

WHO ARE THE MAASAI PEOPLE OF AFRICA?

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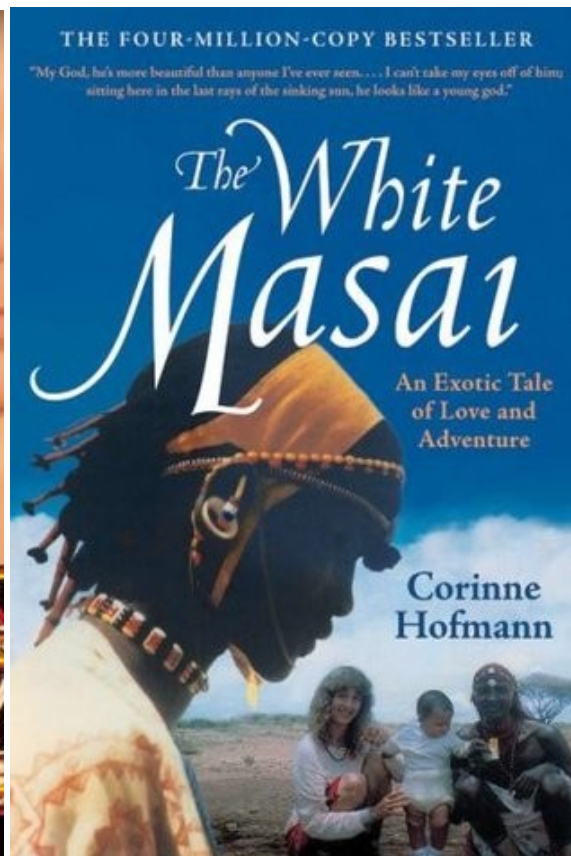
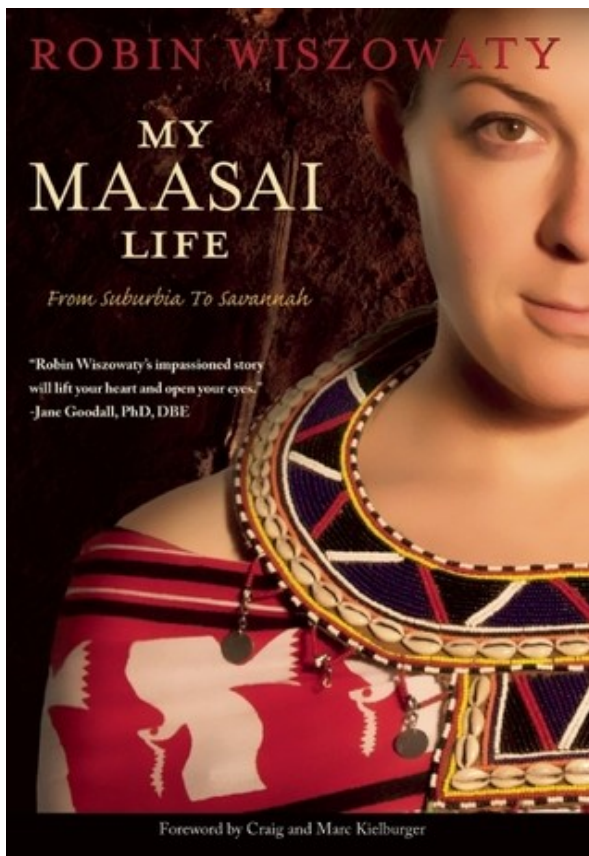
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Who Are the Maasai People of Africa?

'The most recent people to arrive in the area (Serengeti and its environs) have in many ways become the most iconic: the Maasai. Arriving from the north of Kenya and Sudan as recently as the 1800s.' - From *Unnatural Histories – Serengeti* (BBC documentary)

'No nation has the right to make decisions for another nation; no people for another people.'
– Julius Nyerere, 1st president of Tanzania



SOMETHING TO WRITE HOME ABOUT: *My Maasai Life* by Robin Wiszowaty (left) and the more famous *White Masai* by Corinne Hofmann

The Maasai – whose exact origins are an enigma – have become the unintentional ‘brand ambassadors’ of East African tribal heritage. When most foreigners think of African tribespeople, they are actually thinking of the Maasai!

