTRODUCTION

The Maasai are thought of as the typical cattle herders of Africa, yet they have not always been herders, nor are they all today. Because of population growth, development strategies, and the resulting shortage of land, cattle raising is in decline. However, cattle still represent "the breath of life" for many Maasai. When given the chance, they choose herding above all other livelihoods. For many Westerners, the Maasai are Hollywood's "noble savage"—fierce, proud, handsome, graceful of bearing, and elegantly tall. Hair smeared red with ochre (a pigment), they either carry spears or stand on one foot tending cattle. These depictions oversimplify Maasai life during the twentieth century. Today, Maasai cattle herders may also be growing maize (corn) or wheat, rearing Guinea fowl, raising ostriches, or may be hired by ecologists to take pictures of the countryside.

Prior to British colonization, Africans, Arabs, and European explorers considered the Maasai formidable warriors for their conquests of neighboring peoples and their resistance to slavery. Caravan traders traveling from the coast to Uganda crossed Maasailand with trepidation. However, in 1880–81, when the British unintentionally introduced rinderpest (a cattle disease), the Maasai lost 80 percent of their stock. The British colonizers further disrupted Maasai life by moving them to a reserve in southern Kenya. While the British encouraged them to adopt European ways, they also advised them to retain their traditions. These contradictions resulted, for the most part, in leaving the Maasai alone and allowed them to develop almost on their own. However, drought, famine, cattle diseases, and intratribal warfare (warfare among themselves) in the nineteenth century greatly weakened the Maasai and nearly destroyed certain tribes.

Since Kenyan and Tanzanian independence from Britain in the 1960s, land ownership has changed dramatically. Modern ranching, wheat cultivation techniques, and setting of grazing boundaries in the Maasai district are becoming common. A wage and cash economy is replacing the barter (trade) system. Consequently, the Maasai have begun to integrate themselves into the modern economies and mainstream societies of Kenya and Tanzania, albeit with considerable reluctance.

2 • LOCATION

The Maasai are thought to have originated in the Upper Nile Valley. Their myths speak about climbing up from a broad and deep crater bounded on all sides by a

steep, long cliff. By the 1600s they had begun migrating with their herds into the vast arid, savanna-like (grassland) region of East Africa straddling the Kenya-Tanzania border. Today, their homeland is bounded by Lake Victoria to the west and Mount Kilimanjaro to the east. Maasailand extends some 310 miles (500 kilometers) from north to south and about 186 miles (300 kilometers) at its widest east-west point.

Estimates of the Maasai population include more than 150,000 in Tanzania, and close to 150,000 in Kenya.

3 • LANGUAGE

The Maasai are speakers of the Maa language, which is also spoken by the Samburu and the Chamus living in central Kenya. The origins of Maa have been traced to the east of present-day Juba in southern Sudan. More than twenty variants of Maa exist. The Maasai refer to their language as Olmaa.

4 • FOLKLORE

Maasai legends and folktales tell much about the origin of present-day Maasai beliefs. These stories include their ascent from a crater, the emergence of the first Maasai prophet-magician (Laibon), the killing of an evil giant (Oltatuani) who raided Maasai herds, and the deception by Olonana of his father to obtain the blessing reserved for his older brother, Senteu (a legend similar to the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau).

One origin myth reveals much about present-day Maasai relations between the sexes. It holds that the Maasai are descended from two equal and complementary tribes, one consisting strictly of females, and the other of males. The women's tribe, the Moroyok, raised antelopes, including the eland, which the Maasai claim to have been the first species of cattle. Instead of cattle, sheep, and goats, the women had herds of gazelles. Zebras transported their goods during migrations, and elephants were their devoted friends, tearing down branches and bringing them to the women who used them to build homes and corrals. The elephants also swept the antelope corrals clean. However, while the women bickered and quarreled, their herds escaped. Even the elephants left them because they could not satisfy the women with their work.

According to the same myth, the Morwak—the men's tribe—raised cattle, sheep, and goats. The men occasionally met women in the forest. The children from these unions would live with their mothers, but the boys would join their fathers when they grew up. When the women lost their herds, they went to live with the men, and, in doing so, gave up their freedom and their equal status. From that time, they depended on men, had to work for them, and were subject to their authority.

