

# Maasai People and their Culture

## Introduction

Anyone who visits East-central Africa especially Tanzania and Kenya for academic or adventure or just a safari holiday, will never be able to avoid seeing the adorable people of East-central Africa, the Maasai. Anywhere you go in towns or countryside in the above mentioned countries you will meet the Maasai people. For example, in Tanzania the Maasai have inhabited Ngorongoro Conservation Area for about 200 years. Upon arriving in Ngorongoro area face out the Datoga or Barbaig, the Nilo-Hamitic speaking pastoralists who came as earlier as 300 or so years before.

The Maasai have since occupied the area living with environment and wildlife harmoniously. The Maasai people dwell also in the eastern, northern, and western parts of Ngorongoro Conservation Area while the Barbaig reside in the southern part by Lake Eyasi, outside Ngorongoro Conservation Area. They also occupy parts of the great plains of Serengeti National Park and other famous parks in Tanzania and Kenya. We can certainly assert that apart from the attraction of national parks which is the primary reason for many tourists' visit to East-central Africa, the Maasai people are another reason that makes many tourists, anthropologists and archeologists come to visit Eastern-central Africa.

During colonial time, the Maasai were unpopular for their hostility because they turned their backs on the petty prizes and temptations from westerners. But in the past few decades, they have won admiration from all over the western world. Indeed, the Maasai are the great people of East-central Africa. Nevertheless, they are considered rigid because they have managed to preserve their traditional ways despite the impact of western civilisation. They have continued to practice their ancient customs and ceremonies; they have continued to maintain their age-set structure with its warrior ranks of proud and brave warriors known as Ilmurran who are equal to commandos.

But how can one describe the Maasai people? The common ways used by many to portray the Maasai people such as their red garments, necklaces, a unique hair style, milk and blood as their main meal, male circumcision in which men become warriors (Ilmurran), killing a lion to demonstrate bravery, warrior-jumping dance, carrying of a spear and a shield are part and true symbols of the Maasai people and culture. But is this really the Maasai? These are good descriptions of the Maasai people, but according to our opinion they are inadequate representations of the Maasai. In other words, these symbols do not tell adequately who the Maasai people really are. How about their other important aspects of life? We need something more, something that deals with the heart of their culture, and something that speaks and portrays the real life of Maasai as people. Therefore, Ilkiding'a cultural tourism programme has seen the importance to provide some enlightening information with regard to the Maasai culture.

But how much is known of these unwavering keepers of their culture? Is there enough to help tourists, anthropologists and archeologists know about the Maasai and their respective culture? We will try our best to provide useful information perhaps more than what others have given. We at Ilkiding'a cultural tourism programme believe that knowing the culture of the Maasai people will be helpful for you as you prepare to come and explore Tanzania, the beautiful land! Why? First, as already stated, "You cannot avoid seeing the Maasai" for they are almost in every corner of all famous national parks, in Tanzania and Kenya. Second, you cannot resist adoring them! Third, they are probably the only people who live with animals without endangering each other! In addition, you will find that despite their firmness to preserve their culture, the Maasai are friendly, hospitable and welcoming.

It is for this very reason we would like to present to you a concise but detailed overview of the Maasai culture, that is, their traditions and norms. Our website [www.ilkidinga.com](http://www.ilkidinga.com) is the place to start your adventure, learning the people's culture and animals of East-central Africa ! Ilkiding'a cultural tourism programme assures you that once you encounter these adorable people of East-central Africa; you also, will admire them. We urge you to come and "see" because "seeing is more than reading" and "seeing is believing." And once you see, you will never regret! Of course, this includes visiting the great Serengeti National Park, Ngorongoro Crater, Lake Manyara National Park, Tarangire National Park, Arusha National Park, and Mikumi National Park, Mount Kilimanjaro the roof of Africa (19,335.6 ft, equal to 5895m), Mount Meru 15,000 ft, equal to 4565m) and many more places. In this juncture, Ilkiding'a cultural tourism programme says, KARIBU a word for WELCOME, which is literally translated, "Come near." Hence, "come near" and we will take you to the most spectacular places where wonders and beauty never cease!

**Maasai population** - These famous warriors and herders of East-central Africa who once dominated the plains of East Africa are now confined to a fraction of their former land and their total population is estimated between 900,000 and 1,000,000 both in Tanzania and Kenya. It is believed that the Maasai population is in decline. Nowadays Maasai have increasingly been forced to settle, and many take jobs in towns.