An insight into this nomadic community from a guide book titled *The Beautiful People of Kenya*¹:

¹ *The Beautiful People of Kenya* by Mohamed Amin, Duncan Willets and Brian Tetley. ISBN: 187404192X

Yet, striding across the dusty plains, clad only in loose-flowing red robe, spear in hand, skin oiled and gleaming, hair slicked down with a spat of 'Brylcreem' ochre, the Maasai initiate is the very celebration of the romantic cliché of the African warrior: the epitome of grace and nobility, an ancient Aristocrat often thought to be one of the lost legions of (Mark) Anthony.

Certainly no other community in Kenya has had so much written about or observed about them as these nomadic pastoralists who swept south towards their present home during the last 500 years.

Today, set flush alongside the Kenya-Tanzanian border from Ntimaru in the west to Oloitokitok in the east, Kenya's 250,000 Maasai pastoralists no longer roam free as they used to...

A thousand years or so ago, their Nilotic forbears were intermarrying with people of Cushitic stock in the area north-west of Turkana. Moving steadily south, raiding and pillaging as they went, they acquired large herds, a fearsome reputation, and dominated a vast territory. They reached their apogee in the middle of the nineteenth century – feared and respected by all who came across them, including the first European visitors.

It was not only the noble mien of the warriors and the comely appearance of the young Maasai maidens which earned **the admiration of strangers**, but also their seemingly loose yet closely-knit social structures...Maasai society is an inflexible autocracy...The chief autocrat of the entire community is the *laibon* – a seer, soothsayer, or visionary.

From *White Mischief* (1982) by James Fox:

There is nothing more valuable to the Masai than cattle, and next to that, perhaps, their passion for physical adornment. Because they never ate meat and never slaughtered or sold their livestock, the Masai chiefs that (Lord) Delamare befriended owned upwards of 50,000 cattle each, and by 1910 the tribe was estimated to own three million head. But they had consistently lost grazing land in the several treaties made with the white man since the setting up of the tribal reservations in 1905. No consideration was given, for example, to their traditional places of retreat in times of drought or pestilence, and by 1914 they were suffering from land hunger.

European colonization of Eastern Africa (by Brits and Germans) spelt doom for the traditional way of life of the Maa people. They could not roam freely over national borders as vast tracts of land were cut into 'parcels' owned/leased by gov'ts, companies and individuals. The 'aristocrats of the bush' could barely find enough land to graze their large cattle herds even inside their respective countries. For example, they were infamously kicked out of what is now the Serengeti National Park – a vast garden-of-Eden-type jungle where some anthropologists believe that Early Man first walked on two feet (ostensibly to see above the savannah grass). In 1959, The Maasai were compelled to sign an agreement that expelled humans from the Serengeti in order for it to be 'protected' as a nature reserve². Below is an extract from the document:

We understand we shall not be titled henceforth to cross the boundary of the new Serengeti National Park which we have habitually used in the past. We agree to move ourselves, our possessions, our cattle and all our other animals from this land by the advent of the next rains.

² *Unnatural Histories – Serengeti*, BBC documentary.

In truth, there was very little conflict between the Maa herdsmen and the jungle wildlife beforehand. If anything, the herdsmen were part of the ecosystem. To this day, it is not uncommon to see herders grazing their flocks side-by-side with other herbivores in the Maasai Mara Game Reserve (The Maasai Mara is, *de facto*, part of the vast savannah that includes the Serengeti, but it is on the Kenyan side of the national border). It is also not uncommon for Maasais, even schoolchildren, to cross the Mara in full sight of carnivores without fear of molestation (The predators seemingly aware through experience that the humans are not 'enemies' and will not bother them). There have, however, been many incidents of livestock being killed by predators – especially lions, leopards and hyenas – mostly at night. It is also noteworthy that some animals – like crocodiles and hippos – have been known attack humans without a second thought. For these and other reasons, wildlife reserves are off-limits to the public unless in sanctioned 'safaris' and other permitted activities.

