

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Kajiado Masai

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Nairobi

Mr. R. H. Nolte
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New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The Kenyan Government is currently in the throes of preventing tribalism from getting a strong hold over the activities of its citizenry. The President and other concerned officials have issued warnings to those who contrive to perpetuate this act of disunity in the Government as well as in schools, social organizations and in athletics. At a recent meeting of Parliament, the Speaker of the Assembly, Mr. Mati, said, "Members must realise the importance of national unity." They had done so and he hoped they would continue to do so because unity was like soil--it could be eroded very easily. Now was the time for all to act as Kenyans and not as tribesmen.

There are problems resulting from this absolutist philosophy which are very significant to me--especially now after interviewing a Masai senior warrior and accompanying him to his native home in southern Kenya. The issue becomes one of technique--that is, how can the concept of Umoja (togetherness) be established while preserving individual cultures such as that of the Masai. Although one can make a case for maintenance of tribal culture using any of the groups here in Kenya, I have chosen the Masai for this newsletter.

The Masai are one of the smallest tribes in Kenya. Out of the fourteen major groups, they rank approximately eleventh in population. The 1962 census listed them as having a total of 154,079 inhabitants (approximately 2% of the total population of Kenya). One writer describes the Masai as "a figure of pristine beauty and great power." He goes on to say, "stonily indifferent to the outside world, he is utterly contemptuous of anyone not fortunate enough to be a Masai."

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These proud people are purported to have originated around the Nile River. However, because the written history about them is very sparse, much of their recorded past has been the result of speculation. One theory is that the Masai wandered down to East Africa from Southern Ethiopia; hence they are referred to as Nilo-Hamitic in ancestral make-up. Alan Jacobs, Professor at the University College, Nairobi, one of the few people currently writing about the Masai, believes they migrated from a place north called "endigirr ee Kerio" (scarp of Kerio) around the 18th century.

Although my past reading provided insight into the present status of the Masai, I became curious as to how the new nationalism is affecting them. As was mentioned earlier, I had the good fortune of meeting and befriending a former Masai warrior who is now employed as a civil servant of Kenya and who most graciously allowed me to interview him quite extensively about his past, the present, and his outlook on the future. On several occasions he graciously invited my wife and me to visit his relatives and age-mates in the Kajiado District of Masailand. At the outset I think it important to say that I have not met a more gracious and hospitable group of people during my lifetime.

My new found rafiki (friend), Steven Sironik ole Oloolikileti, 24 years old, comes from the division of the Masai known as the Ilka-putie. As a part of a polygamist culture, Steve has many siblings. In fact, he was unable to identify the entire group--he states that he has over 35 sisters and brothers. His father at one time had seven wives.

As a boy growing up in his Masai home compound (an enkenkang), Steve reminisced how much fun he had imitating older tribesmen. He spent a great deal of time making wooden spears and clubs and fighting an imaginary enemy--a lion or a hostile tribe attempting to steal cattle. He quickly noted, however, that this period of adolescence did not last long. At age six or thereabouts, young boys are given the responsibility of tending a small herd of goat and sheep--a prelude and apprenticeship towards the care of the life blood of the Masai and their main source of income, the cattle. The Masai, in contrast to some of their neighboring tribes who actually worship their livestock, are very pragmatic in dealing with their cattle. If it becomes necessary to part with an animal to gain or to maintain a friendship, provide for education of one of their youngsters, or more commonly to invest for the future gain of more cattle, they will indulge most willingly.



Steven Sironik ole Oloolikileti

At about age ten, the Masai boy is entrusted with a herd of cattle. He is responsible for seeing that they are properly grazed and watered. Grass and water therefore become the main determinants of where the Masai live.



Masai gold

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During periods of drought, many live very close to each other, whereas when the rains come and grass is plentiful, groups tend to separate, allowing maximum grazing space. It has been said by many people who know the Masai that although a young boy may not know the names of his great-grandparents, he can name at least thirty different types of grasses. He can also describe each animal in his domain to the nth degree. This knowledge of the livestock sometimes includes hundreds of cattle.

Driving through Masailand one is usually greeted by a scene that is often captured by the artist and the photographer--a herd of animals of varying sizes and colors being tended by a slender spear-like Masai youth.