**Maasai origins** - The history of these tall, handsome, elegant, well known, and adored people of East-central Africa Maasai (more properly Ilmaasai) is not explicitly known, due to illiteracy among them. However, this is not a conclusion that the history of the Maasai is not written altogether. According to anthropologists and archeologists, the history of the origin of the Maasai can be traced back to the fourteenth century when they came down along the Rift Valley and finally settled in Kenya and Tanzania, East Africa. The anthropological writings suggest that the Maasai have been settled in East Africa for about three thousand years. From what is known and recorded by anthropologists and archeologists, the Maasai are descendants of an ancient community called Proto-Eastern Nilotes who were located in the southern Sudan for centuries before the so-called first split occurred.

The Maasai people are two distinguished groups and both groups speak one language known as Maa.

The first group is identified as "pastoral Maasai" who are basically headers and keepers of livestock. It should be clear that Maasai have a deep love for their livestock because to them cattle are not only food and source of income, but also a religious symbol of God's favour. When the Maasai people pray they always ask for two things namely children and cattle. The Maasai prayer runs as follows: May God (Enkai yaai meaning "Creator," "heaven" or "rain") give us children and cattle." In short, for the Maasai "a cow is life." Perhaps, it is this notion and understanding, namely being "pastoralist" or keepers of cattle, which make them claim that all cattle belong to them by "divine right." This conviction has resulted in disputes with other tribal groups when they did cattle raiding and claim to repossess their property. The "pastoral nomadic Maasai are found in the following districts, namely, Kisongo (the largest group) in Tanzania, Il-uasi Nkishu in Kenya, and Enaipasha in Kenya.

The second group is the "agricultural Maasai" known as Ilarusa or as the national language of Tanzania, Kiswahili puts it Waarusha who are farmers as well as keepers of cattle. The Ilarusa occupy the southern slopes of Mount Meru in Arusha region where the land is fertile and the rainfall is sufficient for raising maize, bananas, beans, coffee, and other crops. Here is where you can find us Ilkiding'a cultural tourism programme.

Family and social structure and functions - The structure and social settings of the Maasai family has a dual dimension. First, it shows how unique the Maasai are as well as how they correspond with other social ethnic groups (more than 120) within the country. Secondly, it shows how members within the family and clan relate and what roles members play and their place within the larger community social settings. The Maasai family structure is different from other ethnic groups in that several families form a clan. Nevertheless, the members of these families are not typically related people. In other words, people who form a clan are not essentially biologically related.

The main social purpose of the clans is for exogamous marriages; for it is through clans bloodlines are kept. One must be careful not to marry within one's own clan, for it would be marrying his own sister. For instance, a girl must not marry a man of her father's age group since it suggests incest, even though they are not genetically related. Such a man is regarded as her father. Similarly, a man must not marry a widow or a divorcee whose husband is of his father's age group, for she would be considered his mother, regardless of age.

Maasai leadership structure - The Maasai have no chiefs, although each section has Oloiboni, a spiritual leader who also play the role of a political leader. Along with oloiboni there is also alaigwanani in the leadership structure of the Maasai. The difference between oloiboni and alaigwani is that the former plays two roles namely spiritual and political while the latter holds the secular part only. In addition, alaigwanani leadership is confined within the clan parameters while Oloiboni role goes beyond clans to a larger community setting in the Maasai land. As spiritual leaders, the Maasai diviners (Loibonok) are consulted whenever misfortunes arise in the community or in the whole land. They also serve as physicians, dispensing their herbal remedies to treat diseases and absolve social and moral transgressions. In recent years they have earned a reputation as the best healers in Tanzania. The Maasai are often portrayed as people who have not forgotten the importance of the past, and as such their knowledge of traditional healing ways has earned them respect.

Together with Laigwanak who are heads of clans, Loibonok's role as political leaders include settling disputes on land issues, to resolve conflicts between Maasai communities and other tribal groups, as well as serving as intermediaries between the Maasai community and the government.

**Cultural practices and norms (Age-grades)** - Another interesting factor is that the Maasai community is a patriarchal society, which is structured and built upon "age grade" or "age-set" known as olporror. These age groups derive during circumcision, when a group of young warriors (age 16 and above) is initiated into warrior-hood, to become defenders of the land. Each age-et consists of two age groups, namely, "right" and "left" the right being the one that is circumcised first, and the "left" one later. According to Maasai tradition, each age group has its specific role in the community. As part of a cultural process, the boys (age six and seven) will begin to learn herding from their older brothers before they undergo the circumcision ritual which marks manhood for a boy and womanhood for a girl.

