

My introduction

My introduction to the Maasai came at university when although I was studying Biology in the first year we had the opportunity to study different course units and I chose Social Anthropology – the study of human societies and cultures and to understand how people live in societies and make their lives meaningful. We had to study two tribes and I chose to study the Maasai. Then when I went to work in Kenya and Tanzania, I came across the Maasai in both countries many times and was able to observe their way of life and made some Maasai friends.

In considering both tribes, many people might give them the term 'primitive'. But just because they are not on social media and the internet, we were taught they are not primitive. Any tribe which has survived thousands of years of evolution and is so adapted to their environment (like many African tribes) cannot be considered to be primitive. Arduous environment living off the land. In their own way, they are successful, and the terms basic or under-developed may be more appropriate.

Despite external world pressure they are strongly and proudly determined to live according to their ancient traditions. The Maasai are a noble and dignified people despite being one of the most impoverished tribes in Africa.

History of Maasai

Came from the north where, according to their tradition: a quote from Maasai history: 'the earth is the sand over which a great river flows and no one knows where the river ends. There was no grass for the cattle in that land, and no food for the people, so the Maasai had to move south' (passed from generation to generation)

The Maasai are a Nilotic race, meaning originating from the East bank of the River Nile region. In the 16th century the Maasai migrated south down the Great Rift Valley to Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Kenya. In the 16th century they reached the savannas between Lake Victoria and Mt Kilimanjaro where they found good grazing for their herds. They considered Mt Kilimanjaro to be the home of the Gods and the savannah beneath Mt Kilimanjaro is still called the Maasai plains. From there they migrated south and west into what is now the Serengeti and the Maasai Mara National Parks and crucially the Ngorongoro Crater where in more recent days they came into conflict with western organisations which had bought the land and made a good living out of running safaris. I came across the Maasai further south still in Tanzania on the east shores of Lake Nyasa, one of the huge Rift Valley lakes. Here they live in isolated communities which seem to be somewhat hostile to western visitors even when you are just driving through to the nearby Ruaha and Selous National Parks

Nilotic races include the Turkana and the Dinka. The Maasai are also subdivided into separate groups which include the Samburu. See Corinne Hofmann's books The White

Maasai and others describing her marriage as a German lady to a Samburu warrior and the challenges of living in a Maasai community. (Also the challenges of returning to live in Switzerland with her daughter when she decided to leave).

In the Berlin Conference of 1885 the European powers met to decide the 'ground rules' for the 'scramble for Africa'. The Treaty of Berlin was signed which determined the spheres of influence allocated to each country. In particular Germany and Britain had been competing strongly against each other over the rights of territory in East Africa, and what became Tanzania (Tanganyika) and Kenya. The boundaries were drawn up regardless of geographical features, and more importantly regardless of tribal territories. So the Maasai landed up partly in Tanzania, Kenya and even Uganda. As a tribe they make no abeyance to the different countries and wander with their herds of cows and goats in their nomadic existence across national boundaries.

The Maasai held back the development of East Africa from Mombasa on the coast to Lake Victoria in the north west. They were war like and marauding Maasai warriors or **morans** and attacked the colonialists. So the colonialists arriving at Mombasa with their caravans of covered waggons had to make a wide detour around the slopes of Mt Kilimanjaro, skirting what is still called Maasailand. The Lunatic Express from Mombasa to Nairobi built by the British in 1896 a railway line to transport soldiers and goods through to Kampala and Lake Victoria. Marauding lions in Tsavo, lack of local manpower so used 32,000 Indian coolies, tropical diseases, difficulties through valleys and swamps, 2500 workers died, but the aggressive Maasai warriors were part of that.

Modern social scientists have largely discarded efforts to classify peoples according to their physical characteristics. They now prefer to use linguistic studies to distinguish between peoples. They formed ethnicities and cultures based on a shared language. More recently they are using population genetic studies – DNA analysis. So the Maasai are defined by their speaking the Maa language, hence the correct spelling of Maasai and not Masai.

