

Eve Jones
Georgetown Day School
Chevy Chase, MD
Kenya, Factor 15

Maasai Tribe: Community-based Schools Improve Literacy and Life Expectancy

The Maasai are a tribe of 350,000, located in parts of both Kenya and Tanzania. The semi nomadic people currently live in areas of extreme dryness and infertile soil due to the unavailability of land. The Maasai are seen as one of the most impoverished tribes in all of East Africa.

Over the years the Maasai have continued to resist the government's attempts to modernize their culture. Today the people are still continuing to live by the traditional practices taught by their ancestors since the 15th century. Although they have managed to maintain their culture, they have not been able to provide adequate food for their people. While the rest of the world continues to make progress around them, the Maasai have lagged far behind. Currently, about 85 percent of children in Kenya manage to complete primary school. Comparatively, less than 10 percent of all Maasai children are enrolled in primary school. The national literacy rate in Kenya is about 69 percent, compared to a much smaller amount of 20 percent for the entire Maasai community. This means the Maasai lack the means to get new knowledge about agriculture, nutrition and how to better feed their families. They also maintain cultural practices that are abusive to women. In recent years, schools and not-for-profit organizations that collaborate with the community and utilize incentives like school feeding and girls' dormitories are attracting more children to get an education. This assures that new generations of Maasai are gaining the knowledge that can increase literacy rates and life expectancy. This in turn improves the quality of life for the Maasai Tribe.

I had the opportunity to meet a typical Maasai family and observe their lifestyle when I visited Kenya in May 2011. In the Maasai culture, polygamy is still normal for most families. The elder men of two families arrange the marriage without any input from the girl or her mother. The father selects a man for his daughter who is ideally wealthy and will bring a large dowry. Typically a girl is married around the age of 15. This age is usually when a girl begins to go through puberty, and she is given away at this age so that her parents do not have to take care of her during this difficult time of growth in her life. Once she is married, the husband is expected to teach her the ways of womanhood. Many Maasai women are beaten by their husbands. Even when this happens a woman is not allowed to go back to her family.

The family I met consisted of two brothers and their nine wives. Each wife had her own hut made of dirt and cow dung. The homes are all located in a circle in a compound; therefore they are expected to live in harmony among each other. A man tends to sleep in a hut without any children in it. When a child is born he will move to a different hut until the boy becomes old enough to move on to his own bachelor quarters. This is the age in which a young boy will go through the Enkipaata ceremony, after this ritual is performed the boys aged from 14 to 16 will travel across their section land with a group of elders for approximately four months while they announce their coming to a new age. Once this journey has been completed the circumcision ceremony is performed on the teenage boys. Circumcision is seen as a rite of passage in the Maasai culture, it marks the day you become a man. After the ritual is finished, the men return to their posts of protecting their village. Both men and women in the Maasai community are given certain roles depending on their gender. Women are expected to fetch both the water and firewood, prepare food for their family, build the homes, milk the cows and clean their sheds, as well as keep the

huts clean. Men are the ones who look after the animals, provide food for the family, and provide security for their village.

Cows are one of the most vital parts to the Maasai's daily life and are the main source of food. Maasai men and women share the responsibilities of caring for the cows. They are also traded for products or services. The cattle raised by the Maasai community are rarely slaughtered for meat. They are used for their blood and milk which over the centuries continue to be the staples in their diet. The Maasai use the milk to make yogurt and ghee, a product that is similar to clarified butter. The blood is obtained by using an arrow to pierce the neck or throat of the cow; usually the blood is only used when the milk is scarce due to the dry season. Without easy access to many vegetables and other varieties of food the Maasai use all resources possible in order to intake nutrients. Blood has little nutritional value. It consists of iron, giving it its red color, as well as water and small amounts of protein. The meat of the cow is only eaten during times of celebration or when someone is in need of a great amount of strength including, births, the Enkipaata ceremony, or if someone is sick. During any of these events the cow will be presented, publicly slaughtered and then blessed by the elders before being eaten. If a cow is slaughtered all the other parts of the animal are used to create numerous objects. The horns of the cow can be used as containers to carry water and other drinking fluids, hooves are used to make rings and ornaments, the hides are used to make, clothing, bedding and shoes, the animals' urine is typically used inside their medicine, and the dung is used to build their homes. A cow can also be traded in order to pay the school tuition for the children. A great deal of importance is placed upon the symbolism of the cow in the Maasai community. It is believed that the cattle possess the qualities of Enkai, their supreme god. Eating the meat and drinking the milk stands as a symbol of the unity of Enkai and man.

