

The Warrior's Dilemma: Can Maasai Culture Persist in a Changing World?

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Abstract

The Maasai people have acted as the historical stewards of the land and wildlife of the Amboseli Ecosystem for centuries. Maasai culture and its accompanying traditions compose one of the most well-studied anthropological systems in the world. Currently, Maasai culture and tradition face more challenges than ever before. Through a series of interviews with various constituents of the Amboseli community, we sought to discover which traditions the Maasai continued to find important, what were the most formidable threats to those traditions, and how the Maasai were responding to those threats. Community members identified four primary traditions that continue to be important: social connectedness, dress and ornaments, connection with wildlife and nature, and the practice of Moranism. Threats to these traditions include increased the presence of Westerners, tourists, and conservationists; climate change and increased incidence of drought; changing land tenure systems; and the introduction of formal education among younger generations. Maasai community members have responded to these threats by keeping, discarding, or evolving the tradition based on its importance to them. Based on these findings, we detail potential strategies for the maintenance of those traditions which are currently evolving: Moranism and pastoralism. These recommendations will inform Maasai community members about the scope of solutions they currently face, as well as providing insight into more innovative solutions that could be implemented in the future.

1. Introduction

The Maasai tribe of Kenya and Tanzania has acted as the historical stewards of the land and wildlife of the Amboseli Ecosystem for centuries (Fitzgerald 2013). The traditional Maasai lifestyle is seminomadic; as it is for other pastoralists; the movement of herds of livestock over vast areas of land in search of areas with better resources is central to the Maasai way of life. Maasai measure their wealth by the number of cattle they own and the number of children they have (Briggs 2006). Among the Maasai, such symbols of status lead to high population growth—a trend reflected by rapid population growth across Kenya since the 1980s (Kenya Open Data). Livestock numbers must increase to sustain an increasing population of Maasai, leading to competition for land. Due to land privatization through subdivision, the Maasai are now unable to travel over the vast distances they once covered. These factors have led to considerable changes in their traditional way of nomadism (Goodman 2002). Two such traditions that are undergoing change include pastoralism and Moranism. Among the Maasai, the Morans, or warriors, are an age class of men tasked with protecting their communities from external aggressors, both human and animal. Morani initiation is a complex affair that traditionally involved the killing of a lion and other displays of bravery. These events served to prove one's manhood to the fellow men and eligible women of the group. With the recent outcry against lion-killing, Moranism, like pastoralism, has come under threat from the encroaching modern world.

In light of the aforementioned challenges, the Maasai tradition and cultural practices are changing. The effect of these changes on the tradition and culture will ultimately affect the conservation efforts of the surrounding wildlife moving forward. Through surveys and interviews of Maasai people in local communities, IFAW, KWS, and Big Life representatives, we gathered information on which cultural practices seemed to be evolving with the current changes. We examined the possible results these two cases would have on the future preservation of Maasai tradition and culture and, in turn, the effects this would have on the conservation of wildlife in the Amboseli ecosystem.

2. Methods

We collected information about the evolving culture and traditions of the Maasai by conducting a series of ten interviews over the course of five days. We spoke with three Maasai communities in the area surrounding Amboseli National Park: women at Enkangu Narok, women at Mbirikani group ranch, and men from the community of Satao Elerai. We collected supporting information from employees of several NGOs, the Kenya Wildlife Service, and other entities that are closely tied to these Maasai communities at the local level. These included the Big Life Foundation, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the Kenya Wildlife Service, the Amboseli/Tsavo Game Scout Association, the deputy headteacher at the primary school at Enkangu Narok, members of the African Wildlife Foundation, Nora Njiraini of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project, and David Sorimpan and

Isack Marembo of Wildlife Direct. We supplemented the information we collected via interviews by using observations taken at each site, including noting the dress and any piercings of our interview subjects. Additionally, we augmented our conclusions by consulting the literature on Maasai culture.

3. Results

We have divided the results of our study into several components. First, we report the traditions that were specified by Maasai interviewees to be most important to their culture. Next, we identify the primary challenges threatening these traditions, including a risk assessment of their potential hazardousness to Maasai culture. We then identify strategies currently used by the Maasai for dealing with these challenges, including examples.

3.1 Vital Traditions

Maasai interviewees verbally identified four tenets of Maasai culture (listed in order of importance): their social connectedness, their dress and ornaments, their connection with wildlife and nature, and their practice of Moranism (See Figure 1).

