Traditional Maasai Food Culture and   
Impediments To Its Sustainability

Maasai food culture has been subject of anthropological curiosity for several years now. Cultural anthropologists have not only explored the dietary habits for its nutritional significance (for details refer to Petersen 2012) but have also reflected on its cultural symbolism (Arthem 1989). On the other hand biological anthropologists and population geneticists (Bhatia et.el 2012) are looking for evidence of selective sweep that gives Maasai the unique ability for lactose tolerance. Researchers have also reported that Maasai enjoy much better cholesterol levels than their western counterparts. They have negligible susceptibility to heart conditions despite having high fat content in their diet (Christensen, 2012). However, it is important to note that most of these accounts and researches generate epistemological narratives that are attributed to procedures of etic knowledge generation. These are mostly written by non-Maasai researchers and are at times riddled with contradictions. This paper brings voices of Maasai ethnographers in the methodological tradition of auto-ethnography.

Maasai are Semi-Nomadic pastoral Nilotic ethnic group that inhabit Northern, Central and Southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. The vibrant, tall, handsome community that literally ruled the Great Rift Valley and adjacent lands from Mount Marsabit in the North to Dodoma in the south is gradually being pushed out of their native habitats. British acquired 40% of their native habitats for making ranches and later they were pushed out of their territories to make wildlife reserves and national Parks, because of misconceived policies of wildlife conservation as was the case in India (Weeks & Mehta). It is sad to see proud inhabitants of the land escort tourists for animal sighting or serve them in forest lodges.

Territorial displacement has greatly impacted their traditional food practises and has brought lifestyle changes that impact their health. Maasai Traditional Diet comprised of naturally available foods, livestock, and herbs from trees, milk, meat and blood. This was a balanced diet and protected them from various ailments that inflict health conscious urban people. Unfortunately, displacement and shrinking pastureland is compelling them to include grains like maize, white potato (common food of the mainland Kenya) in their diet. Bekure et al. (1991) of the International Livestock Centre for Africa indicated prevalence of 12-39% maize and 8-13% sugar in addition to the traditional food items in the diet of the average Maasai. In a study conducted by Indigenous Peoples food systems in the year 2004-2005 in Ngong Division, Kajiado District, located approximately at a distance of 70 kilometres from Nairobi it was reported that 45.7% food component was bought from the market. The study concluded that limited supply of traditional food is adversely impacting nutrition and food security of the Maasai. There is an urgent need to generate indigenous accounts that are able to articulate the glaring gaps that exist in this critical transition. This paper makes a nascent attempt in that direction.

**Overall Maasai Population:** **Approximately 1.8 million people spanning Kenya & Tanzania**

**Estimated Amboseli Maasai Population in Area of the Museum – 62,000 people:**

Population by Group Ranch:

Kimana - 7,000

Mberkani - 11,000

Kuku - 8,000

Olarashi - 18,000

Rombo – 15,000

Eselenkei – 3,000

Children’s Diet:

• Drink Fresh Milk directly from cow and goat – Breakfast, lunch, dinner, all day. Some families boil the milk, some do not.

• Breastfeed until 2 years old.

• Butter - boil milk, Skim the cream off the top, store several days in a *calabash* (gourd), mixed with water and shaken until butter / fat separates from the milk. The butter is the fat, wash it with water, then it is left with yellow butter. The butter is a natural dewormed for the children that eat soil / dirt. It causes diarrhea and cleanses the system.

• 2-5 years old eat the soil / dirt and soft stones to clean their digestive system. It is suggested that they eat soil and stones because they need nutrition– Iron deficiency. (Children 2-5 do not drink blood, blood also provides iron for older people.)

• Mother chews hard food (meat) to make food smaller and soft for children to digest.

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Ages 6+ Diet:

• Milk was the staple food – main source of food.

• Honey – Eaten with medicinal herbs

• Butter (as described above) – They used butter when pregnant or have cramps, menstruation or pain in stomach. Helped in pregnancy and folk belief is that it facilitates smooth delivery.

Butter is also used, as a medium for cooking after heating it becomes oil.

• Oil and fat are obtained from the cow, goat and sheep.

Oil is used to massage a person to help relax body muscles. It is also used as Medicinal herbs to heal illnesses. The Maasai use oil with all medicines and to cure all diseases including fevers, colds, viruses, malaria, vomiting. They also use hot oil to cure wounds using boiled oil from a sheep. They also believe oil can make joints and bones strong.

• Fat obtained directly from the cow, goat, sheep is also melted and used as cooking oil.

• Blood – The blood of the cow– striking the vein in the neck with an arrow, and collecting the blood, then the vein is plugged with soil and a leaf and the cow stops bleeding and continues to live, they collect and drink blood without harming the cow. The blood of the goat or sheep is also consumed during slaughtering. The blood has iron and nutrition.

• Meat from goat, cow, sheep

There are different parts of the meat that are eaten according to the following: age, elders,

women, girls, boys, children, leaders, chiefs. Example girls eat the backbone meat. Meat is roasted on open fires or boiled.

Ironkena - Chest fat and tail of a sheep – Tail produces oil after it is cut & boiled. Once it is dried men eat it. –

ELDERS eat.

Munono/kirdi - Smaller pieces of meat, mixed with blood & oil. EVERYONE eats, same day of the slaughter.

Orpurda - Dried meat mix with fat. – Made for circumcised boy or girl.

The front leg of a cow or a goat is cut into medium pieces is boiled and when is ready, its mix with oil and stirred to mix completely and kept into a container ready to be eaten

• Soup – Soup is made from bones of the goat or cow boiled in water, sometimes it includes the head as well. Includes medicinal herbs and roots from trees and the branches of yellow acacia trees. Also, the metacarpus (leg) bone.

• Medicine – Various Natural Herbs from the forest are used to heal all illnesses and to give strength. Warriors & Elders take specific herbs and pray to gain strength before droughts, knowing they will have difficult times ahead finding water and grass for livestock.

• Wild Fruits – Wild fruits and stems were eaten.

• Tree Barks - Boiled with soup. It forces a person to vomit to clean the stomach and to stimulate and give appetitive and energy.

Warriors (Morans) – Have dietary restrictions based on rites of passages.

Morans are not allowed to eat, drink, shower alone – other warriors must accompany them. This law is to keep them unified and avoid any warrior to go hungry. To makes warriors share food so no one starves.

Fat & oil must be hidden from women and separated – men cannot eat fat or oil that has been seen by a women, so it is hidden and kept secret. They cannot eat around any woman. They cannot eat food made from a woman that has any fat or oil in it.

Warriors are encouraged to eat in the bush together, where they share stories and secretes that women are not meant to hear.

After Eunoto Ceremony – where men shaves their hairs ceremony- they are blessed with milk and then they can eat alone, but food without oil.

After Olng’esher Ceremony – the meat eating ceremony – Warriors officially become junior elders and then they can enjoy food made with oil & fat cooked by women.

Pregnant Women (after 6 months of pregnancy) – they are told not to eat too much food, because if the baby becomes too big, the deliveries were more complicated and hard to push and deliver a larger child.

Maasai Food Terms:

Milk (Kule)

Butter (eng’orno

Oli (eilata)

Maasai Heritage Museum

Fat (enkurriny’)

Soil (inkulukuo)

Roasted Meat (inkirri’ Naapejo)

Boiled Meat – (inkirri’ Nayiara)

Blood – (Osarge)

\*Porridge - (added into the Maasai diet approximately 60 years ago once Maize was introduced as a relief food)– Unga (maize flour), water, milk, oil, butter. Yellow Maize came around 1960’s – Relief Food.