

Maasai - A traditional tribe undergoing change



The **Maasai** are traditional, semi-nomadic **pastoralists** in East Africa. In the 1550's they moved down along the Nile from Sudan and Egypt and brought with them knowledge on agriculture and cattle breeding. This migrational wave experienced a peak during the 18th century. During these times, the Maasai were feared as "wild barbarians" and their territories were avoided by the Arabs, the mountain people, missionaries and by European commercial travellers or if they had to pass a road tax in the form of useful trading goods was paid to the Maasai. At the end of the

19th century drought, cattle plague epidemics, cholera epidemics and smallpox epidemics broke out among the Maasai strongly weakening them. Additionally, there were civil wars with the mountain people who were considerably more dominant. Due to these wars they lost in a short time a lot of land, cattle and their prosperity.

In the 1930's when the British took control of Tanganyika they set up the first hunting districts on the Maasai land as well as national parks in the 50's. The Maasai thereby lost many tracts of land and they were either expelled from their own land or, were forcibly relocated to special reserves. There were even times in which the Maasai were not allowed to use public means of transportation if they were wearing their traditional **Shouka** clothing (cape). They were discriminated for decades and were unable to perform any appreciable defence.

During the 60s, where an average of 26 heads of cattle and goats per Maasai were counted, just 5 animals per head are left today. Although there are a few Maasai today who occupy positions of authority, these positions are not seen as important key roles.

Their influence is therefore limited and the future continuity of the Maasai culture doesn't seem too hopeful in the long term.



The beginning of the 2nd millennium saw the Maasai carry out a change in lifestyle from a nomadic living into an **established life**. They live in single, regional tribes dispersed in Kenya and in northern Tanzania. In Tanzania one finds them mainly in the area around **Arusha** as well as in the **Ngorongoro Conservation Area** and in the **Serengeti**. Today it is estimated that about 140,000 Maasai live in Tanzania. A large part of them already live as **semi-nomads** in a **kraal** (*enk-ang or boma*) whose location changes only every few years depending on the fertility of the landscape. On the one hand, they try to maintain their traditions but also, on the other hand, try to take part at the same time in the modern lifestyle. More and more Maasai send at least one of their children to school, enabling them to lead a "better" life later. During the school hours, the young Maasai wears jeans, sneakers and a T-shirt and announces him- or herself to the family elder on a mobile phone.

Language

The Maasai speak the so-called **Maa language** which belongs to the family of **Nilotic** languages which, as the name indicates, originate from the Nile valley in Sudan. However, many "modern" Maasai have also appropriated the **Swahili** spoken in Tanzania. A local tour guide can therefore communicate relatively well with the Maasai and would be able to extend his services to the visitor as an interpreter.

Tip: All *italic words* in brackets are concepts from the maa language spoken in Tanzania. Maasai from Kenya might use different words.

Boma (Hut)



The huts (*engaji*) of the Maasai are constructed from **dried cow's dung, loam soil** and hundreds of wooden branches. In the huts, in which small animals also sleep, there constantly burns a small fire which, during the day serves for the cooking and which, in the evening, keeps away mosquitoes and provides warmth. Except for a small hole in the sleeping area, no daylight enters the hut. There are no chairs, tables or wall decoration and only several cattle skins serve as a place to sleep. To protect the people and animals against predators and enemies during the night, the herds are brought in the evening inside an enclosed area of the **kraal** (settlement) whose entrance is then sealed with thorn bushes. The same thorn bushes are used to fence in the whole kraal. During the day these entrances are kept opened.

Clothing

Traditionally dressed Maasai are to be seen almost everywhere along street pavements and at markets. **The women** wear a chequered, mostly red and blue cape (*shouka*) and long, silver or home-made beaded earrings (*imbenyetta*) in the expanded earlobes of their smoothly shaved heads. The neck is adorned with heavy necklaces (*ilturesh*) and around the ankles and wrists they wear brightly coloured beaded bangles and bracelets (*emarinai*). Quite often the women and girls also don a headdress which consists of silver ornaments and coloured beads.



The men also wear a traditional **shouka** in different colours and chequered versions. In addition to this outfit, they carry a long wooden staff (*eng'udi*) or a small sword (*olalem*). A few men wear earrings however, the majority can be seen wearing wide-beaded bracelets (*engomesha*).



Shoes for men and women are produced from the rubber of an old truck tyre. Along Arusha's side streets one can recognise some of these 'shoe factories' by the hundreds of old tyres stacked together. These sandals (*raiyo*) are the classical footwear of the Maasai.



Age-set (Men)

Every Maasai belongs from birth to a certain age-set which determines his social life, status and the tasks required of him. The first big step is the circumcision ceremony (*Emoratta*), the crossing over from boyhood to manhood. It is carried out only every few years for all boys aged between 10-18 years during a so-called "open concision period". After this period they are appointed "Moran" (lit. the cut one) and are, from then on, warriors. They then pass through the other age-sets which categorise them till old age. During the years of the "closed concision period" the boys are impatient and are, supposedly, often provoked by the old people to break their "bans" thus, signalling their readiness for circumcision.