3.2 Challenges to Traditions

We identify the primary challenges to Maasais' social connectedness to include shifting land ownership practices, education, and Westernization (See Figure 2). The cultural tenet of social connectedness among the Maasai arose through their pastoral way of life. When land is privatized, communal management of cattle by men and the development of emotional bonds between women and children living in close quarters in temporary *manyattas* ends, thus reducing social connectedness. Additionally, increasing rates of primary school enrollment provide younger generations of Maasai access to secondary school, university education, and employment opportunities outside of pastoralism. Economic incentives, as well as the opportunity to secure a higher standard of living, may draw younger generations away from their parents and their communities, thus reducing social connectedness. Finally, implicit in Kenyan education is a degree of Westernization; students are expected to wear uniforms rather than traditional dress to school, are required to learn English, and are not taught about Maasai culture in typical curriculums. Each of these factors serves to alienate younger generations from their parents' culture and to stifle connectedness between children, their parents, and community elders. For a summary of the risks posed by shifting land ownership practices, education, and Westernization, see *Table 1*.

We identify the primary challenges to Maasais' dress and ornaments to include conservation, education, and Westernization (See Figure 2). By providing Maasai men and women with job opportunities as game scouts, community rangers, administrators, and researchers, conservation increases the probability that Maasais will discard traditional dress for uniforms or Western-style office attire. There is one notable caveat to this trend: conservation efforts maintain wildlife, which attract eco-

tourists who may also be interested in visiting one of the several cultural bomas in operation around Amboseli and purchasing souvenirs from their markets. In this way, conservation indirectly encourages Maasais to maintain their traditional dress and ornaments as a strategy for supplementing their income from livestock. The ways in which education and Westernization discourage traditional dress and ornaments have been provided above. For a summary of the risks posed by education and Westernization, see *Table 1*.

We identify the primary challenges to Maasais' connection with wildlife and nature to be shifting land ownership practices, climate change and drought, and conservation (See Figure 2). When Maasai communities shift from group ownership of land to private ownership of subdivided plots, new owners often erect fences to denote their property. This not only reduces potentially beneficial interactions of wildlife with cattle, such as the facilitation of grass communities by native ungulates (Augustine et al. 2010), but prevents these traditional pastoralists from moving their cattle according to where they can find high quality forage. Furthermore, increasing incidence of permanent settlements leads to reductions in wildlife around those settlements; thus, in the event that properties are not predator-secure, any remaining predators may be turned to livestock to reduce energy expended in seeking out prey (Western et al. 2009), thereby increasing human-wildlife conflict. By reducing the predictability of rains and decreasing the resilience of semi-arid ecosystems, climate change and higher incidence of drought will reduce the land area suitable for traditional pastoralist lifestyles. In these ways, drought and climate change erode the relationship between the Maasai and their historical territories. Conservation primarily threatens the ability of Maasais to continue such practices as ritual lion-killing, which have long been a part of their relationship with wildlife and with nature. However, it is worth noting that conservation can also bolster the already-strong relationship between the Maasai and wildlife: for example, conservationists have supported maintaining pastoralist lands because they enable wildlife to pass through them. Additionally, conservation organizations have emphasized that traditional Maasai skills, such as tracking wildlife and adaptability to harsh conditions in the bush, make them excellent employees in the business of poaching prevention. Thus, of all the factors threatening the relationship between the Maasai and wildlife and nature, conservation has the fewest net negative effects. For a summary of the risks posed by shifting land ownership practices and climate change and drought, see *Table 1*.

We identify the primary challenges to Maasais' practice of Moranism to be declining wildlife populations, conservation, and shifting land ownership practices (See Figure 2). Because one of the defining trademarks of Moranism is the killing of a lion to symbolize strength and warrior status, declining wildlife populations, in conjunction with conservation efforts, are a major threat to this tradition. In the context of increasing membership in the age-class of boys about to become Morans (the most recent class was approximately 4,000, compared to between 70 and 121 lions by Big Life Foundation's last census), there simply are not enough lions to support ritual killings by every eligible group. Furthermore, conservationists have been campaigning to end the tradition of lion-killing through a variety of initiatives that will be discussed further under *Responses to Challenges*. Beyond the end of lion-killing as a tradition, Morans' responsibility to protect communities from aggressors, both human and animal, is challenged by the shifting of Maasai from community

living to private land ownership. For a summary of the risks posed by shifting land ownership practices and declining wildlife populations, see *Table 1*.

