

Maasai Culture

*The information that follows was provided by **Maasai Girls Educational Fund** for Dining for Women's educational materials.*

Food

Meat, milk and blood form a substantial portion of the Maasai diet. They rely on cattle, goats and sheep for this. Using a bow, a blunt arrow is shot at a live cow's jugular to extract blood. Animal fats, honey, porridge and recently maize meal, vegetables and tea are also consumed.

Cattle

The Maasai are a pastoral tribes-group native to southern Kenya and north-central Tanzania, along the Great Rift Valley plains. They are great herders of cattle who live in the open wild, sharing their habitat with wildlife. They deem themselves as sons of *enkai* – a monotheistic God, who gifted them with cattle – in fact all the cattle in the world. With this certain knowledge, they do not associate cattle raids with any guilt, but more like a restoration to the rightful owners.

Ownership of cattle is the key measure of a man's wealth and status. The more cattle a man has,



the more wives he may marry. This in turn leads to more wealth by way of children, for children are another measure of wealth. Indeed a common Maasai prayer is: "May the Creator give us cattle and children". The Maasai are passionate about their herds and take great pains to ensure their increase- by means fair or foul.

Dress

The Maasai often wear heavy handmade bead jewelry, for which they have become well known. Often, elongated earlobes dangle with beads and shapely objects. The Maasai also wear large disks or single strand beaded necklaces, anklets, wristlets, headbands, waistbands, and rings.



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Bright red is by far the Maasai's favorite color. In traditional regalia, young warriors dress in short, crimson wrap-skirts and smear their hair with red ochre. Elderly men dress in long red wrap-robies and sash in red *shukka* – blankets – while the women dress in colorful clothing, red being the dominant shade.

Only three categories of Maasai are allowed to grow out their hair: an unnamed child, a barren woman and a *moran* –warrior. Warriors spend good time braiding their hair; they then apply red ochre, which they also use to embellish their skin. Such grooming is invaluable in attracting girlfriends at this stage of their life.

Ceremonies

Circumcision – *emurata* – is the most significant ceremony in the early years of a Maasai's life, as it marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. The night before the main ceremony, boys sing and play their childhood away. Those who undergo circumcision at the same time henceforth belong to the same age-set, and range from 7 to 14 years old.

On the morning of the ceremony, each boy is bathed in stinging-cold water to deaden his nerves. He is draped in a purple piece of clothing and is presented with a special pair of shoes made from dry cowhide. In a public ceremony, in the chill of the morning, the foreskin of his penis is knifed off. During this ritual the boy must not show the slightest sign of pain, not even the twitch of a muscle.

Girls undergo an excision of the clitoris – *clitoridectomy*, or female genital mutilation (FGM) – which is performed in the privacy of their mother's house. It is believed that this infamous practice helps keep the girls' sexual desires in check. However, the damage – both physical and emotional – is devastating, and can include death. After a lengthy healing process, the circumcised girl is considered eligible for marriage and any worthy suitor may now ask for her hand. The Maasai bride is usually never part of the dowry negotiation or wedding arrangement, and sometimes, it is a childhood engagement.

After the boys heal from their circumcision, initiation into junior warriorhood follows in a colorful ceremony known as *emurano*. The boys move from home and set up warriors' camps –





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emanyatta – where they are taught to be true warriors – *morani*. During this period, the junior warrior is allowed to engage in sexual relations with uncircumcised girls. He shares his girlfriends with other junior warriors, as they are bound by oath for life and share in everything. No doubt that this practice aids in the spread of STDs, HIV, and the prevalence of teen pregnancy.

Junior warriors must be on the ready to fight fearlessly, at any time. If they prove themselves, they are promoted to senior warrior – *ilingeetiani* – through a huge ceremony known as *eunoto*, which is performed every ten to fifteen years. The *ilingeetiani* cease to be front-liners in battle and prepare for elderhood. They are allowed to accumulate wealth, marry and start families. At the transition ceremony, they are handed new spears with ebony handles to signify their seniority. Here, they identify and choose their age-set leader.

The warrior graduates to become a junior elder at an emotional, meat roasting ceremony – *olngeher*. Crying and wailing, he mourns the end of his youthful years. He downs his weapons and is honored with an elders' chair. The chair becomes his companion till death or until it breaks. On this chair his eldest wife shaves his head clean. If he has no wife, his mother does the honors, and a wife is very soon found for him.

Death – *enkeeya* is the inevitable end of a Maasai's life journey. To the horror of Christian missionaries, Maasai traditionally mourned their dead and then left the body for animals to eat. The common practice now is to hold a small ceremony, after which a grave is dug and the body buried. Stones are then piled upon the grave, but without any tombstones or markers.

Excerpts from: <http://www.africapoint.com/newsletters/maasai2.htm>