

MAASAI BOYS' CIRCUMCISION

In many parts of East Africa the ancient traditions and practices of Africans are dying out through contact with *mzungus* (white people) and their way of life. Employment in offices, mingling of tribes in a non-tribal environment and other factors contribute to the breakdown of traditional religions that stress the value of kinship ties, respect for elders and tribal unity. However, in Maasailand, this process of cultural erosion is less rapid and one can still observe women's dances, war dances, cattle dances and many others that are associated with various rituals, e.g. child-naming, *Eokoto e' Kule* (the milk-drinking ceremony) and many others.

The Maasai are probably the most famous (and infamous) people in East Africa, coming close to the Zulus of South Africa in their reputation for cattle raiding (referred to by the government as "cattle rustling"), conquering other communities, and such. The Maasai started their conquests from the southern Sudan by conquering the Turkanas who inhabited the lands west of Lake Turkana, the Kalenjins, who are situated south of Lake Turkana, right on down to southern Tanzania where they conquered the Sukuma people.

They were also famous for inhibiting the slave trade across their lands. The Maasais did not believe in slaves and they stood between Uganda and what is now northern, southern and central Kenya. They also opposed foreigners who crossed their lands; first the Arab slave-traders and then Europeans. In fact, Thomson was among the few Europeans who managed to stay in Maasailand before the signing of an agreement which was associated with sacrifices and vows that the Maasai would not injure him. They are also well-known for the fact that they are among the few Africans who are still practicing their old customs.

There is a lot of their traditional history which has not been recorded, and none that has been recorded by Maasais themselves. The relatively few attempts that were made during colonial times to record their history were full of exaggerations and bias.

The Maasai people still occupy parts of Kenya and Tanzania. In the middle of the 19th century, they occupied a region that stretched between Mount Marsabit in northeastern Kenya to Kiteto in central Tanzania, a region of about 700 square miles from north to south and 200 miles from east to west.

According to popular oral tradition, the Maasai are believed to have originated somewhere in the north at a place known as *endikir e Kerio* (Kerio Escarpment). Although some scholars refer to this region as the origin-place of the Maasai, some still hold that they originated farther north, possibly somewhere in the Horn of Africa. This is a point which needs further research.

I personally believe that Maasai origins are situated in North Africa, since there is one phrase in the Maa language which is uttered during difficulties, "*Ol pa Sinai*", possibly meaning a longing to go back to Sinai. Whatever may be the case, the Maasai migrated southwards due to a dry spell. Oral history reports that a bridge was constructed across the Kerio escarpment and after half of the migrating people had crossed the bridge with their cattle, the bridge collapsed leaving the Sampuru (Sampurr)¹[see p. 101] and the Itiamusu people, who currently live in the Baringo district as fishermen around Lake Baringo.

All of these people, however, speak a language called *Maa*, which is closely allied to the Nilotic language spoken by the Kalenjins, Luos and Turkanas of Kenya and by the Dinka, Shilluk and Nuer of the southern Sudan. Culturally, they are related to the Cushitic-speaking peoples who are in Somalia, and the Rendile and Boran peoples (also Maasai) of northeastern Kenya.

Although they present a large degree of linguistic and cultural unity, there are still noticeable spoken dialect and general cultural differences among Maa-speakers. For example, we have the Sampurr (Sampuru), who inhabit Marsabit, Sampuru and Isiolo Districts, the Itiamusu who practice fishing around Lake Baringo and the hunter-gatherer group called Iturobo (Dorobo) who form the third group of Maa-speakers, although their speech sounds like a dialect of Kalenjin.

These people have qualified to become Maasais because they have stayed with us for a long time. Also, they have acquired cattle just like the pastoral Maasai.² There are also the Ilkunono, who practice iron-smithing and they speak a language only spoken by Maasai elders. They risk becoming extinct. They are considered to be unclean because they produce lethal weapons and even at night it is *taboo* to call them. Whenever they spend a night in your house, the owners of the house must turn the hides which are used as mattresses upside down for them to lie down or sleep on -- turning the flesh-side up, in the way that is done when a dead person is laid out.

Then there are what one might call “the Maasai proper”, who, except for slight dialect differences caused by geographical differences, speak one language and have a common cultural heritage and rituals. They strive as much as possible to remain pastoralists. These fall into 15 politically independent “*iloshon*” or “sections”, i.e. *Ilpurko* (my group, which is the largest group); *Ilmatapato*; *Ilkeek-oonyokie*; *Ildala-lekutuk* (also called *Ilkangere*); *Ildamat*; *Iloodo-kilani*; *Ilkisongo*; *Iloitoki-toki*; *Iloitai*, *Isikirari*; *Isiria*; *Serenget*; *Ilmoitanik*; *Ilwauasin-kishu* and *Ilkaputiei*.