3.3 Responses to Challenges

Over the course of our interviews, we identified three primary ways in which Maasai have responded to challenges to their traditions. In some cases, they have been able to keep their traditions mostly intact without alteration. For example, because it does not interfere with the interests of other groups, Maasai dress and ornaments are still worn by a high proportion of Maasai—as we were told on more than one occasion, “Even Maasais in downtown Nairobi can be seen wearing their *shukas*” (*pers. comm.* Paula Kahumbu, David Sorimpan). Additionally, because dress and ornaments have come to symbolize the Maasai outside of Kenya, maintaining this particular tradition has economic incentives—there is profit to be made off the Maasai image, even if the Maasai are not currently the ones collecting that profit (See Figure 3). A second response strategy is to phase out the tradition altogether. This was the case for both female genital mutilation (FGM) and lion-killing among Morans. We found that excising a tradition does not happen all at once—according to David Sorimpan and Phillip (AWF), FGM still occurs, though it is no longer celebrated. Additionally, we heard from the women of Enkangu Narok that, as they have learned about the potential negative consequences of the practice, younger women are no longer choosing to have their daughters circumcised. Similarly, lion-killing has been phased out gradually, though it is now completely extinct according to all of our interviewees.

A third and final strategy that the Maasai have used in response to challenges to their traditions is modification. This strategy emerges in the case of both Moranism and pastoralism, two of the most aggressively threatened of the Maasai traditions. Indeed, the elimination of lion-killing has prompted some Maasai to assert that “Moranism is dying” (Peter, Chairman of Elerai Conservancy). In order to maintain the tradition of Moranism in the absence of lion-killing and some other aspects of traditional life, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Big Life Foundation and Lion Guardians have begun initiatives such as the lion guardian program for young Maasai men as well as the Maasai Olympics. Lion Guardians attempts to position prospective Morans as protectors of lions by drawing on the skill set that traditionally marked Morans as warriors: strength, courage, bravery, and skill in the bush. Similarly, the Maasai Olympics seeks to provide an outlet for young Maasai men to demonstrate the skills they would otherwise have proved by killing a lion through athletic contests. As an additional benefit, these initiatives promote benefit sharing with the local communities: Lion Guardians offers employment, and participants at the Maasai Olympics win prizes such as pedigree bulls (for the winning *manyatta*), scholarships (one participant in 2012 received a full scholarship to Moy University), and invitations to international events (one participant in 2012 was invited to compete in the NY Marathon) (*pers. comm.* Daniel Ole Shambu, Big Life Foundation).

The case of pastoralism is a more complex one because it involves many more stakeholders than the Maasai alone. One way in which the Maasai of the Amboseli ecosystem have maintained their practice of pastoralism is by entering

land-lease agreements with such organizations as the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), and Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). In a land-lease from the Olgulului people, for example, IFAW, AWF, and KWS pay the Olgulului stakeholders 600KSH per acre per annum in order to keep the Kitenden corridor, a vital passageway for wildlife traveling between Amboseli and Tanzania, open (Evan, IFAW). Through land-leases, both Maasai interests and the interests of conservationists are met to some degree. However, this land-lease was difficult for the NGOs and KWS to negotiate because some Maasai are adapting from pure pastoralism to partial agriculture. In land nearby the Kitenden corridor, Maasai are making between 5,000-6,000KSH every three months farming maize, tomatoes, beans, potatoes, and some other crops (Evan, IFAW). While this land is especially fertile in the context of the surrounding semi-arid regions, it offers a potent reason for Maasai to turn to agriculture where possible and, where impossible, to lobby strongly for comparable compensation. Indeed, according to the IFAW officials we interviewed, this particular land lease was settled only because IFAW, AWF, and KWS have agreed to add other incentives, such as funding for a game scout training program, to their original offer. Thus, through savvy agreements and diversification of sources of income, the Maasai have been able to maintain their pastoralist lifestyle in new, modern forms.

4. Discussion

Over several days of conducting interviews and observations, we obtained a comprehensive view of how Maasai culture is changing in the face of challenges such as drought, Westernization, and conservation efforts. However, it is important that we also acknowledge the limitations of our study. Our sample size was small; we interviewed three communities (Enkangu Narok, Elerai and Mbirikani), several NGOs, KWS, and several individuals. The interview process consisted of talking to a group in which either the elder woman or head of the respective organization responded to questions, with minimal input from others. This likely introduced some bias into our study. However, the information we compiled was sufficient to preliminarily assess how and why Maasai culture is evolving.