5 • RELIGION

Unlike the predominantly Christian populations of Kenya and Tanzania that surround them, the Maasai traditionally place themselves at the center of their universe as God's chosen people. Like other African religions, the Maasai believe that one high god (Enkai) created the world, forming three groups of people. The

first were the Torrobo (Okiiek pygmies), a hunting and gathering people of small stature to whom God gave honey and wild animals as a food source. The second were the neighboring Kikuyu, farmers to whom God gave seed and grain. The third were the Maasai, to whom God gave cattle, which came to earth sliding down a long rope linking heaven and Earth. While the Torrobo were destined to endure bee stings, and the Kikuyu famines and floods, the Maasai received the noble gift of raising cattle. A Torrobo, jealous of the Maasai's gift of cattle, cut the "umbilical cord" between heaven and Earth. For many Maasai, the center of their world remains their cattle, which furnish food, clothing, and shelter.

6 • MAJOR HOLIDAYS

The traditional Maasai calendar has no designated holidays. It is divided into twelve months belonging to three main seasons: *Nkokua* (the long rains), *Oloirurujuruj* (the drizzling season), and *Oltumuret* (the short rains). The names of months are very descriptive. For example, the second month of the drizzling season is *Kujorok*, meaning "The whole countryside is beautifully green, and the pasture lands are likened to a hairy caterpillar."

Maasai ceremonial feasts for circumcision, excision (female circumcision), and marriage offer occasions for festive community celebrations, which may be considered similar to holidays. As the Maasai are integrated into modern Kenyan and Tanzanian life, they also participate in secular (nonreligious) state holidays. In Kenya, these include Labor Day (May 1), Madaraka Day (June 1), and Kenyatta Day (October 20). In Tanzania, these include Labor Day (May 1), Zanzibar Revolution Day (January 12); *Nane Nane* (formerly *Saba Saba*— Farmer's Day, in August); Independence Day (December 9); and Union Day (April 26), which commemorates the unification of Zanzibar and the mainland.

7 • RITES OF PASSAGE

Life for the Maasai is a series of conquests and tests involving the endurance of pain. For men, there is a progression from childhood to warriorhood to elderhood. At the age of four, a child's lower incisors are taken out with a knife. Young boys test their will by their arms and legs with hot coals. As they grow older, they submit to tattooing on the stomach and the arms, enduring hundreds of small cuts into the skin.

Ear piercing for both boys and girls comes next. The cartilage of the upper ear is pierced with hot iron. When this heals, a hole is cut in the ear lobe and gradually enlarged by inserting rolls of leaves or balls made of wood or mud. Nowadays plastic film canisters may serve this purpose. The bigger the hole, the better. Those earlobes that dangle to the shoulders are considered perfect.

Circumcision (for boys) and excision (for girls) is the next stage, and the most important event in a young Maasai's life. It is a father's ultimate duty to ensure that his children undergo this rite. The family invites relatives and friends to witness the ceremonies, which may be held in special villages called *imanyat*. The *imanyat* dedicated to circumcision of boys are called *nkang oo ntaritik* (villages of little birds).

Circumcision itself involves great physical pain and tests a youth's courage. If they flinch during the act, boys bring shame and dishonor to themselves and their family. At a minimum, the members of their age group ridicule them and they pay a fine of one head of cattle. However, if a boy shows great bravery, he receives gifts of cattle and sheep.

Girls must endure an even longer and more painful ritual, which is considered preparation for childbearing. (Girls who become pregnant before excision are banished from the village and stigmatized throughout their lives.) After passing this test of courage, women say they are afraid of nothing.

Guests celebrate the successful completion of these rites by drinking great quantities of mead (a fermented beverage containing honey) and dancing. Boys are then ready to become warriors, and girls are then ready to bear a new generation of warriors. In a few months, the young woman's future husband will come to pick her up and take her to live with his family.

After passing the tests of childhood and circumcision, boys must fulfill a civic requirement similar to military service. They live for up to several months in the bush, where they learn to overcome pride, egotism, and selfishness. They share their most prized possessions, their cattle, with other members of the community. However, they must also spend time in the village, where they sacrifice their cattle for ceremonies and offer gifts of cattle to new households. This stage of development matures a warrior and teaches him *nkaniet* (respect for others), and he learns how to contribute to the welfare of his community. The stage of "young warriorhood" ends with the *eunoto* rite, when a man ends his periodic trips into the bush and returns to his village, putting his acquired wisdom to use for the good of the community.

