

COWS

COWS AND THE MAASAI

“The cow is almost the center of life for us. It's **sacred**. It's more than property. You give it a name. You talk to it. You perform rituals with it. I don't know if you have any sacred food in America, something that has a **supernatural** feel as you eat it. That's the cow for us.” —Kimeli Naiyomah in *The New York Times*, June 3, 2002

View the New York Times article here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/03/international/africa/03KENY.html>

Cows are the cornerstone of the Maasai diet. The Maasai live mostly on cow's milk and corn meal mixed with milk. Beef is eaten only on special occasions, like feasts and other celebrations. When a cow is slaughtered for its meat, the community elders prepare the animal quickly and skillfully with great respect for the animal. The elders are served first with the best cuts of meat, followed by the warriors, and finally the women and children are served what is left. The Maasai also drink cow's blood, which they believe makes them stronger. Sometimes they mix the blood with milk, and sometimes they drink it straight. They draw the blood carefully by inserting a sharp arrow into the jugular vein in the cow's neck, which causes no long-term damage if done correctly. After the animal is bled, mud is pressed into the wound to seal it closed.

In Maasai culture, wealth is measured by the number of cows a person has. The average Maasai man owns at least 15 cows, which means that they are some of the wealthiest people in Kenya. If a Maasai man wants to get married, he might have to give as many as 15 cows to his bride's father, which is probably the most he'll ever spend at once in his lifetime! The Maasai recognize their herd by sight and could tell at a glance if one was missing, but it is considered to be bad luck to count the cows.

The Maasai believe that cows were given to them by their goddess Enkai. They believe that Enkai entrusted the cows to them for safekeeping when the earth split from the sky. Because the cows were a gift from a goddess, drinking milk and eating meat symbolizes the connection between the Maasai and Enkai. Cows also play a major part in the Maasai afterlife. When a person dies, it is believed that their guardian spirit leads them to one of two places: a desert with no cows if he has been a bad person, and pastures with many cattle if he has been good. Because of the religious significance of cattle to the Maasai, cows are often slaughtered in honor of milestones like weddings.

The Maasai find creative uses for the cows. They make clothes, shoes, and mattresses out of cowhide, and dried cow dung can be used as fuel for fires. They even use cow dung to build their houses. The dung is mixed with twigs, grass, and urine and left to bake in the sun. When it is baked, it is as hard as concrete (and it doesn't smell at all!)

The Maasai take very good care of their cows. The men herd and protect the cows, and the women milk the cows. They treat their cows like friends—they give them names and even sing songs to them. They also work hard to keep their herds safe. The Maasai live in small clusters of 8-15 homes kraals. Each kraal is protected by fencing made from thorny acacia branches, which the men weave together by hand. The thorns are as sharp as barbed wire!

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14 COWS
for America

COWS

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More about the 14 Cows

The 14 Cows

The cows live in their home village of Enooaen in Kenya. The original fourteen cows have multiplied, and there are now thirty-five “American cows,” as the village children call them. They are tended by Mzee Olé Yiampoi, a revered elder who is the custodian of tribal sacred knowledge about ritual and traditions. Olé Yiampoi was chosen by the elders to tend the cows because of his long-standing reputation as a trustworthy and deeply faithful man. The American cows are not isolated by themselves, but rather they live mixed with Olé Yiampoi's cattle.

The Brands

The Maasai brand their cattle by making small slices in their ears. Each clan has their own special earmark for identifying their cattle, and every cow bears an earmark on both ears. The American cows needed an earmark of their own, so the Maasai charged American ambassador Ranneberger with designing the earmark. When Ranneberger visited Emanyatta, the sacred warrior camp of Enooaen, for a ceremony honoring the graduation of the Ilmeseyieki/Iltalala warriors and the presentation of the fourteen cows, the elders approached him. They brought out a cowhide and drew shapes of ears on the cowhide with charcoal. Kimeli remembers presenting it to the ambassador, saying, “Now you represent your people. You are the elder of the Americans, you decide what earmark the American cows will have from now [until] forever.” After careful consideration, the ambassador hit upon the simple image of the twin towers. Now each new American cow is branded with two small upright bars on each ear representing the twin towers.

The Scholarship

*“The gift of cows was a **gift of life**...people lost their lives in New York, but we have animals that are living that represent the ... remembrance of those people, and because the cows will keep multiplying, **life continues**, doesn't stop, ... We decided that when you educate a child, it gives the child knowledge and a better life... and that life is **passed on and on and on** through many generations.”*

—Kimeli Naiyomah on the American Maasai high school scholarship

The American embassy was so touched by the Maasai's selfless gift of compassion that they decided to find a way to give back. After consulting with Kimeli and the tribal elders, the American embassy agreed to sponsor fourteen revolving scholarships to be given to Maasai teens (selected by village elders) to attend a Maasai high school for four years. A high school education is a tremendous gift for these students, many of whom would be unable to continue their education without scholarships. Even Kimeli's high school education was sponsored by a kind headmaster at a local school who found a scholarship for the promising young student. Kimeli will be taking over the scholarship himself as part of the [American African Nuru Foundation](http://www.aanuru.org)¹ when the four years of funding promised by the American embassy runs up this fall.

¹ www.aanuru.org