

## The Maasai



### Who Are They?

Uncertainty about their origin remains many theories and oral traditions. Their Maa language suggests that they came from the Nile Valley of Southern Sudan. Strong Cushitic influences are reflected in the Maasai culture and it is thought that this interaction took place before the Nilotes entered present day Kenya about 500 to 600 years ago. By the time of the European colonization of East Africa in the late 19th century, the Maasai occupied much of the Rift Valley in Kenya and northern Tanzania as well as the surrounding highlands and plains. They had absorbed other peoples and cultures along the way but were not structured as a single tribe. Rather, they were several different tribes sharing a similar culture and a common language, albeit with differing dialects.

### How Do They Live?

For the Maasai, cattle are what make the good life, and milk and meat are the best foods. Their old ideal was to live by their cattle alone – other foods they could get by exchange – but today they also need to grow crops. They move their herds from one place to another, so that the grass has a chance to grow again; traditionally, this is made possible by a communal land tenure system in which everyone in an area shares access to water and pasture. Nowadays Maasai have increasingly been forced to settle, and many take jobs in towns. They have no chiefs, although each section has a spiritual leader. Maasai worship one god who dwells in all things, but may manifest himself as either kindly or destructive. Many Maasai today, however, belong to various Christian churches.

### Social and Economic Structure

Contrary to this early reputation as lazy, ne'er do wells, the Maasai are expert herdsman and the social structure is organized for the optimal utilization of their cattle. A boy begins to learn the intricacies of cattle husbandry from about the age of five when he assumes responsibility for taking care of his father's calves. By the time he reaches the age of circumcision, about 15-18 years, he is fully capable of tending and protecting his animals, diagnosing and treating diseases, supplementing their diet for overall health, growth and milk production, assisting in the birthing of calves and attending to related problems of birth and lactation.

Ceremonial group circumcision initiates age-related boys into manhood. It begins their tenure as warriors, a period of approximately 8 to 12 years, during which they progress from junior to senior warriors. The primary responsibilities of warriors are to protect the community from predators and other tribes and to raid cattle to increase their herds. Modern laws and regulations have diminished their function. Cattle raids are now illegal and their lands are greatly diminished. However, in pre-colonial times, every community knew the extent of their territory even though there were no legal titles or fences. In addition, warriors supervise grazing, continually assess the condition of the pastures and

seek out new pasturage when indicated.

The E Unoto or 'coming of age' ceremony marks the transition from warriorhood to elderhood and is the most important event in the lives of Maasai men. As junior elders, they are allowed to acquire cattle and to marry. Maasai men are polygamous and take as many wives as they can afford. More wives extend the network of friends and relatives and increase the number of children. More sons enable families to split up their animals, thereby reducing the probability of losing an entire herd to disease or misfortune. Having already proved their physical courage and abilities as warriors, junior elders now embark on sharpening their mental prowess.

Intelligence and wisdom are prized qualities because elders are responsible for the overall welfare of Maasai society. They uphold their traditional laws and spiritual mores and they impart their specialized knowledge to young people. This includes but is not limited to the use of herbs for animal and human health, observing the sky to determine the timing of events and to predict rain, planning cattle itineraries based on the warriors' ecological reports of the pastures, and active range management to induce optimal grazing conditions. After advancing in age and fulfilling their duties to the tribe, the responsibilities of elders are relaxed as they take on the role of senior elders. Senior elders are highly respected and sought out for their knowledge and experience.

They officiate at important ceremonies and preserve Maasai legends and traditions. Maasai women are primarily involved with the day to day running of their households. Whereas men are responsible for maintaining the herds and the ritual slaughter of the animals, women collect and utilize the by-products. They milk the cows, clean and prepare the hides and build their houses with dung and mud. Young girls assist their mothers in preparation for their role as wives and mothers.

### **What Problems Do They Face?**

Since the colonial period, most of what used to be Maasai land has been taken over, for private farms and ranches, for government projects or for wildlife parks. Mostly they retain only the driest and least fertile areas. The stress this causes to their herds has often been aggravated by attempts made by governments to 'develop' the Maasai. These are based on the idea that they keep too much cattle for the land. However, they are in fact very efficient livestock producers and rarely have more animals than they need or the land can carry. These efforts try to change their system of shared access to land. While this has suited outsiders and some entrepreneurial Maasai who have been able to acquire land for them or sell it off, it has often denuded the soil and brought poverty to the majority of Maasai, who are left with too little and only the worst land.

*Source: [www.africaguide.com/culture/tribes/maasai.htm](http://www.africaguide.com/culture/tribes/maasai.htm)  
[www.great-adventures.com/destinations.tanzania/maasai.html](http://www.great-adventures.com/destinations.tanzania/maasai.html)*