As many community members and NGO officials articulated, Maasai culture has *had* to change in the context of modernization and conservation efforts. While some traditions, such as FGM and lion killing, are being phased out, other traditions, such as dress, are able to be maintained in most areas of life. Still, other traditions – including Moranism and pastoralism, which embody important values to the Maasai are being modified and preserved by the Maasai. For example, pastoralism is considered to be one of the most fundamental elements of Maasai culture. The Maasai are seminomadic pastoralists, who value cattle as a form a currency and subsist mainly on their domestic stock. However, pastoralism has come under threat for a variety of reasons, including those outlined in this study. As we have shown, these pressures are forcing the Maasai to partially abandon their nomadic way of life. In the face of these issues, can – and should – pastoralism survive?

Pastoralism has survived for over 30,000 years; therefore, it must be a viable life strategy in many respects. Several studies support the benefits of traditional pastoralism: the seasonal movement of cattle has been shown to maintain milk yields

and to enable drought avoidance. Additionally, the Maasai's breed of cow, the boran, is well adapted to semi-arid and dry environments (Western, 1982; Ellis and Swift, 1988). Traditional pastoralism is also economically productive; the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) estimates that the commercial meat industry in Kenya is worth over 800 million US dollars. In addition, the mobility and scale of pastoralism has traditionally allowed overgrazed areas to recuperate while herders graze their cattle elsewhere. Furthermore, wildlife numbers and production have also been shown to decrease in areas that have been subdivided when compared to areas where mobile pastoralism has been maintained (Western et al. 2009). These many benefits of traditional pastoralism explain why the Maasai initially resisted government efforts to subdivide and privatize land (Western and Manzollino-Nightingale, 2004).

However, the challenges to pastoralist development are increasing. One of the biggest issues the Maasai, as well as other pastoralists in Africa, face is recurring droughts and other climatic disasters. While weather and climate are never completely predictable, droughts are expected to become more frequent and more severe as climate change worsens (IPCC 2013). These changes render Maasai pastoralists more dependent on national parks and areas with permanent water sources, such as Amboseli, for refuge from drought. In addition, in many parts of the country, pastoralists are involved in a slow process of settlement and integrating into agricultural economies (Sandford 2006). Agriculture and other business ventures pose another, perhaps more profitable, challenge to the pastoral way of life.

Nevertheless, pastoralism is a key part of Maasai culture that many are reluctant to completely relinquish. While some aspects of pastoralism will inevitably change, many options exist that will allow partial maintenance of traditional pastoralism. One such option is expanding education on rangeland management practices, which emphasize keeping herd size at or below carrying capacity and prioritize the productivity of each cow rather than the sheer number of cows. Changing the perception that quantity, rather than quality, of livestock is a better indicator of social status will go a long way towards preserving pastoralism while reducing overstocking and land degradation. While expanding education can improve current practices, a more innovative strategy would be to diversify and supplement sources of income. We have seen such diversification achieved through the zoning of specified areas for particular purposes, as in the Amboseli Ecosystem Management Plan, 2008-2018, wherein some areas are to be used for wildlife tourism, others for livestock production, and others for arable agriculture. Private owners could set aside a part of their plot for agriculture, mining or wind farming, while continuing to practice pastoralism on the remaining area. Finally, Kenya could adopt systems that have worked for other countries with large populations of pastoralists; in Spain, for example, the government maintains cattle migratory routes.

Though the threats to the Maasai way of life are greater today than ever before, we are optimistic about the future. While Maasai culture and tradition will inevitably change in the coming years, our study demonstrates that the most valued Maasai traditions and values have manifested in new ways that are harmonious with conservation efforts and a changing world. The Maasai are a resilient people, and their presence will still be surely felt in Kenya for years to come.

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Tables

Table 1. Risk assessment of threats to Maasai culture and tradition based on trends up to April 2014. Threats were identified based on interviews conducted from Mar 31, 2014 to Apr 5, 2014. Probability of occurrence was assessed based on how often the threat in question could be expected to occur based on information collected from our interviews as well as additional literature. Mitigation strategies were also identified based on information collected from our interviews and additional literature. Hazard scale was assigned by taking into account the expected frequency of threat, as well as how many and which of the four key cultural tenets (see *Results*) the threat challenged. Note that some of the broader challenges mentioned in the text are excluded due to difficulty in assessing probability of occurrence, whereas some additional underlying threats have been added for completeness.