Circumcision for the Maasai is the most significant event. It is a sacred ritual through which the age groups of the Maasai are designated. The four age groups are junior warriors, senior warriors, junior elders, and senior elders. The junior warriors, although they are already initiated into adulthood, do not engage in any political affairs or cultural rituals. Their main responsibility at this stage is to learn warfare under the tutelage of their older brothers, namely, the senior age group, in order to be defenders of the land. They also learn the customs and traditions of the Maasai people for they are expected to pass it on to the next generations. One important thing about this age group is that they are not allowed to marry. The senior warriors assume a tremendous responsibility to defend the land from all sorts of enemies such as lions who come and invade livestock etc. The senior warriors, therefore, are equivalent to military commandos who serve to protect the welfare of the people and to stabilize and maintain peace. Each of these age groups serves within a twenty-year term of length, after which another age group is circumcised and takes over the duty of defending the land.

The initiation of these age groups is accompanied by a special ceremony and is done for young men only because women do not have age groups. In other words, a woman belongs to the age group of the man who would marry her. This ceremony brings about the climax of the initiation of age-set. The Oloiboni (diviner or religious leader highly respected among the Maasai) orders the opening and closing of the circumcision period. He would also announce that those who are already initiated can assume their role as defenders and protectors of the Maasai land.

**Special note** - The government of United Republic of Tanzania has outlawed Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Therefore, anyone who practices FGM will be incarcerated. Other non-profit and religious organizations have joined in to discourage this humiliating practice. Female Genital Mutilation is an ongoing fight for there are Maasai men and women who strongly believe that female circumcision is essential to being accepted as true Maasai woman. Male circumcision does not fall under this law. It is practiced and it is possible to attend the ceremony if one is fortunate to come during the circumcision season.

**Marriage** - According to Maasai culture, marriage is a very important stage of life because it is through marriage the family and clan continue to exist. Therefore, it is important to get married. Several things need to be done for one to get a wife. First, a man meets a girl whom she loves and gives her a chain, then follows the open declaration of the man intention to marry the girl. Secondly, the man brings honey and milk which he gives to his clanswomen. The women take honey and milk to the girl's parents. Honey is equal to an official declaration of intent to marry. The honey is not brewed into beer but is eaten by women. After this a large quantity of honey will be taken to the girl parent's home together with milk. Contrary to the first, this honey is brewed into beer. The father invites his relatives and other distinguished elders of his age-group to drink the beer. At this point, the man who had declared to marry the girl will be summoned and told whether his proposal is acceptable. If the parents agree then life time friendship begins from that very moment. On the other hand, if the proposal is rejected for any concrete reason, he will be informed. Things end as it is and the man will not attempt to recover the cost of honey or anything else he had incurred. If parents approve the man proposal, he will give them presents as much as he is able to give. This brings about the climax of betrothal and no other man may interfere or try to marry the girl.

**Wedding day** - On the wedding day the bridegroom brings two heifers and one bull all of which must be of the same colour (black or brown are regarded as sacred colours), with no scars or any blemish. He also brings two female sheep and one ram to be slaughtered and the fat used for making ochre and for daubing on the bodies. Some of the fat will be taken by the bride to her new home. The bridegroom also gives a lamb to his mother-in law and from that day the bridegroom and his age-set call her Pakerr meaning "The one to whom I gave a lamb." The man gives a heifer to his father-in law and as it is to his mother-in law they would call each other Pakiteng which means, "The one to whom I gave a heifer (cow)." The bridegroom also gives brass ornaments to his mother-in law as a symbol of great respect for marrying his daughter. Honey beer is brewed for this special occasion which is used for blessing the bride. The Maasai do not believe in divorce, therefore, according to Maasai tradition and norm divorce is inconceivable.