Future warrior

Encased in the usual panoramic background of blue sky, this scene is spectacular. It is not uncommon to find these youngsters with their herd, 15 or 20 miles away from home in search of water and grass. Steven reports that although one never complains about the necessity of this chore, it is a lonely period of time. Quite often there is no contact with another human for an entire day.

A more involved daily schedule for a young man begins its upward swing at about age eighteen. This is the approximate age when they are released from the daily chore of herding cattle and are encouraged to pursue the role of an Ilmurran (more commonly spelled "moran"), a Masai warrior. As a warrior the young man is held responsible for learning and internalizing the Masai culture. He is also free to roam around the countryside familiarizing himself with the land. The warrior classification is the first step in an "age-set system". In the age-set scheme, the Masai male becomes a Junior warrior and then after a designated period of time is promoted to the Senior warrior level. Each classification has certain rights and privileges. From the warrior status, one is graduated into an elder status, first Junior and then Senior. Whereas the warrior sect is noted for its frivolity, training and experimentation, the elder group is more noted for its role as the guardian and keeper of the Masai code of ethics and order. Movement in these age-set classifications is based on the start of a new group, usually recommended by the Laiboni (ritual experts) of the area.

Recent historical records of the Masai reveal that at about age fourteen-eighteen years the Masai undergo a circumcision rite. According to these records, the opportunity to be circumcised lasts for 7-8 consecutive years. It is generally held that anyone initiated during this period of time is considered a member of the distinctive group. This ritual might well be considered the reference point for the age-set system, for the young man will be classified and associated by his membership in this particular group. The progression from one level to the next level is a very simple process, but quite emotionally laden. For the newly circumcised it means the joining of the ranks of a manly class; for the warrior, it means an end to a carefree and adventurous life; for the elder, it means moving into retirement--a position which carries no official alienation from community activities, but which is without voting privileges on internal matters.

Steven talked about his ventures as a senior warrior with much exuberance. Traditionally, the warrior group is responsible for the defense of their tribal territory, but "civilization" has removed some of their natural enemies. The Masai as a whole are no longer considered



Steve at home

a fierce and warlike group. At the end of the first year of warriorhood, the young man usually chooses to move away from his family's enkenkang and move to a manyatta (warrior's home). He is usually given a small herd of cattle by his father and is accorded the right to have his mother and some of his younger sisters and brothers accompany him. The mother is usually responsible for constructing the house and the cooking while the youngsters care for the animals.

According to Masai standards, warriors spend a considerable amount of time with their personal appearance. They also spend time perfecting their skill in the use of the spear and the club. The Masai spear ranges in length from about five feet to six feet--the final size related to the height of the warrior. Both ends of this implement constitute a weapon. One end, almost half the length of the spear, consists of a long razor-sharp blade while the other end looks like an extension of a long pointed piece of steel and is used mainly for piercing. The club, which is usually made out of a hard wood, is used not only as a striking implement but also can be quite effective when thrown.

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Demonstrations on the use of these weapons are most convincing.

During the warrior years marriage is forbidden. As a result of this restriction, coupled with their isolation from the general female population, there is a tendency to participate in after-hour jaunts into villages and towns in pursuit of "extra-curricular activities." Quite often these young men find themselves in trouble because of their amorous advances to the young wives of the aging elders and other tribal men in the area. The warriors risk a spearing by an irate husband or expulsion from the manyatta. The latter punishment is a formalized reaction by the tribal elders for the warrior who is a flagrant violator.

Built into this period of warriorship is also an opportunity for young men to begin preparation of their portfolio for future contacts with the opposite sex. Steve related that when a young man approaches a young lady with the intent of marriage or even dating he is usually confronted with the question, "Well, what have you done?" If the answer can include such things as the killing of a lion (the more the better) or the confiscation of a number of cattle from neighboring tribes, the better the chance of securing her admiration. For those who have no great accomplishments to espouse, the chance of securing a popular female is almost nil. Cowardice is not tolerated by any Masai, male or female. Steve's father boasts of annihilating seven lions--some of them he even caught by the tail prior to the kill; this act constitutes one of the highest forms of bravery.

All in all, the life of an Ilmurran is a very enjoyable one. In spite of celibacy, abstinence from honey beer (highly savored by the Masai), sweets and tobacco, the fraternity spirit prevails and the warrior is a true carefree individual.