The Maasai in their history have very largely resisted some forms of colonization and Western expansion. Their system of communication and trade or exchange revolved primarily around trade among themselves. President Nyerere in Tanzania encouraged the abandonment of the tribal system to avoid conflicts. That included the tribal languages. He encouraged Swahili and English as the official languages to unite the different ethnic groups in Tanzania, as well as English to compete on a global scale. Despite this Maa, the Maasai language has survived, even as a minority language. It is part of their nomadic heritage. But fewer and fewer groups of Maasai continue to be nomadic, choosing instead to settle in close-knit communities to keep their language and other aspects of their culture alive.

Interestingly the German language has no part in Tanzanian culture despite Tanganyika having been a German colony in the sub-division of Africa. Cruel colonists as they were in Namibia, decimation some of the local tribes, their early form of genocide. Made reparations since.

Rites of Passage/ different stages of Maasai life

1. At birth, an anthropologist who lived with the Maasai for several years describes how when the mother to be is in labour she welcomes any other woman to be present: sisters, mother, grandmothers, neighbours etc. The hut becomes full of women, but no woman is allowed who is younger than the woman in labour can be present, no woman who is pregnant herself may be present, no woman who has children who have not yet developed teeth may be present. When the baby has been born the husband of the woman in labour climbs on the roof of the hut and with a stick and repeatedly hits it announcing the birth. She will stay in the hut with the baby for 2 months being looked after by her mother and mother-in-law. Her husband is not allowed in the hut for 3 months.

A woman in labour then has no pain relief but there is a real sense of community in which the anthropologist states that the sense of love is inspiring.

2. Becoming adults

Circumcision traditionally denotes leaving childhood and becoming an adult at around 13. It is supposed to enable a boy or girl to establish their place in society. Female circumcision is technically now illegal in East Africa but a Maasai girl I was talking to said that many Maasai communities still practice it. Shortly after circumcision a girl will be married to an older man who her father has made an arrangement with for the exchange of the bridewealth which is a negotiated number of cows and goats and sometimes money.

With boys at the same age, they go to a kraal in the forest for the night beforehand and dance for hours. Circumcision takes place the day after, and the boy is then a warrior or moran. In the old days he was required to spear a lion but there are not enough now. Nevertheless, he assumes responsibility for the territory with the other morans as well as the herding of the stock. He must prove himself to his community by carrying a heavy spear and taking over the control of a large herd. In earlier times the morans were the terror of the whole of East Africa, plundering cattle and possessions from neighbouring tribes. Nowadays they live in peace with their neighbours.

There is no political structure in the Maasai tribes There is a council of elders and senior elders. Occasionally where there are problems many local Maasai tribes will gather together in a large assemblage called the Ol-olsho.

So the boys goes from child to adulthood as a junior warrior, to senior warrior to junior elder and finally senior elder. As a senior warrior he is allowed to marry one of the 13/14 year old girls who have just been circumcised

Camping in the Masai Mara we had 3 Maasai guards. Stand on one leg all night leaning on their spear. They have a strong smell which the lions recognise and avoid as of course the Maasai and lions are old enemies.

Children generally inherit from their mother – matrilineal society. A woman will have a main husband but in traditional Maasai culture she is allowed to also have sexual relationships with other men of her own age-set. Men practice polygamy, having several wives. A woman will have a main husband but in traditional Maasai culture she practices polyandry where she has sexual relations with her husband and other members of her husband's age-set, i.e. circumcision group.

At the end of the day the moran decides which hut he is going to sleep in, and leaves his spear outside so other morans, who will recognise it, move on to another hut.

Probably not happening nowadays. But the Maasai make no distinction between children who are legitimate, illegitimate or adopted. The Maasai do not place great importance on being the biological father of their own children. All children of the manyatta are equally loved and valued, regardless of their paternity

3. Average lifespan of the Maasai is 42 years for men, 44 for women. They traditionally lead a healthy, active, nomadic lifestyle. There are no funeral ceremonies for the dead. They believe that burying the dead is bad for the soil. They spread the dead body with animal blood and fat and deposit it out in the scrub/savanna where predators scavenge it. Hyenas etc. This is called Predator Burial.