8 • RELATIONSHIPS

Each child belongs to an "age set" from birth. To control the vices of pride, jealousy, and selfishness, children must obey the rules governing relationships within the age set, between age sets, and between the sexes. Warriors, for example, must share a girlfriend with at least one of their age-group companions. All Maasai of the same sex are considered equal within their age group.

Many tensions exist between children and adults, elders and warriors, and men and women. The Maasai control these with taboos (prohibitions). A daughter, for example, must not be present while her father is eating. Only non-excised girls may accompany warriors into their forest havens, where they eat meat. Although the younger warriors may wish to dominate their communities, they must follow rules and respect their elders' advice.

9 • LIVING CONDITIONS

By Western standards, Maasai living conditions seem primitive. However, the Maasai are generally proud of their simple lifestyle and do not seek to replace it with a more modern lifestyle. Nevertheless, the old ways are changing. Formerly, cowhides were used to make walls and roofs of temporary homes during migrations. They were also used to sleep on. Permanent and semi-permanent

homes resembling igloos were built of sticks and branches plastered with mud, and with cow dung on the roofs. They were windowless and leaked a great deal. Nowadays, tin roofs and other more modern materials are gradually transforming these simple dwellings.

A few paved trunk roads and many passable dirt roads make Maasailand accessible. Much like their fellow Kenyan and Tanzanian citizens, the Maasai travel by bus and bush taxi when they need to cover distances.

10 • FAMILY LIFE

The Maasai are a patriarchal society; men typically speak for women and make decisions in the family. Male elders decide community matters. Until the age of seven, boys and girls are raised together. Mothers remain close to their children, especially their sons, throughout life. Once circumcised, sons usually move away from their father's village, but they still follow his advice. Girls learn to fear and respect their fathers and must never be near them when they eat.

A person's peers (age-mates) are considered extended family and are obligated to help each other. Age-mates share nearly everything, even their wives. Girls are often promised in marriage long before they are of age. However, even long-term engagements are subject to veto by male family members.

11 • CLOTHING

Maasai clothing varies by age, sex, and place. Traditionally, shepherds wore capes made from calf hides, and women wore capes of sheepskin. The Maasai decorated these capes with glass beads. In the 1960s, the Maasai began to replace animal-skin with commercial cotton cloth. Women tied lengths of this cloth around their shoulders as capes (*shuka*) or around the waist as a skirt. The Maasai color of preference is red, although black, blue, striped, and checkered cloth are also worn, as are multicolored African designs. Elderly women still prefer red and dye their own cloth with ochre (a natural pigment). Until recently, men and women wore sandals made from cowhides; nowadays sandals and shoes are generally made of tire strips or plastic.

Young women and girls, and especially young warriors, spend much time on their appearance. Styles vary by age group. The Maasai excel in designing jewelry. They decorate their bodies with tattooing, head shaving, and hair styling with ochre and sheep's fat, which they also smear on their bodies. A variety of colors are used to create body art. Women and girls wear elaborate bib-like bead necklaces, as well as headbands and earrings, which are colorful and intricate. When ivory was plentiful, warriors wore ivory bands on their upper arms much like the ancient Egyptians. Jewelry plays an important role in courtship.

12 • FOOD

The Maasai depend on cattle for both food and cooking utensils (as well as for shelter and clothing). Cattle ribs make stirring sticks, spatulas, and spoons. Horns are used as butter dishes and large horns as cups for drinking mead.

The traditional Maasai diet consists of six basic foods: meat, blood, milk, fat, honey, and tree bark. Wild game (except the eland), chicken, fish, and salt are forbidden. Allowable meats include roasted and boiled beef, goat, and mutton. Both fresh and curdled milk are drunk, and animal blood is drunk at special times—after giving birth, after circumcision and excision, or while recovering from an accident. It may be tapped warm from the throat of a cow, or drunk in coagulated form. It can also be mixed with fresh or soured milk, or drunk with therapeutic bark soups (*motori*). It is from blood that the Maasai obtain salt, a necessary ingredient in the human diet. People of delicate health and babies eat liquid sheep's fat to gain strength.

