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Maasai Tribe: Understanding Their Life, Culture, Religion and Language

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Abstract:

Africa has many indigenous tribal tribes. The Maasai are a prominent and culturally rich tribe in Africa. They are a nomadic herding tribe, primarily reside in East Africa. Their main habitat is found in Kenya and Tanzania. They lead a nomadic lifestyle, constantly moving their livestock to fresh grazing grounds. Cattle hold very significant place in their lives. Their diet primarily consists of animal products, including milk, blood and meat. Cattle are crucial to the Maasai's economic well-being. Having more cattle is a great sign of wealth for them. To acquire goods, they sell their cattle in local trading markets to obtain money. Food and labor are communal within Maasai villages, shared by all members of the community.

The Maasai are a patriarchal society where all decisions are taken by men. They have different traditions and customs. They are famous for their singing, distinctive culture, rituals, high jump, dance, costume dress and being courageous warrior. Maasai warriors are called Morans. They have unique characteristics including their diet, dress and their lifestyle. Maasai women build their houses called Manyatta and their village is known as Maasai "Boma". Maa is an Eastern nilotic language spoken in Kenya and Tanzania by the Maasai people in their daily lives. This is a spoken language, not a written one. Maasai are monotheist and believe on one god ie. the Engai.

This paper aims to explore the Maasai people's way of life, including their traditional practices and the challenges they face in preserving them. It will also examine the Maasai's efforts to maintain their cultural heritage, religious beliefs, and language.

Keywords: Massai people, culture, religion, language, progress.



Introduction

Guardians of Tradition

The Maasai are a renowned East African people who call the arid and forested lands of Tanzania home. They are historically known as skilled cattle herders and warriors. They have dedicated their lives to preserving their ancestral way of life. Maasai are worldwide famous for their unique customs, clothing, language and social structure. They have resisted the adoption of modern technology in favor of maintaining their traditional culture. Their society is governed by the system of oral laws and customs created by the community itself. The eldest male in each household holds the highest authority, and his decisions are respected by all family members. Every morning, the head of the family assigns tasks to all members, ensuring that everyone contributes to the household and community.

Maasai Homes

Traditionally, Maasai Communities were structured as family units residing in circular settlements. Their homes were built near water sources for convenience. Maasai men erected barbed wire fences around the settlement for the safety of livestock and families. The construction of the houses within the enclosure was the domain of the women. These dwellings are known as Manyattas. Their homes are typically circular structures located in the center of a communal area. The head of the family resides in the central room, surrounded by six or seven additional rooms. These homes are constructed using natural materials like cow dung, grass and mud. They have a small single window to prevent the entry of wild animals. Due to the nomadic lifestyle of the Maasai, their homes are temporary.

Importance of Animal

The Maasai people's way of life revolves around livestock. Animals play a crucial role in Maasai's life. Their wealth and social standing are directly linked to the number of their cattle herds and their children. The Maasai prayer always starts: "May God give me children and cattle." They believe that God provides them with these animals and they are essential to their survival. Their diet consists of animal products, including meat, milk, and blood, as well as plant



based foods like tree bark and honey, which they believe contribute to their overall health. Maasai used Animal skin as bedding.

Culture and Tradition

The Maasai people have a rich tapestry of ceremonial traditions. They celebrate various stages of life with specific rituals for both boys and girls, including rites of passage, coming-of-age ceremonies, marriage, and other significant milestones.

Maasai weddings last for several days. A unique aspect of their nuptials is the groom's gift of cattle to the bride's family, symbolizing wealth and commitment. A particularly striking custom involves the bride's father spitting on her as a farewell blessing, a ritual believed to invoke good fortune for her new life. While these practices might appear unusual to outsiders, they hold deep emotional significance for the Maasai people. However, the encroachment of modern life, western influences, and environmental pressures are gradually eroding these traditions. Some of their customs have become controversial, sparking debate and discussion. The Maasai traditionally held aversion to agriculture, viewing it as contrary to natural order. Now, this perspective has changed, as they now cultivate and consume crops such as maize, cabbage, rice, and potatoes. The Maasai people have a unique tradition of leaving their deceased in the open for animals to consume rather than burying them. They believe that interring bodies within the earth is detrimental to the land's well-being.