Visits with the Masai were much enhanced by the presence of Steve. After a warm Masai greeting mostly centering around a vigorous handshake, I usually went through a lengthy explanation that I am not from an African tribe. My telling them that I am a black-American from the United States did not seem to satisfy their inquisitiveness. (As my Swahili improves, I find this type of inquiry to be growing.) We were honored on several occasions by being invited into the Masai huts. Masai houses resemble igloos; but unlike igloos, they are constructed with mud and cow dung.

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The ceilings are generally not much over five feet in height, which is quite ironical because most of the Masai men are tall. The entry to the house is even lower than the ceiling; my wife and I had to bend quite low in order to enter and exit. We found that we not only had to bend, but also to turn sideways in order to maneuver the several turns before entering the main portion of the hut.



Carole exiting from a hut

The hut is usually divided into four areas--as one enters, there is a small alcove that is used to harbor the small animals at night for safety and warmth. After the maze is negotiated and after the eyes adjust to an almost lightless environment, you find yourself standing in an area approximately 5' by 6' in which there is an open fire, usually with a pot of boiling water. The water is used for washing dishes and making tea. At each end of this sitting room are two bedrooms--one for the woman of the house and the other for the children or guest.

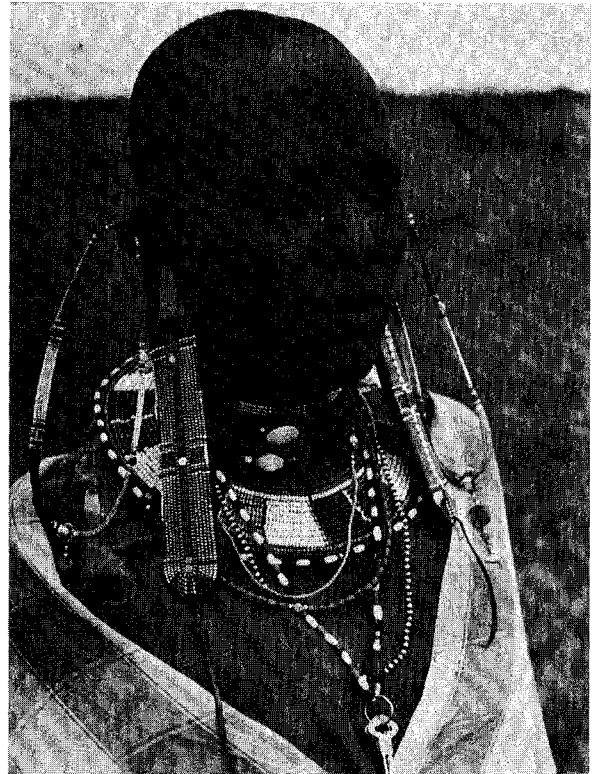
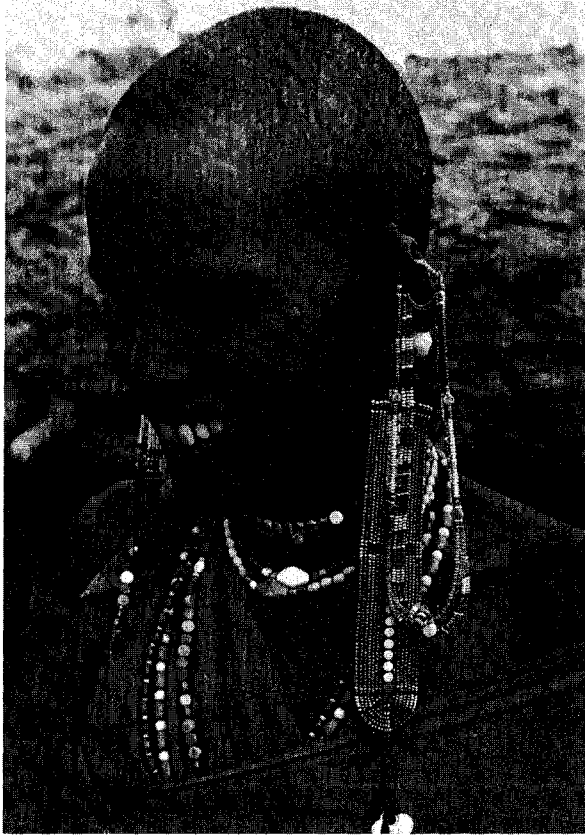
Because of the size of the hut, furnishings are quite sparse. Usually there are a few small stools and a tiny cupboard in which cups and saucers are kept. The beds consist of cattle skin, sometimes placed directly on the ground, but more often stretched between cut limbs of a tree. The only other noticeable items in the room are gourds in which milk is stored. A hole in the ceiling and sometimes a small porthole in the wall are the only other openings in addition to the door. When the fire generates a little too much heat and smoke, these quarters become somewhat close.