**Child birth** - Like all other people around the world at the birth of the child a midwife attends the woman in the process of giving birth. The midwife receives the baby in her hands as soon as he/she is born. Her other task is cutting the umbilical cord and immediately pronounces the words, "Take care of your life and I will also take care of mine" that is telling the baby, "You are now responsible for your life in as much as I am responsible for mine." Above all, these words are meant to convey the sense that the child has from that moment of birth left the security of his/her mother's womb and soon the baby is going to be responsible for his/her own life. After delivery of a baby, the mother is given beehive honey to drink. The father of the baby or his representative gets cow blood which is normally taken from jugular stratum of a bullock for a male child. For the female baby the blood will be taken from the jugular vein of a heifer. The next thing after the drinking of blood is the slaughtering of a black or brown spotless without injuries or scars. This sheep is slaughtered by women in the morning and the meat is never eaten by men. The women eat most of the meat during the day but some parts are reserved for the evening when cattle return from grazing. As soon as the cattle are inside the pens, one of the women gets out of the house and chants about four times "The meat has been roasted and the drinks are ready." This is an invitation to other women from the neighbourhood to come, eat and dance.

Another sheep is slaughtered after this and this time it has to be fat because some of its fat has to be melted for the mother to drink. The meat may be eaten by both men and women. When the above mentioned sheep are slaughtered, the responsibility is on the husband who may decide to slaughter whatever he wishes for his wife. The common meal he would make for his wife would be a mixture of melted fat and lean meat fried in the fat.

**Naming of a child** - Immediately after the birth, the child is given a "pet name" by which he/she will be known for some time. During this time the mother remains with the hair she had when she gave birth. To some families the mother remains unshaved until the child is given a proper name. On the day on which the child is given the proper name, both the mother and the child must shave their heads.

**Women affairs** - The Masai people do not diminish the role of women in the community. On the one hand, Maasai women play a significant role in the community. Women's roles include collecting firewood, drawing water, taking care of children, and building huts. Since it is the woman who builds the house, she also becomes the owner and the manager of the household. When a Maasai man takes delight to introduce his wife so honourably he would say, "This is the woman (wife) who shelters me in her house." They also milk cows, hollowing out gourds as well as decorating them. They do all this kind of noble tasks for their families and community in general. As sustainers of the family, women work hard to supply all the needs of their children by making sure they eat, dress, and live happily. Women have a strong voice in their culture. They function as educators and religious leaders. Maasai women are not only reliable but dependable. In short, they are the keepers and sustainers of the Maasai community.

On the other hand, Masai women are minors in their culture and have to be always represented by their father or husband in sensitive matters and in decision making on those issues. A Maasai woman is by birth a member of her father's family line, which means she cannot own land etc. This practice is against human rights because it denies women of their basic rights. It is high time for the Maasai to change this perspective and the challenge comes from a Maasai wise proverb, Meetai enkerai enkoshoke, ne meetai ene enkoriong', which means, "one child cannot be of the womb and the other from the back." These words simply imply that all children, male and female, are equal.

**Maasai Bomas** - The Maasai people live in the kraal which is commonly known as boma. In Kiswahili the boma which means enkanj' (singular) and inkang'itie (plural) in the Maa language is a compound within which are houses or rather huts covered by manure. The arrangement of a boma or kraal is normally in a circular fashion. The fences are made by men using branches of trees. These bomas are generally shared by more than one family. However, due to the reduction of land and land ownership systems, bomas are more and more occupied by a single family.

**Maasai traditional food** - Traditionally, the Maasai people rely on meat, milk and blood from cattle for their living. The Masai people also drink blood on special occasions. It is given to a newly circumcised person, a sick person and as mentioned above to a woman who has given birth. Once a month, blood is taken from living animals. This is done by piercing the jugular vein with an arrow. The blood is mixed with milk and kept in a gourd. According to Maasai belief farming is a crime. This notion derives from the fact that cultivating the land makes it unsuitable for grazing. But due to severe and continuous drought which has resulted in the decrease of livestock, the Maasai are forced to engage in raising maize and other crops for their survival. Therefore, the Maasai people have become dependent on corn meal, rice, potatoes, and the use of blood as the traditional meal has decline.

**What problems do they face?** - There are three critical problems faced by the Maasai people today. First, the Maasai people are facing the reduction of land. For example, since 1959, part of Serengeti National Park and Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority which was formerly occupied by the Maasai people has been taken away from them for wildlife parks. The second is drought which is intensified by the fact that they live in arid parts of the land where rain is insufficient for grazing. Third, the Maasai people face another crucial problem, that is, illiteracy. As part of contributing to the Maasai community development, the Ngorongoro Conservation Authority formed the Pastoralists Council (Baraza la Wafugaji) with the purpose to offer education at all levels to the Maasai people. Ilkiding'a cultural tourism programme would like to join the Pastoralists and other NGOs in the area to contribute in anyway possible for the betterment of the Maasai community in Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority.