

The Colorful Maasai: A Photographic Essay

by Neela Bhagat

During a recent African safari, I had the opportunity to visit and photograph some of the Maasai people, of the famed nomadic tribes of East Africa. Visiting their village—or “manyatta”—was an exceptional experience. Earlier we had mentioned to our driver, Joseph, that we’d like to meet some Maasai if possible. The drive from Nairobi to the Masai Mara game park took us across the Great Rift Valley, and almost in the middle of nowhere, we passed a group of Maasai men sitting by the side of the road. Joseph talked with them, and they agreed to let us visit their manyatta for a fee, and they escorted us into the settlement through a narrow opening constructed of dried, thorny bushes and twigs.

The People

The Maasai live in small, family-related groups. Their manyatta is usually a large enclosure, with a group of huts

arranged in a semi-circle and occupied by a large extended family. The location of each hut depends on the status of its occupant. The Maasai are polygamous—a man usually has several wives and each wife has her own hut, which she shares with her children.

The huts are constructed by the women (they’re *literally* the homemakers). These huts are squat, igloo-like, and surprisingly, too low for these tall people to stand upright in. They’re made of mud, twigs and cow dung, and the interior is dark. A small hole in the roof allows a little light to enter, while permitting smoke to escape from the smoldering fires which burn for cooking, warmth, and to keep insects away. The huts are sparse, with no furniture.

A young “morán,” the traditional Maasai

warrior (whose primary duty is to protect the tribe and cattle) welcomed us in halting English, and told us briefly about their culture. Then he proudly brought us inside his tiny dwelling. On one side was his bed—a raised, flat platform made from dried mud and straw, with a thin blanket. The manyatta was enclosed by a stockade—a tall, thorny fence—which served as a barrier, and protects the tribe and their cattle against the predators that also inhabit the area. After all, this is lion country!

Soon we were surrounded by the men and women, dressed in traditional bright red and yellow wraps, wearing colorful bangles and strings of beads around their necks. The shy, smiling children watched



On these pages, we share this author/photographer's experience of visiting a Maasai village in East Africa. **Above:** A village elder speaking to a group of children. **Right:** A Maasai mother and child.



us curiously. The women gathered and sang a welcoming song. We distributed some cookies and candy among the children, and it was a pleasure to see the delight on their faces.

These were the legendary Maasai people—the famous tribes of East Africa, about whom so much has been written, and whose faces are featured in many publications.

Their History

Their culture is of the ancient, Nilotic origin. It's believed that their earliest ancestors came from the Nile Valley to Lake Turkana, located in Kenya, just south of the Ethiopian border. Here, they were thought to have intermarried with the Cushite tribes, adapting much of their culture.



From Lake Turkana, they migrated south, spreading into the Rift Valley area in search of fertile grazing land. This has been their homeland ever since. The traditional Maasai are often called the "people of the cattle." The possession of cattle symbolizes wealth and prestige, and gives the men status among their peers.

These tall, proud people are easy to recognize. They have classic, chiseled

Left: The women gather to sing a welcoming song.

Below: A Maasai elder sporting bead necklaces and earrings.

Bottom: A cheerful young Maasai girl in the village.



features, and wear multi-colored, ornamental beads around their necks and earrings from their elongated earlobes. As they drive along the rough, dusty roads, the Maasai are often seen draped in their red cloaks—called "shukas"—which billow in the wind as they herd their cattle across the parched terrain.

Land ownership is meaningless to them. For many years, their traditional tribal lands have straddled the Kenya-Tanzania border near the Equator. These pastoral wanderers ignore national

Maasai

boundaries and follow the rains, roaming the rolling hills and grassy plains of Kenya and Tanzania, seeking greener pastures for their cattle.

Although they're peaceful today, in bygone days they were fierce warriors who raided neighboring villages, stole cattle, and were feared by all.

Throughout the centuries, these hardy people have survived on the harsh, semi-arid African plains. But they are at one with their environment, and co-exist and share the land with the prolific wildlife that surrounds them.

