

Symbols of Kenya: The Maasai

The Maasai community has been one of the symbols of Kenya. They are the famous colorful people who have managed to hold on to their traditional way of life till present time. Together with Samburu, the Maasai are members of the Nilotic tribal group, both of them cattle herders. They came from Sudan and occupied the central Kenya, best parts for their huge cattle herds. These herds have been their measure of wealth which usually accumulates to adverse economic consequences. The bigger the herd size, the richer the owner. Known for their red color clothing, the Maasai have a reputation of being fierce warriors, though this has been often exaggerated. Facing a lion in the African savanna is an experience that is not quickly forgotten by the warriors. Lion hunting is an ancient practice that played an important role in the Maasai culture. The practice is different from trophy hunting; it is symbolically a rite of passage and ritual rather than a hobby. The lion hunting is made in different methods which make the lion to be angry, upset and sometimes provokes a fight with a lion. The game between warriors and lions is similar to that of a cat and a mouse. Warrior hood system still continues today accompanied by traditional regalia, unchanged by time. This system is for the young males before they marry. The importance of this is to prepare the young males to be responsible people both for themselves and for their community. The Inkajjiki (Maasai word for a house) are loaf-shaped and made of mud, sticks, grass, cow dung and cow's urine. The big responsibility of building the homestead (Inkajjiki) falls in the hands of the women. They are in charge of taking care of the entire home which includes milking cows, searching for firewood and preparing food for the entire family. Men generally make the tribal decisions and care for the cattle. The homestead of the Maasai consists of several thatched houses and smeared with cow dung on the walls. These houses are built in a circular design one next to the other. The central part is left open for the cattle and goats belonging to that particular village. Most of the rest of Kenyan people have long forgotten their traditional ways of life. The western way of life slowly deleted the traditions of some of them. The white man brought formal education including modern medicine and this was the exchange price for the age-old customs. While most communities accepted these with open hands, the Maasai are yet to open their hands. Despite more than 33 years of self rule, red dress together with traditional rituals are still performed. For centuries they have continued to believe that all the cattle in the world belong to them and were given to them by Enkai, the God. A fact that has been a source of trouble with other neighboring communities by generating inter-tribal conflicts. The young Maasai morans (warrior) job is to protect the cattle of their fathers and to capture those of other communities, because in their folklore God gave them all the cattle. What has won them the great fame over the decades is their courage. It is true that when they surrounded a marauding lion, they crossed on it and speared it to death. This fearlessness has not been seen in any other community in Kenya. In addition to this braveness, the Maasai have won time and again admiration from foreigners visiting the country due to their nomadic way of life, not attachments to possessions, and togetherness banded by the age sets of those who underwent circumcision ritual together. When a young man reached junior elder hood he had the freedom to have sex with the wives of other elders, his comrades, if he so wished. Likewise, a Maasai woman belonged to the entire age-set and sexual jealousy did not exist. Ornamentation is very important and takes a big part of the Maasai tribe. They have very beautiful bead-work that they make for themselves and also sell to tourists. Each age set makes its own pattern. They have been living side by side with wildlife and sharing pastures. This is changing and at a quick pace as most of the fertile lands has been taken for plantation agriculture. In the process, the traditional routes for the wildlife have been disrupted, forcing them to be concentrated in particular areas. Due to these plantations, the pasture ground for the Maasai's cattle has further discouraged the nomadic way of life. Add on it the introduction of legal rule and government orders to keep distance from the areas gazetted as wildlife sanctuaries. There is little doubt as till when the Maasai will remain the 'famous Maasai'. They continue to demand grazing rights in the National parks. The community has its own way of organization whereby the elder men are at the top of the hierarchy, then elder women, morans and finally the girls. Passage from one age set from the moran to young adult is marked by slaughtering of a cow as an offering to the gods. Tourism has taken its toll too on the way of life of the Maasai and Samburu people. The construction of tourist hotels in the Maasai land imposed further restrictions to their movement and introduced a different way of life for those working in these resorts. The villages near the lodges do make some income from selling their hand-made crafts that include spears, beadwork and customary dances. The future of the Maasai is uncertain at this point.

About the Author

Natural Track Safaris is a Kenyan safari agent catering for family outdoor adventures, camping and overland safaris in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. For more safari information visit <http://www.natural-track.com/safaris>

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