Being purely pastoralist, the Maasai keep cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys as beasts of burden. The Rendile and Boran peoples are Cushites who are culturally related to the Maasai. They live in the northeast, and besides cattle, they also keep camels and goats. The Maasais sole subsistence and wealth is derived from cattle. Their staple foods being milk, meat and blood from the cattle. Milk is consumed on a daily basis and when the yields are low, the milk is mixed with fresh cow blood obtained by puncturing the jugular vein with a blunt arrowhead called *orngoret*. The blood is either mixed with fresh milk to produce what is known as *nailanga*, a delicious meal for women who have just given birth, or the mixture is curdled, to make *osaroi*, which is given to convalescing patients.

The traditional Maasai system of government is decentralized with each age-set of every section having its own elected political and ritual leaders. Political leaders are known as *Ilaiguanak* (chief counselors) who preside over meetings and secular functions. The bearer of the office holds it throughout his life. One of the greatest leaders in Maasailand was *Parsaloi Ole Ngilisho* (anglicized as “Legalishu”) who took over power from *Olonana* (anglicized as “Lenana”), who was an *oloiboni* of the *Inpurko* community. *Kuntai ole Sankale* was also a famous *Olaiguanani* (chief counsellor). *Illoibonok* officiate at religious rituals like sacrifices, lion-hunts, cattle raids and during wars. *Olonana* was one of the greatest *Olaiguanani* who managed to command many Maasai sections.

As herds boys, a Maasai boy’s education mainly entails acquiring skills in cattle-grazing. They may be in cordial relationship with their other warriors, but they are despised by other warriors because of their juvenile behaviour. They are guarded against usurping the privileges of the *Ilmurrans*. Their privileges include close association with girls (*Iselengen*), even of their own age. Each *olmurrans* has an *ilangata* (a “mistress”) and the boys long to

have one too. The boys greatly admire the *ilmurran's* posture, their springy walking style, their dances, their hairstyles, body adornments, and the fact that they hold glittering spears and colourful shields (*ilongoi*), their *ilowuarak* i.e. lion-maned headdresses and *imunken* (leg-bands). If any of the boys are found with any of these things, or if they are seen performing any of the *ilmurran's* actions, they would be severely punished.

In order for a Maasai boy to become a man, he must undergo circumcision. Circumcision is an operation performed by specialists who are considered "unclean" people, like the Dorobos or the Kikuyus. Candidates are expected to go through the operation without flinching. The Maasai refer to flinching as *aipiri* or *akwet* (to run away), but it doesn't mean literal running away.

In the social organization of the Maasai, age-sets are of paramount importance. This system begins with circumcision. Circumcision initiates a boy to warriorhood, to the status of *ilmurran*. It involves removal of the foreskin of the penis by an expert. For boys, therefore, initiation into the *ilmurran* represents a coveted ambition and the circumcision dance performed by the newly initiated boys is an expression of this desire.

Other important aspects of this stage of life are the attire and habits of the *ilaibartak* (newly initiated boys) who are still in seclusion. The candidates wear long greasy robes made of sheepskin, and their hair is kept long and greasy, like that of women in maternity. The impression they give is summarized by the riddle: *Arro onyil* (He who looks like a greasy buffalo); *olaibartani* (the initiate). He is not allowed to carry or handle any weapon, even a razor blade to trim his finger nails. The meat the initiates eat is chopped into small pieces to facilitate easy eating without a knife. He can, however, use a weak weapon and blunt arrows coated with wax to kill birds for their feathers for his crown. The whole idea simulates innocence and peacefulness in contrast to the later life of an *olmurran* which is full of violence.

During the convalescing state, all that an initiate does is to roam around the countryside killing birds and encouraging young boys in the form of teasing songs to go through the operation without flinching. Some of the songs they sing are scathing.

Ilaisartak sing a song on the eve of circumcision while standing in a circle around the initiate. The dance is given rhythm by clapping three sticks

together. The onlookers become serious, especially young men, some of whom even collapse -- especially, the relatives of the initiate, for they fear that their kinsman will flinch. The words of the song move them deeply. The song and dance is performed in the evening before circumcision which will take place early in the morning of the next day.

