



A Cultural Guide to the Maasai People

Introduction

Inhabitants of the Great Rift Valley in eastern Africa, the Maasai people occupy a total land area of approximately 160,000 square kilometers, in a region spanning southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. For hundreds of years the Maasai roamed, herded, and moved freely about East Africa, preserving their traditional culture apart from Western influences. Since the onset of European colonization a century ago, however, the vast majority of Maasai land has been taken away and the Maasai have been marginalized by the government, confined to a territory a fraction of its original size. Despite the difficulties they face, the Maasai have maintained their strong cultural traditions, ancient rituals and ceremonies, and continued respect for nature.

History

The Maasai people arrived in eastern Africa around the 15th century AD and dominated the plains until the 19th century. For centuries they lived their lives entwined with nature as peaceful herders. They roamed the land in search of water sources, and raised livestock, their primary food source.

Around 1888, Europeans began passing through Maasai land on their way to other areas of Africa, documenting the Maasai tribes as "brave and highly organized." Unfortunately, at the turn of the 20th century the Maasai empire was considerably weakened by battles with British explorers and by a severe epidemic that devastated their livestock populations.

As European colonization advanced, land was needed for the colonists to farm and live on. As a result, colonial officials annexed Maasai land, moved the Maasai to "protected areas," and neglected any native right the Maasai had to the land they had inhabited for hundreds of years. In 1911 the Maasai signed an agreement with the settlers, giving away 6,390 kilometers of land. Today, that land is the backbone of Kenya's beef and dairy industry.

Presently, the Maasai are confined to some of the driest, most marginal areas of Kenya, areas that are overcrowded and overgrazed. In addition, the Kenyan government as an indigenous people does not recognize the Maasai; a change in this status could secure their own land protection.

Society

The Maasai are divided into approximately 12 geographical sections or *oloshon*. These *oloshon* are politically separate, culturally varied, and associated with separate territories.

In Maasai villages, homesteads are arranged in a circular fashion, traditionally with each homestead shared by more than one family. Women in Maasai society are responsible for making the homesteads, collecting firewood and water, milking the cattle, and cooking for the family. The warriors (Maasai males) are in charge of the family's security. Young boys are responsible for herding the livestock, the primary source of income and livelihood for the Maasai. The role of women in Maasai society is very important, as they serve as mediators between the young and old.

Laibon, or a head spiritual leader, rather than a chief rules each Maasai section. These leaders are believed to have spiritual powers and the ability to give blessings, heal sickness, and foretell the future.

Economy

Livestock is central to the Maasai economy and is traded for other livestock, cash, breads, clothing, and grain.

Although the grazing of Maasai cattle is criticized by outsiders as destructive of wildlife and hard on soil, the Maasai argue that their cattle fertilize the land and improve its diversity. It is their belief that humans and animals can co-exist and benefit from each other. In spite of the diminishing area of their protected land, the tribes move their cattle from one place to another throughout the year, giving the grass a chance to re-grow.

Diet

Because the Maasai have traditionally relied on livestock, such as cattle, sheep, and goats, for their primary sources of income, their diet has also been based on meat, milk, and blood, a Maasai cultural trademark. With the advent of knowledge about dietary needs, blood is now more often reserved for special occasions.

The Maasai have in recent times incorporated food such as maize meal, rice, potatoes, and cabbage into their diet. This is largely due to the proximity of Maasai tribes to nearby crop farmers. In addition, Maasai land areas are often not large enough to accommodate their traditional livestock. As a result, some tribes have been forced to learn farming techniques not historically part of their livelihood or culture. The Maasai believe that once land is cultivated for farming, it is no longer suitable for animal grazing. This is just one example of the effects of Western influence and colonization on the Maasai people.

Culture

Common among all 12 *oloshon* is one language, Maa, and the belief in one god, Ngai (or Engai). This one god is neither a feminine nor masculine god, but one with aspects of both. Ngai is the creator of everything and the original owner of all cattle. According to Maasai belief, cattle were sent down to the Maasai people in order to ensure that the herds would be given sustenance for life. Because of the importance of the ground and soil in producing grass to feed the cattle, it was traditionally considered sacrilegious to break the ground and soil, and especially to farm crops.

Another tradition of Maasai tribal culture is lion hunting, an important symbolic practice. Hunting a lion is viewed as an act of bravery and achievement. However, as the lion population has declined, the Maasai have curbed their lion hunting, and they now completely refrain from hunting female lions. Recognizing that lions are important to the African ecology, the Maasai are particularly careful and deliberate in their hunting.

Beaded decorations, worn by Maasai men and women, are astonishingly intricate and beautiful, combining thousands of tiny colored beads with cowry shells and leatherwork. Among the wide variety worn are elaborately beaded neckwear, and decorations that are worn on their heads, ears, arms, legs, and around their waists. All warriors' beads are fashioned by women and most by girl friends. Anklets and upper armbands are particular signs of love.

The shukka is the blanket worn by most Maasai, always red blended with black, blue, or other colors. They are warm and functional blankets, ideal for the chill of early mornings on safari.

Problems Faced by the Maasai

Today, the Maasai struggle to retain their heritage and land. They are forced to find a balance between the necessity of adopting Western ideas, such as crop farming, and preserving the traditions of their beautiful culture, which allowed them to be time-honored hunters and nature's protectors.