Due to their semi nomadic lifestyle, the Maasai do not farm any crops. As a result, their access to nutritious food is severely limited and they do not have a healthy and well balanced diet. The rate of disease within the community is high, and the life expectancy for a Maasai has been estimated to be below the age of fifty. Seeking to address issues of humanitarian need and provide aid, UNICEF is an organization that works to improve the life quality of communities throughout Africa and they have a strong presence in Kenya. UNICEF works with government officials and partners to increase the ability of resilience of struggling populations while responding to humanitarian needs as well. UNICEF has partnered with the Kenyan government to improve access to "education, water, sanitation and hygiene"¹ for children. The Maasai's lack of exposure to the modern world prevents them from getting the new knowledge they require to improve their diet in order to receive the necessary nutrients and increase their life expectancy but hopefully with the assistance of NGO's, such as UNICEF, progress will be made.

Their adherence to conservative tradition also perpetuates abusive practices pertaining to girls, restricting them from education and a better quality of life. In order to overcome these barriers, the Maasai must work as a community and gain more access to education for their children.

A variety of non-governmental organizations have put in efforts to provide support and different educational opportunities for the Maasai people. For example, Ongata Naado is a coed primary school located on the Maasai territories. In the seven years that they have been in existence, the school has become a strong example of the effectiveness of education to teach new ways of doing things that can help the Maasai address hunger and improve their quality of life. When founded in 2006, the school began with a student body of 59. Within only five years, the amount of students enrolled in the primary school had grown to about 289. One of the main reasons children

decide not to come to school is because of the extensive distance of their village from school. Sometimes students have to walk as much as 20 miles. Serving nutritious, plentiful meals is one way that Ongata Naado has attracted kids to come to school. The students learn about how to grow crops by working in the school garden. All the food grown on site is incorporated into the children's meals. They grow a variety of different plants including, maize, beans, and other vegetables. When my family visited the school we were led into a dark stone room where two large pots were located in the center of the floor sitting on top of some type of burner. Two men stood side by side with long sticks stirring these enormous concoctions of maize, beans and animal fat. Once the food was cooked, the children lined up outside the door and were each handed a plastic bowl filled with a substantial helping. I asked the children if it tasted good, and they enthusiastically said, "Yes."

Another strategy that Ongata Naado used to attract students to come to school is dormitories for the girls. Since having started the boarding program the amount of girls in school at Ongata Naado has increased by over 50 percent. In addition to keeping the girls in school so they can get an education, they aren't as likely to be married at age 15. Now that the girls' dorms have been established, the boys have expressed interest in a dorm as well. Ongata Naado currently does not possess the funds to build boys dorm houses but until then they have had boys who are living in the classrooms at night. According to the Maasai Girls Education Fund, a DC based non-profit organization, access to education "increases the likelihood that a woman will have economic security. [An educated woman] will spend 90 percent of her income on her family, compared to 35 percent that an educated man would spend."² It is crucial that organizations such as the Maasai Girls Education Fund and Ongata Naado continue to expand their role within the Maasai community.

The growth of Ongata Naado has positively impacted the community around it as well as the students. They have installed an electric fence around the property in order to keep the elephants out, installed a rainwater reservoir, along with the farm and dormitories. If the amount of annual rainfall remains consistent the rainfall reservoir will continue to fill up, the reservoir has already begun to impact the community surrounding it tremendously. The reservoir now stands as a reliable water source for the residents and their livestock. It allows people the luxury of local water rather than having to travel many miles every day, in search of an adequate water source.

As was proven by the success of Ongata Naado, Maasai schools can succeed with support from the government, local residents, local businesses, international charities, and the children's families, Government policies that make schools mandatory for the people and provide financial support to the schools are critical. School feeding programs should be part of that government support, but there is also a role for the local community, parents and NGOs. A local man who understood the importance of primary education decided to involve himself with the creation of it all by donating the land provided to build Ongata Naado and its school garden. Jobs including cooks, farmers, teachers, among others are all provided due to the creation of the school.

One of the most important factors to running a school is involving the parents in order to make them feel included in their child's success. Parents are bartering cows, selling beads and raising money through other means to support the school. This kind of support gives everyone a commitment in the school. This also is a way to teach them about the education process and the importance of why their child should take part in it. Donations by the parents are a great way to get them to feel committed to the program, once someone decides to personally invest in it; it creates more of a value to the school. As mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons Maasai

children are not initially sent to school is due to the fear of their parents that after being taught by government schools their children will lose sight of their culture. Once the parents understand the value of the school and education, it ensures that their traditional Maasai lifestyle does not have to be eliminated. Rather than feel like they are caving into the government's pleas to completely sacrifice their culture, education is one way to teach generations to come about ways to improve their way of life while still maintaining its customs.

While the parent donations do contribute a great deal to the school, it still does not supply them with the funds necessary to entirely support the school. UNICEF have continued to support government-led coordination by co-sharing sectors focused on nutrition, education, water, sanitation, hygiene, and child protection. The organization works on educating management of how to strengthen their leadership skills and how to access the necessary elements of running an organization or a business.