RISK ASSESSMENT				
THREAT	RISK POSED	PROBABILITY OF OCCURRENCE	MITIGATION STRATEGIES	HAZARD SCALE
Drought	Loss of livestock; human health implications	~every 5 years	Construction of grass banks and water reserves; scholarships to gain alternative employment	High
Climate change	Unpredictability of rainfall; reduced ecosystem resilience	Increasing into the future (IPCC WGI AR5 2013)	Improved rangeland management techniques; diversification of income resources	Medium/High
Declining wildlife populations	Reduced tourism; loss of game scout & community ranger employment; threat to traditions pertaining to wildlife	Increasing based on current demographic trends, especially of megafauna (Craigie 2010)	Cooperation with conservation organizations; ending ritual killings and/or retaliation killings	Medium
Land subdivision/shifting land ownership practices	Loss of pastoralism and social connectedness; loss of opportunity to collaborate with conservationists	On the rise since the 1990s (Fitzgerald 2013)	Land use policies that accommodate pastoralism; land lease programs to improve benefit sharing	High
Political instability/violence	Reduced tourism; exclusion of Maasai interests; corruption	Increasing in recent months (e.g. grenade attacks in Nairobi, Mombasa, and at the international airport in January 2014)	Local participation in government/devolution; community accountability	Medium
Westernization	Loss of social connectedness; loss of traditional dress and ornaments	Declining with recent cultural revival (pers. comm. Daniel of Big Life	Maintenance of traditional ceremonies and dress	Low

		Foundation)		
Education	Reduced investment of youth in traditional practices/lifestyles; increases ability of girls reject traditional roles	Increasing as Maasai attitudes towards school become more positive (pers. comm. Nora Njiraini)	Including cultural history in school curriculums	Low/medium
Population growth	Increasing livestock beyond carrying capacity of land; reduced availability of property	Increasing rapidly to 2030 (Kenya Open Data)	Diversification of sources of income	High

Figures

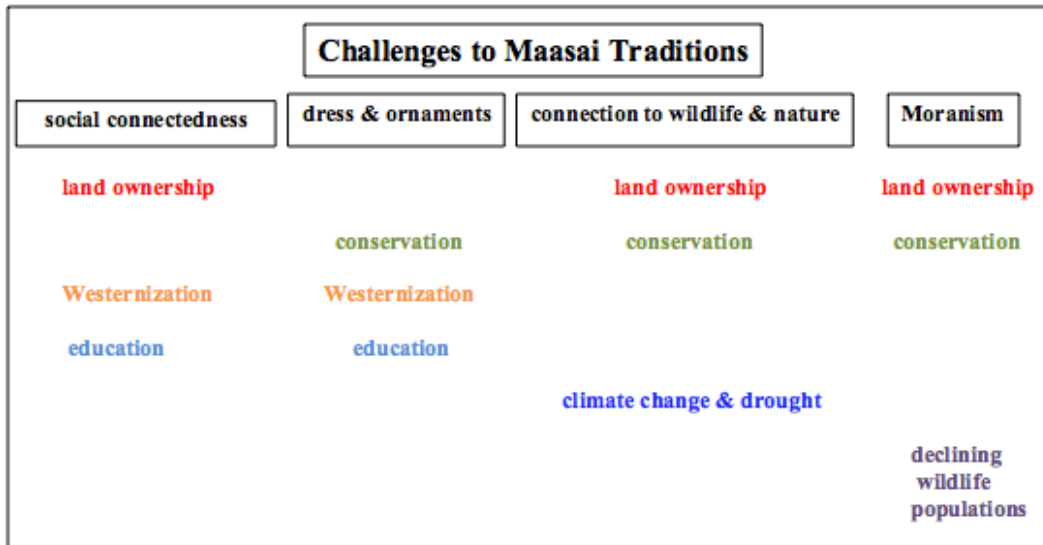


Figure 1. Primary challenges to four central Maasai traditions. Land ownership and conservation were the most often occurring challenges, and threatened three out of four traditions. Westernization and education were the next most often occurring, threatening two out of four traditions. Climate change and drought and declining wildlife populations were the least often occurring, threatening one out of four traditions.



Figure 2. A Louis-Vuitton ad featuring traditional Maasai *shuka* cloths. Maasai cloth has been used in a variety of branding schemes by western clothing companies; although the profits from these endeavors likely do not reach communities on the ground in Kenya, *shukas* are sold in most curio shops in southern Kenya and represent potential economic returns that have not yet been realized by the Maasai.