Maasai Way of Life

In historical terms the Maasai were semi-nomadic, herding their cattle between different areas of good grazing and moving their houses with them. Today they largely stay in permanent settlements, concrete block walls and corrugated tin roofs.

Going into a Maasai house is amazing. Typically, the traditional house is a safe and comfortable shelter for the whole family. It is round in shape and built over a frame of interwoven branches. This frame is covered with several layers of animal skins and plastered with a mix of earth and cow dung. It is built by the women and must be easily moved according to their nomadic way of life. The huts also inhabited by sick or newly born calves. Only opening is the entrance and leads into a circular tunnel which winds around into an internal space which is divided into rooms by partitions. In the central room is a fireplace which is used to cook meals, provide light, keep insects away, especially termites. Very hot. The occupants sleep on beds of branches.

Surrounding the homestead or manyatta the Maasai construct a hedge of acacia branches with thorns to keep wild animals and enemies out at night. This is called the Enkang. They herd their cattle into the enclosure at night. Is it effective.

Maasai villages are a form of vernacular architecture that perfectly represents the uses and ways of functioning of an ethnic group. Livestock is at the heart of the activity and is therefore protected in the centre and heart of the community's village. The habitat is restricted because it has to be built quickly and will be abandoned just as quickly. Moreover, the person who builds a property, in this case the woman, is the owner. Matrilineal inheritance. The spatial use, the architectural form is solely the result of the social and economic functioning of the Maasai Group.

The men do no work and have no interest in money. No cash economy. He tends his herds of cows and the Maasai generally keep vastly more than they need. A man's status is determined by the number of cattle that he has. The Maasai are pastoralists and not hunter-gatherers. There are estimated to be about 900,000 to 2 million members of the tribe, no-one seems to be sure, so that involves a lot of cattle and clearly competition for grass with native wildlife and the livestock of other tribes and farmers. Especially with the wardens of the national reserves. They have a determination to cling on to their traditional way of life. They reject the cash economy and refuse to settle as farmers. This may be changing and some of them seem to be growing crops.

Many of them are allowed to live in the national parks and reserves and to keep a certain number of cows. Or around the edge of the parks, such as the communities around the Ngorongoro Crater. In the old days they raided cattle from across a huge area of East Africa from the Indian Ocean coast inland. They were fearful warriors most feared for their skill in throwing the orinka – a club which they could throw accurately for 100 metres. Also their spears. Examples in the Cambridge Anthropology Museum.

It is interesting that they stood firm against slavery, even the elders resisted it. They lived around wild animals but had an aversion to eating wild game, birds and even fish. They took the blood from the jugular artery of their cattle (you can buy the little bow and arrows they used in the antique shops). After the blood has been collected in a gourd it is drunk immediately, sometimes mixed with milk.

In the past they used to raid neighbouring countryside for cattle. Fearless fighters. They believe that all cattle on earth belong to them. The Garissa province of Kenya, a broad band of land adjacent to the Somalia border is an area that the FCO advise British people not to go. The terrorist group called Al Shabbab make raid across the border from Somalia to steal cattle and vice-versa. Fatalities occur and the level of policing is low since they are targets. Stealing cattle is an imprisonable offence but it does still occur.

In the colonial days the loss of cattle through disease led to starvation by many Maasai communities. Rinderpest decimated the herds. The colonialists themselves brought diseases that the Maasai had no resistance to, like smallpox in the 1890s around Lake Victoria. Partly caused by the increased mobility of people and the traditional tribal heartlands becoming open up to other tribes. That combined with famine put the tribes under great pressure. To some extent the Maasai tribes absorbed other tribes like the Samburu who adopted the Maasai way of life.

They are quite fearless. Colonialists in the Ngorongoro Crater would describe how boys would creep up to a sleeping rhino and place a pebble on its head. Another boy then creeps up and retrieve the pebble without waking the rhino. You see them walking along the side of the roads very close to trucks and cars. Very dangerous driving at night, no streetlights, very black skin, and the red shuka over their shoulders, they are almost impossible to see. Maasai at night. We used to avoid driving in Kenya and Tanzania at night wherever possible.