The Maasai Today

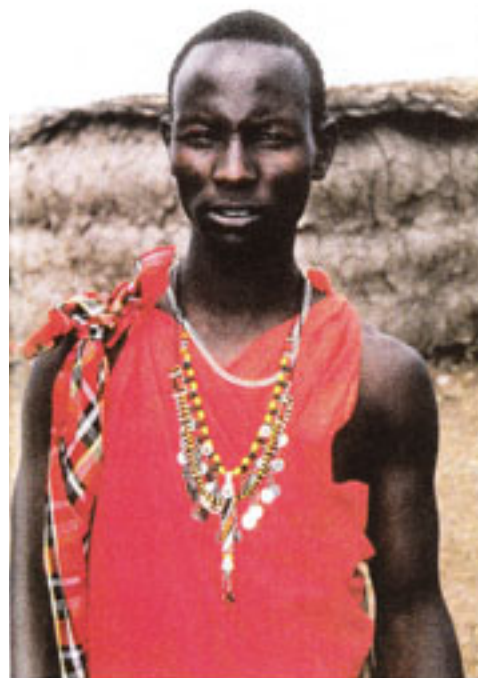
Modernization is making inroads to Maasailand. Some families are choosing to live in more-permanent settlements, close to villages with access to fresh water, and are now sending their children to school. However, the majority still prefer to follow in their ancestors' footsteps—leading a semi-nomadic life as cattle herders, stubbornly resisting



Above: Two brothers standing at the entrance of their family's hut.

Above right: A young moran—the traditional Maasai warrior who protects the tribe.

(Continued from page 45)



change, and fiercely clinging to their traditions and customs of centuries past.

Today, many Maasai groups welcome tourists. However, you can expect to pay for the privilege of visiting their homesteads. For a few dollars, you can walk around a village, take as many pictures as you like, and talk to the villagers (many of them even speak English). It's important to remember that the Maasai live in the remote African countryside, with no electricity, water supply, or a hospital. They make some money by selling necklaces and other trinkets as souvenirs. Tourism also provides a little income for these otherwise very poor people, and all income benefits the entire manyatta.

Photo Techniques and Equipment

As our visit to the Maasai village was an unscheduled stop, most of my equipment was packed in the rear of our safari Jeep. I only had access to my trusty Canon EOS Elan IIe, and fortunately, a few rolls of film in a plastic bag.

Our visit was around noon, and at

Maasai

the Equator with the strong African sun overhead, the light was very harsh. Aside from the Maasai themselves, there was very little color in the scenery. The mud huts and thatched roofs blended with the parched earth and barren landscape.

Our time was limited, and with so much going on all around us, I decided to set the camera on autofocus and used fill-flash. I've always been successful in similar situations that required that my camera automatically balance flash with ambient light in order to reduce harsh, contrasty light and soften the shadows in extremely bright conditions. This allowed me to concentrate on composing and getting candid shots of these people, their home and surroundings. All the accompanying images were shot with my hand-held Canon EOS Elan IIe and a 28–80mm lens at f/11, with ISO 100 film.

In Conclusion

This was an incredible photo opportunity—to meet, photograph, and get acquainted with the Maasai and learn first-hand about their unique culture. I left feeling privileged and grateful for the experience of portraying these people in their environment. I felt that I had captured the true Africa; the essence of an ancient, fascinating, but disappearing culture, with pictures to tell their story. As a visitor for one short hour, I had a glimpse of yesterday: the storybook Africa as it once was.

Today, as in many third-world countries, the Maasai's traditions and lifestyle are being challenged by the modern world. Thus far, they've dealt with most changes on their own terms: accepting some new ways that benefit their society, and discarding others that don't. They've succeeded in preserving the foundation of their social structure and values established through the generations, but for how much longer?

Along with the famed wildlife, the Maasai people have become a photographic icon, part of the multi-colored tapestry of East Africa. Both must be preserved for the future. ■