Honey is obtained from the Torrobo tribe and is a prime ingredient in mead, a fermented beverage that only elders may drink. In recent times, fermented maize (corn) with millet yeast or a mixture of fermented sugar and baking powder have become the primary ingredients of mead.

The Maasai generally eat two meals a day, in the morning and at night. They have a dietary prohibition against mixing milk and meat. They drink milk for ten days—as much as they want—and then eat meat and bark soup for several days in between. Some exceptions to this regimen exist. Children and old people may eat cornmeal or rice porridge and drink tea with sugar. For warriors, however, the sole source of true nourishment is cattle. They consume meat in their forest hideaways (*olpul*), usually near a shady stream far from the observation of women. Their preferred meal is a mixture of meat, blood, and fat (*munono*), which is thought to give great strength.

Many taboos (prohibitions) govern Maasai eating habits. Men must not eat meat that has been in contact with women or that has been handled by an uncircumcised boy after it has been cooked.

13 • EDUCATION

There is a wide gap between Western schooling and Maasai traditional education, by which children and young adults learned to overcome fear, endure pain, and assume adult tasks. For example, despite the dangers of predators, snakes, and elephants, boys would traditionally herd cattle alone. If they encountered a buffalo or lion, they were supposed to call for help. However, they sometimes reached the pinnacle of honor by killing lions on their own. Following such a display of courage, they became models for other boys, and their heroics were likely to become immortalized in the songs of the women and girls.

Over the years, school participation gradually increased among the Maasai, but there were few practical rewards for formal education and therefore little reason to send a child to school. Formal schooling was primarily of use to those involved in religion, agriculture, or politics. Since independence, as the traditional livelihood of the Maasai has become less secure, school participation rates have climbed dramatically.

14 • CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Maasai have a rich collection of oral literature that includes myths, legends, folktales, riddles, and proverbs. These are passed down through the generations. The Maasai also compose many songs. Women are seldom at a loss for melodies and words when some heroic action by a warrior inspires praise. They also improvise teasing songs, work songs for milking and for plastering roofs, and songs with which to ask their traditional god (Enkai) for rain and other needs.

15 • EMPLOYMENT

Labor among traditional herding Maasai is clearly divided. The man's responsibility is his cattle. He must protect them and find them the best possible pasture land and watering holes. Women raise children, maintain the home, cook, and do the milking. They also take care of calves and clean, sterilize, and decorate calabashes (gourds). It is the women's special right to offer milk to the men and to visitors.

Children help parents with their tasks. A boy begins herding at the age of four by looking after lambs and young calves, and by the time he is twelve, he may be able to care for cows and bulls as well as move sheep and cattle to new pastures. Girls help their mothers with domestic chores such as drawing water, gathering firewood, and patching roofs.

16 • SPORTS

While Maasai may take part in soccer, volleyball, and basketball in school or other settings, their own culture has little that resembles Western organized sports. Young children find time to join in games such as playing tag, but adults find little time for sports or play. Activities such as warding off enemies and killing lions are considered sport enough in their own right.

17 • RECREATION

Ceremonies such as the *eunoto*, when warriors return to their villages as mature men, offer occasions for parties and merriment. Ordinarily, however, recreation is much more subdued. After the men return to their camp from a day's herding, they typically tell stories of their exploits. Young girls sing and dance for the men. In the villages, elders enjoy inviting their age-mates to their houses or to rustic pubs (*muratina manyatta*) for a drink.

18 • CRAFTS AND HOBBIES

The Maasai make decorative beaded jewelry including necklaces, earrings, headbands, and wrist and ankle bracelets. These are always fashionable, though styles change as age-groups invent new designs. It is possible to identify the year a given piece was made by its age-group design. Maasai also excel in wood carvings, and they increasingly produce art for tourists as a supplemental source of income.

19 • SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The greatest challenge the Maasai face concerns adaptation to rapid economic and social change. Increasing encroachment on Maasai lands threatens their traditional way of life. In the next decade, Maasai will need to address integration into the mainstream modern economies and political systems of Kenyan and Tanzanian society. The Maasai may fear losing their children to Western schooling, but a modern education has increasingly become a necessity for the Maasai in order to remain competitive with their neighbors and survive.

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