There is some marked racism towards the Maasai by other tribes and especially the Asians. Traditionally they are illiterate, but there are real efforts being made to build schools for the Maasai.

Traditionally the Maasai consider it beneath their dignity to do any form of manual work. Yet they are a very dignified race. They extend their ear lobes by hanging weights on them, both men and women. The older the man the wiser he is and the longer his ear lobes. Both sexes hang bone ornaments or wooden disks from them.

Education of Young People

Education is not free in Kenya and Tanzania and where money is short, it is the education of boys which is prioritised. Maasai girls face many obstacles to get an education, mostly related to high levels of poverty. It is also tied up with the Maasai dowry system. The sooner a girl gets married, the sooner the dowry is provided, which may be many cattle and goats and even some money. So, at an early age of 12/13 immediately after circumcision, a girl is married.

There are also cultural factors which contribute to preventing girls getting an education:

- + a woman is valued for the number of children that she can have. Infant mortality is not uncommon, so she has to start early. Her labour around the house, where women do most of the work, is also valued. Women live to an average age of 44.

- +The schools are some distance away from the homestead and each school has to serve the needs of many homesteads. The only way to get to school is to walk so it may be several hours before the girl arrives at school. By then she is tired and has probably not had anything to eat, which is not conducive to good learning. Parents worry about the safety of girls walking across the savanna in the dark to go and return from school after dark.

- + the biological family does not benefit from educating a daughter since when she marries, she becomes a member of her husband's family.

There are many international charities which are doing a lot to amend this situation and building schools in which they encourage girls attendance. Also, to stop girls circumcision which leads to many complications for them. Womankind is one such charity.

Stars and Omens for the Maasai people .

The dark African nights, with night descending so quickly. The stars and the phases of the moon are of great significance to the Maasai. They indicate the approach of the different seasons when people must start to prepare for the coming rains (short and long rains). The time to bring the cattle back from the plains.

The dates for the circumcision ceremonies and for marriages. If the configuration of the stars is wrong the Maasai will delay a wedding.

Also navigation at night which they are experts on.

The influence of the Modern World.

The traditional Maasai way of life is increasingly difficult to maintain and preserve for the future generations to experience and learn from. There are worthy attempts by schools to balance modern education on core curriculum subjects like Maths, English and Science with the preservation of their traditions. Many have now abandoned their nomadic way of life and now have positions in business, commerce and the government, but at weekends they head home to their homestead, take off their business suit and don the shuka and pick up their orinka

You do experience the Maasai as a tourist on the coastal hotels. They are allowed to come into the grounds, even welcomed by the hotel owners. They encircle and perform a rotating dance around the circle, jumping at intervals, very high, long legs. They love tourists to join them and I have done so several times and when you jump a little later than them and not as high they fall about with laughter.

The early missionaries made very little progress with the Maasai. They are a monotheistic race, worshipping their God who is called Engai. When the early Lutheran and Catholic missionaries tried to baptize the Maasai, they found it difficult since the Maasai felt they already had their own God and why would they want someone else's? But the societies are firmly patriarchal, with the senior elders joined by the retired elders to make decisions and influenced by their Engai. Also, the Maasai are polygamous. and wished to retain polygamy and polyandry, which are against Christian doctrines.

Attenborough in the Planet Earth series recently described how in the old days when a moran had killed a lion he took the name of the lion he had killed (they used to know the lions and give them names). Now each lion has the name of a Maasai warrior, so there is an incentive for them to protect the lions and not kill them.

Also, with modern technology radio tracking collars are fitted on lions after they have been anaesthetised and when one approaches a Maasai village they are warned and they protect their cows.

Finally

East Africa is home to over 50 tribes of native peoples, many of whom have lost their traditions over time. But not the Maasai. The Maasai tribe is well known for their strong traditions, unique culture, and red tribal dress. As they stand firm in their traditional lifestyle and culture, in anthropological terms the Maasai tribe are an inspiration.