- 8-18 Laiyoni** – The boys of the Maasai. Their duties entail herding the goats daily to the waterholes, protecting the animals against thieves and predators and undertaking "training" by the old people. From an age of 8 years they are given the responsibility of herding the cattle. They are not allowed to keep any engagements with girls and are fully subordinate to the authority of their father. This changes however once they are cut at the age of between 10-18. They are then referred to as 'warrior' or 'Moran' (the cut one)
- 18-30 Moran (Konrianga)** – the young warriors. Their duties are to protect the kraal and their families against predators and raids. They must constantly be on the lookout for fertile areas and it is up to them to organise the move to these new areas. They are allowed to take up relations with 'uncut' girls (*endito*) and may also move freely, attending distant ceremonies without the permission of the father. It is virtually an "apprenticeship" after which a Moran is allowed to get married. Each Maasai is entitled to several wives.
- 30-40 King'onde** - the warriors (Senior warriors). They help the **Moran** to protect the kraals and take care of project solution and problem solving. Further they are godfathers (*ol-piron*) to the Moran and keep them under control as they often provoke unintentional incidents in neighbouring villages or with authorities during their "storm and urge time".
- 40-60 Makaa** (till 50) and **Seuri** (till 60) – the "Old gentlemen" (Junior elders). They look after the apprenticeships of the younger generation and are there as a reliable contact person for any questions. They provide security for the families and look after the essential interests of the clan. They also maintain the preservation of the classes and, more importantly, the continuity of the **Maasai culture**.
- 60-80 Meshuki** - the Chiefs (Senior elders). They remain in the kraal and are wise contact persons for all women and boys present. They have the right to "sit" and are exempt from carrying out any physical duties. The Meshuki are actively involved in any decision-making and have the last word. They often own status symbols in the form of **wildebeest's tails** and **wooden staffs** (*eng'udi*). They are greeted by children and Moran whose heads are stooped in respect whereby the senior elder will then stroke the person's head with his hand.

Circumcision

Even today, many **Maasai girls** before puberty (between the ages of 10-18 years) are, because of tradition, **cut** by older women resulting in the removal of the clitoris. This initiation takes place during a special **ceremony** (*emoratta*) whereby the whole neighbourhood bestows milk, cows and gifts on the initiates. Once initiated, the girls are available for marriage to the Moran (young warrior) with **whom they had a relationship before**. It is mainly the senior Moran who gets the bride, as the parents of the girl demand a "bridal price" of more than 30 or 40 cattle, this wealth cannot be raised by the young warriors. Remark: The circumcision is very painful and medically unsafe.

The **boys** are categorised into an **age-set** whose ages lie between 8 - 18 years. They are then cut together and the outcome is celebrated with a big festivity. However, before the **circumcision ritual**, the mother shaves her son's head bald and the other tribe members drape a **black robe** (*olaibatak*) around the young man. To honour the new members, the **Moran** warriors dance and sing **the circumcision song** (*lebart*) the whole night. In the morning the circumciser comes and pours milk over the head of the boy. Using a normal knife, and without applying any form of anaesthetic, he then cuts the foreskin and, without any other hygienic measures, disinfects the wound with cinder. A sign of pain is seen as a sign of weakness and can bring disgrace to the initiate's whole family. Any pain felt is therefore suppressed.



Beliefs & Religion

Tanzanian Maasai are very tradition-conscious and proud people. Although most of them are Christians, they still believe in several gods and their main God is **Engai** who lives at the summit of the mountain **Oi Doinyo Lengai**. They believe that Engai assigned to them the power to rule over all the cattle. The cattle are playing an important roll in the Maasais life ! They make use of all animal parts. What is not edible is processed into tools (e.g., bones) or is put to other uses. The fur of the animals can be used, for example, as clothes, water containers or as bedding.

Food

Maasai have always had a close relationship with their animals. Cattle and goats play an important role not only in religion but also in food, in medicine and in social relations. Even nowadays the wealth of a Maasai is still measured in the number of cattle he holds. They revere cattle and are convinced that, if they live off them, they will be strengthened. By consuming the cattle products they are therefore living in harmony with their God. For decades the earlier Maasai have lived almost only on animal products like milk, meat and blood. Provided that they had enough in stock, the food was complemented with maize and beans.



Even today **blood** and **milk** are still mixed to a liquid **rich in protein** (*saroi*) and is kept in **calabashes** (a vessel made from the fruit of the gourd). **Calabashes** (*engoti*) serve the Maasai as safekeeping vessels for all possible liquids and dry materials. Only on special occasions is grilled meat served. It was always a particularity that the Moran

warriors were not allowed to eat meat which had already been seen before by women or girls. Therefore, the meals of the warriors were always taken apart, even today. Times have changed in many regions and, meanwhile, even grilled meat is to be found on the Maasai menu. Women also prepare rice, maize or other kinds of vegetables in different variations. Today round, flat dough-cake bread and eggs also belong to the food plan of many families. These adaptations though are not lived by all Maasai tribes.

Duties & Responsibilities

Maasai life constantly revolves around the recurring seasonal cycles which primarily influence the search for food for the cattle in the dry and rainy seasons. The **male Maasai** are responsible from the age of 8 years for herding the goats and sheep and daily cover long distances in the search for water and ideal grazing pastures for the animals. When they are a little older, their fathers extend their responsibility by giving them new tasks e.g. herding the cattle (see under "old classes"). Nowadays, besides the stockbreeding which is steeped in tradition, the men also earn their income as night watchmen, as security staff (*askari*), as doormen in souvenir stores or as shop assistants selling typical Maasai products at the markets.



The life of the **women** differs dramatically from that of the men. After marriage, they are responsible for the raising of the children and for preparing the girls already at an early age for the life of a wife – this can be anytime after the circumcision (between the ages of 15-18 years). The young girls help the mothers and grandmothers in all tasks.

Together, the women collect firewood, carry water on their heads long distances and, grow the basic food in small gardens. Also, the construction of the huts (*engaji*) from branches, loam and dried cow's dung is traditionally the work of the women. At the present time they also make pearl jewellery and sell it directly at the markets or through wholesalers. One can say that the Massai women have, by far, a harder working lifestyle than the men. Also, the 60 to 80-year-old men who have earned themselves the title "Senior elders" are allowed to enter retirement whereby, the equally old women continue to slave on.