It is a dance mainly performed by *Ilaibartak* (circumcised boys) when the boy is being shaved as a sign that he has now graduated from boyhood to manhood. The dance is accompanied by spitting, pinching, counseling and exposing the nakedness of the boy. This is done to make him build courage so he will go through the operation without flinching -- an act that not only shames him, but dishonours his parents. The song is called a "teasing song", and the full text is reproduced below:

Maiseyie osinkolio le teipa
Maiseyie iltiapukuro

Let us sing the evening song
and appraise the covered ones (the
uncircumcised boys)

Eima entepisi nan sno

They have passed the thicket (a
woman who has had sexual relations
with an uncircumcised boy)

Maiseyie olkimula

That has taken all the covered

CHORUS:

Ainyo naitigida koyiomso

What makes *koyiombo* (an
uncircumcised boy) arrogant?

Loolashiok oturia olkokoyoi

Who has feared the Kikuyu (Kikuyu
and Dorobo are employed to do all
menial tasks including circumcising).

Hooe hooyioe hoyiono hooyia

Koyiombo mira oltung'ani

Koyiombo, you are not a human
being

Nimira sii enkiteng'

Neither are you a cow

Ira ake enkuyukui narpto

You are only a dirty puppy

Naishori kule oltiren

That is given milk of the hearth

REPEAT CHORUS

*Nabo ilayiok olkaseron
Ke'pi'yaya nkidong'o
Nabo olkaisiodi olayioni
Mang'ari pooki osaroi*

The boys are one with brown birds
They both have rolled up tails
The flincher is one with a boy
I share *osaroi* with neither

REPEAT CHORUS

*Olayiok oiguana
Mikido ekiguana
Neidia ekakenya nanyokie
Naitaeku Imaai*

You councillor boy
May your council fail
There comes the real morning
That brings the Maasai

REPEAT CHORUS

*Nimijo iyie enjorata kinyori
Ikimojik loonkejik eingori
O'ilpapat lo nkonyek
Peyie elo olmareng nkacloru
Ncheri' ekwita olyioni*

But it is not for your love they come
They come to observe the toes
As well as the eyelashes
And rumours spread
The boy has flinched

REPEAT CHORUS

*Eilepa enkalem inkokwa
Memurat Koyiombo
Negila ilala oltarge
Nikijo kinangu to rinka*

The knife has risen to the sky
Before *koyiombo* is circumcised
The hook teeth broke off
When we tried to throw it down by a
club

*Nengururi endukaya
Nikijo maiswaku te kule
Neiswaku enkai osarge*

The head broke off
when we tried to splash with milk
God splashed back blood

REPEAT CHORUS

*Esira enkomerei enkon'gu
Nesira ene puli
Nengobu olkirapasu inkipa
Nayla sikitok entawuo
Nemeishori Ilkaisiod eer*

The pied wagtail has printed eyes
so has *enkomerei*
Superb starling is as yellow
as colostrum
None will I let a flincher wear

REPEAT CHORUS

*Ero enakiti sunguroi
 Natii impiyayo olpirangasu
 Netii eriaisimai oldonge
 Nitii ilopuo te kimojik
 Li'nkang'ang pooki le manguar
 onyor enkolong eleipu
 Neure enkijape enteipa
 Napukur ena sepe*

You young pretender
 with hairs on the muscles
 and snuff in his penis
 who cannot approach girls
 whom I do not admire
 who loves the morning sun
 and fears the evening coldness
 That covers the stupid ones

REPEAT CHORUS

*Ero tenikweta teneitu
 Kira ake iyitok olkinyor
 Kiti kiti mikiok osaroi olili
 Lenkang' na kweta olayioni*

Boy whether you flinch or not
 we like it either way
 No, no, we will not take the smelly
osaroi
 Of the home where the boy has
 flinched

It is evident from the dance/song that the boys are dirty, incapable of holding council and they are generally despised. Notice how they are compared with dirty brown birds and puppies, and their skin is said to peel like the bark of a tree. If a boy flinches during the circumcision, their *osaroi* (fresh milk mixed with blood) is not shared by their age-mates and they are not permitted to wear the choice birds' feathers on their crown. To flinch is the worst thing that a male can do to his life, for even if he becomes a great warrior in future, nobody would acclaim the man as a hero since he flinched during circumcision. Whenever he tries to give a comment or a suggestion, his colleagues will refuse to listen by saying, "What does *orkaisiodi* (a flincher) have to tell us?" Normally flinchers are anti-social as a sign of trying to cover up the shame of flinching.

The dance done on the eve of circumcision shows how bravery is so revered and valued by all the people that one can say that bravery is worshipped by the Maasai.

Salau ole Koros

ENDNOTES:

1. The word literally means "luggage", "baggage" or "belongings".
2. For someone to become a Maasai, he must possess cattle. People without cattle are referred to as "*litorobo*", since the Dorobos didn't have cattle in the first place. The Maasai believe that they raise wild animals since the *litorobo* diet is mainly wild animal meat and fruits from the forest. Some songs have been composed by the Maasai to ridicule them and their way of life.