Maasai influence on world culture:

'Anna (Trzebinski, fashion designer) is a muzungu, a white person, but she is African to her bones. Her elaborate pashmina shawls are fringed with ostrich feathers and her suede dresses are bordered with Masai beading.' – From ['Two in the Bush'](#), a New York Times article by Janine Di Giovanni (25 Feb 2007)

'Culture is a process, not a fixed position; it is the product of unremitting interaction between the past and the present.' – Lawrence Levine, cultural critic and author of *High Brow/Low Brow*



Photo: Louis Vuitton

CULTURE SHARE OR CULTURAL APPROPRIATION? Maasai-inspired couture in Louis Vuitton's 2012 Spring-Summer collection

From an article titled 'Africa's Lost Tribe, Part I', published online by [Frommers.com](#):

Perceptions about the Maasai abound in the Western imagination, possibly because, as a people, they fit so readily into the role of the exoticized other. Dark, mysterious, eccentrically costumed, and defiantly adhering to strange customs and primitive superstitions, they're a people who legitimize foreign interpretations of who and what Africans are. Regarding the Maasai as 'noble savages' has long been the outsiders' approach to a people who for so long clung to ancient ways even in the face of rapidly encroaching

modernity. Hemingway accorded the Maasai a kind of 'ignorant' dignity, referring to them in his *Green Hills of Africa* as 'the tallest, best-built, handsomest people I had ever seen and the first truly light-hearted people I had seen in Africa' -- despite his overt bigotry toward native Africans, he was undeniably awed by the people of Maasailand. Another Western observer, the Danish author Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), positively fell over herself in praise of the Maasai in her famous novel, *Out of Africa*. **'A Maasai warrior is a fine sight,' she wrote.** 'Those young men have, to the utmost extent, that particular form of intelligence which we call chic; daring and wildly fantastical as they seem, they are still unswervingly true to their own nature, and to an immanent ideal. Their style is not an assumed manner, nor an imitation of a foreign perfection; it has grown from the inside, and is an expression of the race and its history, and their weapons and finery are as much a part of their being as are a stag's antlers.' Yes, outsiders are quick to idealize and romanticize.

Their physicality aside, it's difficult to pinpoint the source of their attraction. Perhaps it's their elegant simplicity -- as pastoralists, they have traditionally wanted for little and have measured wealth in terms of their cattle and children. There's always been a certain grace with which the Maasai tread upon the earth -- their semi-nomadic lifestyle has meant that they frown upon agriculture, and by eschewing individual land ownership, they have tended toward a zero-impact lifestyle, leaving little trace of their presence when they relocated their semi-permanent *enkang* (a corral of dung and clay huts) to new grounds. Until recently, Maasai did not have villages with permanent buildings, but would periodically abandon their *enkang* and construct a new, equally biodegradable one with better water and grazing. These days, the nomadic life is increasingly substituted with tin-roof houses and small villages centered on schools, clinics, and shops.

Modernity has brought attempts to impose external law and order on this tenacious, clannish, traditionally war-mongering tribe.

The 'Maasai brand' has been exploited worldwide. Below are some instances of this phenomenon:

- Fashion, jewellery and catwalks – *Kikois*/red-and-blue *shukas* (worn on the body in various ways or used as sofa set throws); hand-made beaded jewellery (as seen at 'Maasai Markets') is wildly popular locally as well as for export. According to the website Siyabona.com:

Clothing varies by sex, age and place. Young men wear black for several months after their circumcision. Although, red is a favored color among the Maasai. Black, Blue, checkered and striped cloth are also worn, together with multicoloured African garments. In the 1960s the Maasai began to replace sheepskin, calf hides and animal skin for more commercial material. The cloth used to wrap around the body is the called *Shúkà* in the Maa language.

