

This sample Cultural Anthropology report is single spaced to keep file size small. Papers should be double spaced.

A Glimpse Into the Culture of the Maasai

The Maasai (sometimes spelled Masai) people compose one of the many diverse tribes of Africa, occupying much of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. The Maasai has received the most written recognition of all the tribes of this region of Africa and prove to be very interesting to study. Although the tribe has developed rather recently from their warrior, nomadic, pastoral way of life into a more settled people, the traditions that characterize their culture and their daily lives remain virtually the same.

Maasai reside together among two different types of kraals. The first type is the *enjang*, which is where the married people live with their families. The *enjang* consists of anywhere from twenty to fifty huts enclosed by a circular thorn fence. (Adamson 222) Each family has one or two gates in the fence. The wives huts are located on each side of the hut, the odd numbered wives (first, third, etc.) are located on the right side of the gate, while the even numbered wives (second, fourth, etc) are located on the left side of the gate. (Kaplan 132) The second type of kraal is the *manyata* where the groups of young males live along with their mothers and sisters upon their circumcision. The *manyatas* consists of fifty to one hundred huts that house hundreds of people. There is no fence surrounding the *manyatas* like what surrounds the *enjang*. (Adamson 224)

The Maasai people do not hunt wildlife, except for lions, but instead live off of the meat and milk from their own herds of cattle. (Adamson 220). They also do some gardening, raising maize, beans, tomatoes, tobacco, and other items. The women are in charge of cultivating the garden and milking the cows, among other chores. When there is plenty of milk for her family, a Maasai woman may trade her milk for cash, which she uses to buy beads and other materials necessary for making jewelry and school uniforms for her children. (Priest 62-3) Children ages four and five are also expected to help with herding cattle and caring for them. Some children attend school. Girls who approach puberty do less herding and spend more time helping their mothers with the younger children, gathering firewood and water, and cooking. (Priest 63)

There are several rites of passage, accompanied by specific rituals for each rite, that mark important parts of a Maasai's life. These rites of passage include birth and childhood, puberty, warriorhood for males and marriage for females, marriage and adulthood for males and adulthood for females, elderhood, and death. Pregnancy is a joyous occasion because a large family is desired. If the pregnancy is a woman's first, a ritual is performed during the eighth month of the pregnancy. The woman will wear a sheepskin skirt and cape and will smear the fat and blood over her face and body as a symbol of purity. She will drink water from a gourd and wear a grass necklace made by an elderly woman in the clan; both the water and grass are considered to be blessings. She and the women and children of her homestead will eat the ribs of one side and the front leg of the sheep that is slaughtered by her husband that morning. (Priest 84-5)

Upon a child's first (or second, depending on the tribe) birthday, a naming ceremony is held. Early in the morning of the ceremony, the mother chooses an animal, either a cow or a sheep, and the men lead it to the forest where it is slaughtered. The women and children are washed and cleaned thoroughly and the mother puts on her best, most beautiful beadwork. Both the mother's and child's heads are shaved, signifying the child's first haircut and the mother's first since the birth of the child. The gateway of the mother's home is kept closed off with shrubbery and branches until the day of the naming ceremony, when she clears it. When the cattle return home and enter through the gate, the ceremony officially begins. The elderly people are in charge of naming the child because they are considered blessed and wise. (Priest 86-7)

The next big rite of passage is puberty and involves circumcision of both males and females. The females are circumcised at the onset of puberty and males between the ages of eleven and fourteen. (Priest 88) When the males have been circumcised, they go to live and dwell among the other circumcised males of the tribe, living in the *manyata*. They wear women's earrings and a dress that has been dyed black and fastened over one shoulder, with a string of cowries tied around his waist to keep the dress in position. During this time, the young males achieve warrior status. (Adamson 224) Two months after the female has been circumcised, she is allowed to wear colorful beads across her forehead and marriage plans begin to become reality.

The marriage of a girl is arranged by her parents and her suitor's parents, many times years in advance. The suitor brings an ox that is considered holy to the girl's family. The ox is slaughtered at the doorway and skinned. The hide is given to the mother of the girl, who keeps it. (Priest 89) Maasai males marry multiple wives, as many as they can afford. (Adamson 224) Numerous wives, children, and cattle are a sign of great wealth among the Maasai. (Priest 90)

There are several other rites of passage that are celebrated with various rituals between marriage and elderhood, all involving the slaughtering of an animal, whether it be a sheep or a cow, including a fertility ritual and a cleansing ritual of the males. The rite of passage into elderhood is another significant mark in the life of a Maasai. The elders are not in charge of decision making, as one would have thought. This task is the responsibility of the adult men. At the age of fifty five to sixty, men and women become elders. They are no longer asked to make decisions, but are now called upon for wisdom. They are important to different rituals in that their presence gives the sacredness to the rituals. (Priest 99-100)

Traditional death rituals involved simply leaving a corpse out for hyenas to eat; however, the practice of burial has become more widely used. The dead body was wrapped in a skin of a particular animal, depending on the status of the person who died. An ox is slaughtered upon the death of an adult or elderly man. The body is wrapped in the skin after being lathered in the fat and oil of the ox. Leather sandals are made from the hide of the ox and placed on the feet of the dead body. The body is buried, placed on its side facing east.

When a woman dies, a black ram is killed and she is wrapped in the traditional ceremonial sheepskin. Her body is also lathered in the oils from the sheep and her beadwork is removed before she is buried. If the woman was but did not have children, or if a warrior or child dies, no animal is slaughtered. If a baby dies, it is lathered in milk and the head is shaved. If a ritual leader dies, the body is buried and covered with stones. Sometimes, upon passing one of these stone graves, the passerby will add another stone to the pile. (Priest 100-101)

The Maasai people are very intriguing people who live simple lives without many modern machinery or technologies. They have learned to live off of the resources provided to them by nature and are happy and successful in doing so. Their rituals are followed closely and intently, and the sense of loyalty and community that is present among them is outstanding. Although different from the Maasai rites of passages and the ceremonies performed by them, we also have our own rites of passage and traditions and ceremonies that we use to celebrate different occasions. It is always interesting to learn about different cultures ways of celebrating different rites and occasions and to learn how they live and prosper.

Works Cited

Adamson, Joy. *The Peoples of Kenya*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York: 1967. Kaplan, Irving et. al. *Area Handbook for Kenya*. 2nd ed. 1967.
Priest Jr., Doug. *Doing Theology with the Maasai*. William Carey Library, California: 1990.