Surprisingly, after one finds an area suitable for stretching the limbs, the hut becomes most comfortable and snug. When reminiscing about this experience, my wife and I simultaneously remarked that it felt like being "back in the womb."

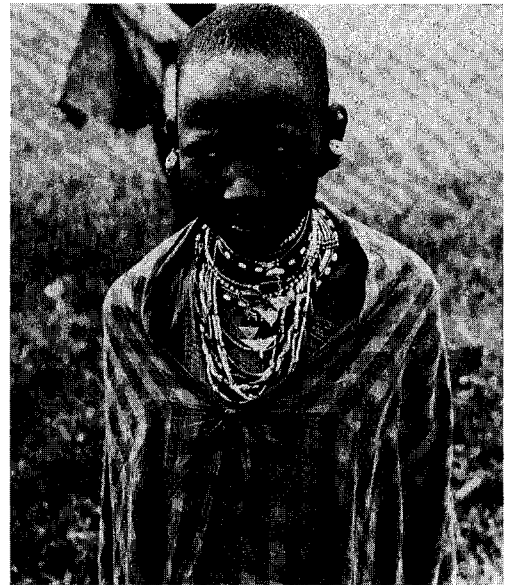
As is customary, the woman of the house served us milk, which, notwithstanding its unrefrigerated condition, was quite tasty. I did however detect a taste somewhat different from the usual milk flavor that I later learned was from the gourds that are cleaned each day with ashes from the fireplace. It is this process which gives the milk the somewhat smoky taste. The range of conversation during our visit in the hut was quite limited. Most of the talk centered around daily life in the kraal (compound) or on the animals.

The diet of the Masai is limited to meat and milk. Sometimes in order to supplement the diet, blood of the cattle is added to the milk. Very recently, however, some of the Masai have attempted eating the popular African maize made into a bread-like dish called ugali. The warrior however is not allowed to divert from the meat and milk dish.

A recent article in one of the local papers gives an account of a medical study related to their meagre diet. The study centered mainly on their physical condition and the incidence of cardiovascular diseases. A team of three physicians from Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, African Medical and Research Foundation, Nairobi, and the University of North Carolina concluded that the Masai are almost free of signs of coronary heart disease. Blood pressures showed only a very slight tendency to elevate in old age. Fifty-three volunteers performing on a tread mill matched with olympic participants, for the most part, kept abreast in stamina score--many far surpassing the olympic median.



Masai women



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After a delightful period of time in one of the first huts we visited, our hostess decided she would like to travel with us to one of the larger kraals to see her husband. I suspect she told Steven (her brother-in-law) that she would have to change her clothes before going. Right before our eyes she changed clothes--but at no time did we see bare skin. Her deftness at putting on clothes over clothes and then removing the underlayer in the darkness of the room was most intriguing.

After approximately forty miles of travel to the large kraal we found that the roads had been completely washed away by the rains. We were able to continue only another five miles before large boulders prevented further travel. At this point we decided to turn around and visit some of the warrior villages instead of pursuing the original idea. Our hostess, after conferring with her brother-in-law Steve, decided she would continue the journey on foot (ten miles). Realizing the distance we had traveled thus far and the remaining miles ahead, I felt compelled to ask what I thought to be a pretty sensible question--how was she going to get back. Without a break in voice or a change of expression, he answered that she would walk back. After a few minutes of departing gestures, indicating safe journeys for all concerned, we went our separate ways.

Heading back on the main road towards the warrior village, we were flagged by two young Masai girls who asked if they could get a lift. Before we opened the door of the Rover, we had eight new passengers with sacks and gourds and sticks and spears and clubs and bottles. The group began laughing almost to the point of hysteria whenever I looked at them. With our new-found travelers, the trip was continued--with much noise and chatter.