- Movies – Hollywood, documentaries eg. *The White Masai*, *Tomb Raider 2*, *Maasai*, *The Air Up There*
- Music videos
- International books eg. *Through Maasai Land* (1885) by Joseph Thomson, *White Maasai* by Corinne Hofmann (filmed), *My Maasai Life* by Robin Wiszowaty

From an online article titled, '[Can a Tribe Sue for Copyright? The Maasai Want Royalties for Use of Their Name](#)', written by Stephan Faris:

The Delta Maasai pen is just one of the products on display in ole Mbelati's outreach session, an effort to organize one of Africa's most famous tribes to lay claim to the commercial use of their name and image. Maasai leaders have come by public transportation, in Land Rovers, on motorcycles, and on foot to a small compound of roughly painted buildings to listen to a two-day presentation on intellectual property. According to Ron Layton, a New Zealander who specializes in advising developing world organizations on copyrights, patents, and trademarks, about 10,000 companies around the world use the Maasai name, selling everything from auto parts to hats to legal services.

Layton estimates six companies have each made more than \$100 million in annual sales during the last decade using the Maasai name. In 2003, Jaguar Land Rover sold limited-edition versions of its Freelander called Maasai and Maasai Mara. [Louis Vuitton's 2012 spring-summer men's collection](#) included scarves and shirts inspired by the Maasai *shuka*. The shoe company Masai Barefoot Technology (MBT) says on its website that the distinctive curved soles of its sneakers were inspired by 'the wonderfully agile Masai [sic] people walking barefoot.' Bedding by Calvin Klein, shirts and trousers by Ralph Lauren, and cushions by Diane von Furstenberg have all been sold using the tribe's name. 'Most of the value of the Maasai brand is not in the handicrafts the tribe produces,' Layton says. "It's in the cultural value of an iconic brand.'...

And yet, as a people, they have benefited little from the visitors. They see their images on billboards and their beadwork in gift shops, but they are underrepresented in the industry's craft markets and other trades. They see tourists take their pictures and imagine them sold for riches abroad...

When I started researching this piece on the Maasai, I intended to write something akin to a love letter to this fascinating tribe. Alas, given the effects of modernization, this section has turned out to be more like a 'Eulogy for a Culture'. Nonetheless, the contribution of the Maa people to the world cannot be gainsaid. They have bequeathed to us beautiful legends, myths, dances, fashions, and lessons on how to live in harmony with nature. They have inspired in us a spiritual fervour to protect our traditional ways of life, and see them as good – not retrogressive. As in the distant past, the Maasai community continues to earn 'the admiration of strangers.'

MAASAI CULTURE AT A GLANCE

Maa - A language believed to be derived from Nilo-Saharan tongues and related to Dinka and Nuer

Ero – Common greeting; ‘Hello’

Manyatta – Breadloaf-shaped earthen house, customarily built by the womenfolk

Olaibon - A spiritual ritual Maasai leader with very high standing in the hierarchy of the Maasai

Clans – 12 geographical sub-divisions of the community. These are subdivisions are known as clans: 1. *Keekonyokie* 2. *Damat* 3. *Purko* 4. *Wuasinkishu* 5. *Siria* 6. *Laitayiok* 7. *Loitai* 8. *Kisonko* 9. *Matapato* 10. *Dalalekutuk* 11. *Loodokolani* 12. *Kaputiei*

Age brackets - Apart from clans, age subsets are very important in Maasai culture. A new age subset is formed every 15 years.

Morani – Warrior class; typically consisting of young males

Female circumcision / Female genital mutilation (FGM) – Controversial traditional practice still widespread in Maasailand; involves cutting of some female sexual parts as a ‘rite of passage’ into womanhood.

Cattle herding/rustling/raids – Common economic activities dating back centuries

Kikoi - A distinctive East African piece of cloth with hand rolled fringes

[*Enkai*](#) – God. According to local mythology, He gifted *all* cows to the Maa people.

Red ochre – a mixture of butterfat and red pigment that has been ground from earth containing a high iron ore content. Maasai warrior apply it mostly to their hair but may also smear it on their faces and upper body.

Jewellery – Multi-coloured hand-made wire-and-bead necklaces, bangles, earrings and anklets are ubiquitous in Maasai country and are worn by both men and women. Some have particular meanings eg. a necklace that is only worn by married women. Various metals are also utilised in the fashioning of jewellery.