

maasai

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

There are several groups of Maasai, and they all live and look a little differently. Here are a few things they have in common.

What do the Maasai look like?

Clothing: Maasai men wear lots of **red**, the color of power. Women omen wear very colorful clothes with intricate beading patterns on their capes and wide necklaces. They used to make their beads from wood and bone, but now use a lot of glass and other modern materials.

Hair: : The Maasai shave their heads to commemorate big changes, like becoming an adult or getting married. When warriors' hair is long, they wear tiny braids. Women keep their hair very short.

What is a Maasai village like?

Shelter: The Maasai are traditionally **nomadic**, which means they make their homes in many different places over time. When they move to a new location, the women build houses to make up a temporary village surrounded by circular fences, called *enkangs*, which the men build using thorned acacia. At night they keep their goats, sheep, and cows in the middle, where they are safe from predators and will not wander off.

Law and Order: In the tribe, the Maasai govern themselves with **oral law**, which means that they observe traditional rules that they enforce themselves and aren't written down anywhere. If someone commits a crime, they often pay for it in cattle, their most valuable possession.

How do the Maasai live?

Food: Their basic food is made of milk and cornmeal. The Maasai don't eat as much meat as you might think. Slaughtering and eating a cow is reserved for very special occasions, and when it happens, they have a use for every single bit of the animal, and none is wasted.

Life and Death: Because life can be very harsh where the Maasai live, babies aren't considered a part of the tribe until they're three years old. By that time, they're strong enough to survive. Traditional Maasai don't bury their dead, except for certain very important elders. Burying people is thought to contaminate the ground. Instead, they leave their dead to be eaten by predators.

Maa Language: The Maasai speak Maa, a language that they brought with them on their southern migration. There are around 17 different groups of Maasai, and they each speak their own dialect of Maa. Maa belongs to a language family that is not related to either of Tanzania's official languages, English and Swahili. Right now, the [Maasai Cultural Center](#)¹ is working on the Maa Language Project. Kimeli and other Maa speakers are working with linguists at the University of Oregon on an [online dictionary project](#)².

Music and Dance: There are several unique types of Maasai music, including [throat singing](#)³, a very unusual kind of singing deep in the throat. The popular Maasai "[jumping dance](#)⁴," where boys leap into the air, is part of the boys' rite of passage, when boys become men. The Maasai have many [dances](#)⁵ for different events their lives.

Way of Life Threatened: Just like the Maasai in Tanzania, the Maasai in Kenya are being pressured by their government to modernize and stay in permanent settlements, which makes it difficult to sustain their cattle herding lifestyles.

¹ <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~dlpayne/maasai/mcc.htm>

² <http://www.uoregon.edu/~maasai/Maa%20Lexicon/lexicon/main.htm>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IUQFT4zVWk&feature=related>

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AidkPPF49xc&feature=related>

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzidBIU68u0>