Language

The language of the Maasai is called Ma. The oral tradition of the Maasai people is so overwhelming that they decided to give their name to their language. The name Maasai means 'Ma' speaking people. Their language is so vibrant that many tribes abandoned their own language and adopted it.

Clothing and Unique Hairstyle

The Maasai people have a distinct appearance. They are known for their vibrant clothing, often featuring red, blue, and other striking colors. A long cloth wrapped around the body, is called a Shuka. Maasai people adorn themselves with colorful beadwork. Both men and women undergo distinctive hairstyles as part of wedding and ceremonial rituals. Maasai women, in



particular, emphasize beauty through practices like ear piercing and wearing large metal earrings. They also favor ornaments for their hands and ankles. Typically men have short hair that is often plaited and adorned with red beads and feathers, while women typically have long hair. Both men and women decorate their bodies. These adornments are believed to provide strength, courage, and protection. Maasai people are known for their tall, slender builds, dark skin, prominent noses, and dark eyes. They are also known for their friendly nature, and live together harmoniously.

Music and Dance

Their music is a vocal art form, performed without instruments. The community sings together, harmonizing while the singer leader carries the melody. Their dances are accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of their adornments. The Maasai are famous for their long jump called Adamu. Their high jumps are said to attract future brides. Women express their love and pride for their children through songs called Angai Geet and Hum Song.

Religion

The Maasai people are a proud and independent group with a strong sense of identity. While traditionally adhering to their own spiritual beliefs, they have been increasingly influenced by Christianity. As a result, a significant portion of the Maasai population now identifies as Christian and actively participates in Christian religious practices and celebrations. While some of them are Muslims.

The Maasai Struggle

The Maasai people are facing significant hardships. They lack access to basic necessities like education, healthcare, and clean water. Maasai tribes depend almost on agriculture and livestock for their sustenance. Historically, they have been exploited by traders, moneylenders and colonial powers. Rapid industrialization and urbanization has led to massive environmental degradation, deforestation and depletion of natural resources. These developments have adverse impact on the traditional livelihood of the tribal people. Many tribal populations have been dispossessed of their native lands due to various developmental projects without getting adequate



compensation for their displacement. So these factors have impoverished the tribes and limited their ability to improve their economic conditions.

Education is essential for both personal growth and societal progress. It empowers individuals with knowledge, skills and understanding, leading to an improved quality of life. Despite government efforts, the literacy rate among Maasai remains low. Several factors include a lack of awareness about the necessity of education, lack of motivation, inadequate transportation facilities, old mindset, and the influence of superstitions contribute educational disparity.

Their traditional way of life is threatened by the encroachment of modern society. The Maasai are caught in a difficult position. On one hand, they desire a better standard of living, including improved livelihoods and economic opportunities. On the other, they are determined to protect their ancestral land, language, culture, and traditions. To survive, the Maasai are exploring new income sources such as tourism, handicrafts, and beekeeping. However, these efforts are hindered by the growing impacts of climate change, including droughts, which have plunged many into poverty.

Conclusion

The Maasai community is caught between the pressures of modernization and the desire to preserve their heritage. Their future is uncertain as they struggle to balance these competing forces. Despite facing numerous challenges, the Maasai people are resolutely committed to preserving their traditional way of life. Maasai women are also playing an increasingly active role in community decision-making. The Maasai people are a vibrant community possessing remarkable intelligence, untapped talent, and robust health. Their energy and skills are undeniable. However, they are hindered by a significant lack of development. They are fearful of losing their cherished culture and traditions, so they resist change. Life is arduous for the Maasai due to the absence of basic necessities. While some individuals are embracing progress, many others continue to struggle in the face of underdevelopment. To address this, concerted efforts from NGOs and the government are crucial. They must build trust and reassure the Maasai that their cultural heritage will be preserved. Even with external support, challenges persist. It is



imperative that everyone contributes to uplifting the Maasai community by improving their physical, economical, mental, and educational well-being.

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