At the manyatta, the girls disembarked and promptly walked to the warriors who had been waiting near the entrance to the area. With a very humble bow, the girls offered their shaved heads to each warrior who in a fatherly manner gave it a gentle pat. This is the form of greeting ritual which the women follow when they have been away from the area, and it is quite evident that women carry a very minor role (the women's liberation movement certainly has not hit the Masai society). Women are not allowed to eat with the men nor are they permitted to participate in any form of governmental activities.

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They exist strictly to perpetuate the tribe and bring comfort to the men. However, now that the men are becoming more involved with neighboring tribal women, such as the Kikuyu, there is a tendency to relax many of the former traditions, including the secondary role of the woman. It is not uncommon to find Masai men working as farmers. In the past, digging into the ground was an act that the Masai held as unnatural, and a man digging was ridiculed by the group. The stigma is so strong that the Masai even refuse to bury their dead. A corpse is put out into an open area where the wild animals will find it--the Masai believe solely in the living. This belief is partly the reason behind the communal living which is prevalent in Masai villages.



A Masai commune

There is no one leader in a kraal. Decisions concerning daily living patterns, such as who will tend the herd and where the group should graze their cattle, are made through a representative council. Although cattle are owned by individual families, their maintenance and safety become the responsibility of all who live in their locale. At night, all the cattle are herded into the center of their commune. As Alan Jacobs reports in his writings on the Masai, many benefits are derived from this type of society. The inexperienced cattle owner gains from the knowledge of others. A family without sons profits from the use of another's sons as herdboys, the sick are looked after by their neighbors, and the healthy are accorded more leisure by not having to spend all their time with the herd.

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Jacobs goes on to point out that land rights to graze are extended on a communal basis but land ownership is delegated on the tribal level.

Preceding our visit with the Masai warriors we were warned not to bring cameras into their compound and to keep a sharp eye on our possessions. We were also cautioned that the females who accompanied us should not wear long pants. None of these warnings was valid. The warriors were most receptive to us in spite of our mode of dress and our possessions. One high point of the visit was a playback of the recording I had made on a tape recorder of our initial exchange of greetings. The Masai men were not only intrigued by the tape recorder but highly entertained by hearing their own words which resulted in much laughter. It took little persuasion to initiate an additional "performance" and the warriors sang their traditional songs with gusto. These young men are personable, witty and outgoing. They were most helpful in posing for our cameras (supposedly a tabu among the Masai). At one point I decided to join the warriors in a group picture. Hamming it up a bit, I borrowed one of the warrior spears and knelt down in front of the group. After a few seconds had passed, I sensed a pause in the picture taking. Turning around to find out the cause of the delay, I found that one of the warriors had gone to the Land Rover, had slung my Sony tape recorder on his shoulder and was posed behind me.



The Murrans

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Needless to say, the group delighted in this mimicry. The wishes for a speedy return to their village at the end of the visit were genuinely warm and sincere.

Later in the week, Steve related some of his ideas on the future of the Masai in view of a rapidly changing Kenya. Contrary to popular belief that the Masai will continue to resist all forms of change, Steve said that his people would certainly yield if and when they are included more in the planning process. He feels that the Masai, like other struggling minority groups around the world, want to play a greater role in determining their future.

The professionals and government officials of Kenya respond in a similar fashion when posed with the question as to the future of the Masai. It is also their feeling that education will be a big factor in bringing about changes in the living patterns of this group. Therefore it becomes important that all Masai youngsters be accorded the opportunity to attend a school of some type, whether it be an academic institution or a technical-vocational school where different techniques of farming, cattle raising and other task-oriented skills are taught. Although the Masai have always believed that education plays an important role in the development of any culture, economic necessity (according to their own cultural demands) dictated against the insistence that all youth go to school. To substantiate this belief that school is important, many of the Masai quickly point out that the first student to go to Cambridge from Africa was a Masai. They also relate that the first Kenyan African student to go to an American school of higher education was a Masai.

Although there appears to be a consensus that change will occur, there remains some uncertainty as to what form it will take. My impression is that the Masai will adjust to the demands put forth by the larger society, but will always carry the basic tenets of the Masai culture. Hopefully this level of tribalism will not deter the advancement of Kenya but will add to its traditional beauty.

Sincerely,



George Jones

Received in New York on June 30, 1970.