During my time spent in Kenya I talked to some Maasai that have realized the true importance of an education. While visiting a Maasai village, located on the dry sand of the Maasai Mara, I had the pleasure of being introduced to a young man who was the oldest son of the chief. He told us he would become the junior chief the next year on his 25th birthday. During our tour of his village, the junior chief steered us toward a cylindrical shack made out of sticks and leaves. Inside the shack was a blackboard, a couple pieces of broken chalk and a bench around the walls of the room. The young man informed us that we were currently standing inside their kindergarten building. After going through the schooling system himself as a boy, the junior chief decided to come back to his village and prepare the children for the government schools before beginning primary school. This man is a tremendous example of how an education can improve the Maasai culture. The ultimate objective of sending kids to school is to educate them of the necessary knowledge needed to reach success and for them to spread what they have learned with their family members and friends. The junior chief was doing this.

While in Kenya, I was also introduced to a great man named Timothy Kiok. Timothy is a junior elder in the Maasai tribe who works as a safari guide. He wants to provide a better living for his family but also make sure that they continue to maintain the traditions of the Maasai. He commutes between his family life in the village and his job in the more modern world. The first half of my trip was spent riding in the back of a safari jeep while Timothy pointed out different animal species as he saw them. During the long trips out into the Maasai Mara and on the days when there were few animals, Timothy would tell us stories from when he was a boy. His father, the chief, decided that Timothy and one other brother should get an education. At first, Timothy didn't understand the value of education and hated to leave his family and friends. He would pretend to walk to school, but end up lying on the hillside all day till it was time to go home. After many days of doing this, he returned home and his father asked him to tell the rest of the family about his school and what he had learned. Considering at that point Timothy had still never set foot in any of his classrooms he was found with nothing to say. From that point on, he decided to take school seriously. Now as a grown-up having to provide support for his wife and two children he stresses the importance of an education to his family. Both of his boys are enrolled in private schools, paid for by his earnings as a safari guide. Timothy believes the private schools will give his sons an advantage over other children that attend government schools. However, he still expects them to maintain the traditions of the Maasai people.

The Maasai community has continued to live life based off of their traditional customs, causing them to lag behind the advancement of the rest of Kenya. A diet consistent of cow's milk and blood does not contain the necessary elements needed for a nutritious diet. This lifestyle results

in a low life expectancy. Their closed culture has also fostered an abusive lifestyle for women with little opportunity for improvement. Education is proving that it can overcome these barriers to a better quality of life. New generations are going to school and learning about agriculture and new ways to feed their family. It has been demonstrated that community-based schools have the power to raise literacy rates and life expectancy. When these schools offer school feeding and dormitories this attracts children to school. Ongata Naado, the primary school that has had great success in a small amount of time, has used both these two tactics. Feedback from Maasai living in the world today demonstrates that due to their experience in school as a child, they are now using the knowledge that they gained to improve the life of their family as well as their own. It is obvious that the amount of potential that lies within the Maasai to succeed in today's world is most definitely present. After having seen this success firsthand, I believe that this success can be replicated. The Kenyan government and other NGO's must work collaboratively with the Maasai tribe to help them gain an education that will improve their quality of life without eliminating their culture.

Bibliography

- Benoit, Lee Anne. "An Overview of the Kenyan Education System: Issues and Obstacles to Learning." Students for Development blog. Last modified April 27, 2013. Accessed July 26, 2013. <http://www.sfdblog.ca/an-overview-of-the-kenyan-education-system-issues-and-obstacles-to-learning/>.
- Brayer, Toni. "More Maasai Health." Everything Health. Last modified September 24, 2007. Accessed July 23, 2013. <http://healthwise-everythinghealth.blogspot.com/2007/09/more-maasai-health.html>.
- "Economic, Cultural & Physical Barriers." Maasai Girls Education Fund. Last modified 2012. Accessed July 27, 2013. <http://www.maasaigirlseducation.org/the-need/barriers-to-education/economic-cultural-physical-barriers>.
- "Education: Quality education closes the gap between the struggles of today and opens the door to the promises of the future." My Chosen Vessels. Accessed July 25, 2013. <http://www.mychosenvessels.com/maasai-education.html>.
- Ferguson, Pat. "Ongata Naado- a village transformed." Operation Eyesight Universal. Last modified December 2, 2011. Accessed July 23, 2013. <http://blog.operationeyesight.com/2011/12/ongata-naado---a-village-transformed-part-2-of-2/>.
- "The Girls Speak." The Amazing Maasai Ultra. Accessed July 24, 2013. <http://www.amazingmaasaiultra.org/page/in-the-girls-words>.
- "Humanitarian Action for Children- Kenya." UNICEF. Accessed September 11, 2013. <http://www.unicef.org/appeals/kenya.html>.
- "The Life of a Maasai Woman." Maasai Girls Education Fund. Last modified 2012. Accessed July 25, 2013. <http://www.maasaigirlseducation.org/the-need/the-life-of-a-maasai-woman>.
- "Maasai People." Mbogo Expeditions. Accessed July 28, 2013. http://www.mbogoexpeditions.com/maasai_people.htm.
- "Narok South, Ongata Naado." Wherever the Need. Accessed July 24, 2013. <http://www.wherevertheneed.org.uk/projects/kenya-projects/narok-south/>.