

Maasai Mara

AS DROUGHT DESTROYS
A PASTORAL CULTURE IN
KENYA, VOYEUR-TOURISM
FILLS THE GAP

The Maasai Show

BY ADAM JADHAV

THE TROOP OF MAASAI MEN in red are clearly impressive as they shout and jump in time with a throaty tune, played on an instrument fashioned from the horn of a kudu, a local variety of antelope. This traditional dance has been performed for generations at weddings or during the passage into manhood.

But today, these ceremonies are mostly for the benefit of safari-bound tourists who part with precious dollars for a peek at Maasai traditions: dances, village tours, bushwalks and handicrafts. And in these days of drought and massive cattle die-offs, the nomadic pastoralists will most certainly take what they can get.

It's an odd place for the Maasai to be, considering they're more often at odds with Kenya's safari industry, which jealously guards its pristine game lands against the incursions of hungry cattle. But as drought ravages the country, herders here say they have no choice but to risk fines, arrest and the occasional beating as they drive their cows to the best remaining grazing area: the protected wildlife reserve.

To show the extent of the devastation, Joseph Koikoi, a 32-year-old Maasai cowherd, sweeps his arms to the dry plains just past his village's stockade fence. "We have no grass here," explains Koikoi, de facto spokesman for Oltepesi, a village of 120 near the prestigious Maasai Mara National hills. "In the reserve, we find grass. So we take our cows there."

This frustrates park rangers and safari companies to no end, as cattle compete with the vaunted ecosystem of lions, wildebeests and other wildlife. James Ole Sindiyo, Mara senior warden, estimates that illegal grazing has exhausted



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40 percent of grassland inside the reserve.

The land nearest reserve borders is now nearly devoid of wildlife; the savannah grasses there have been sheared to the root by overgrazing. Rangers have even restricted tourist vehicles from some patches while the land recovers.

Foreigners looking for the classic picture of a skeleton bleached by the Kenyan sun more often return home with photos of the bones of Maasai cows killed by drought rather than wildlife felled by lions.

As sSafari trucks leave the park, they pass a small pen at the gate routinely filled with seized livestock found inside the protected reserve. A Maasai herdsman typically must pay 10,000 Kenyan shillings, or about 6,400 rupees, for return of his cows.

“We have never seen this in the history of our pastoral lives,” says one advocate. “These people have maintained this lifestyle for centuries and centuries. But what happens when the cattle are gone?”

“It is a real menace,” Sindiyo says. “We fine and arrest (the herders) and we take their cattle. Certainly they are not happy when we do this, but they know it is trespassing.”

If the drought eases, he adds, “they will be able to go back to their homes and their pastures. I pray very much for that.”

But across Kenya, increased urban growth and farming are depleting water supplies (this fall, even some midrange hotels in Nairobi weren’t immune from water shortage). Making matters worse, historic watersheds like the Mau Forest are dwindling at alarming rates. This means drought is only likely to occur with more frequency and severity, says scientist David Western of the African Conservation Centre.

Well over a million cows were estimated to have died this past year due to drought; the government tried to ease the blow for herders by buying up weak cattle for slaughter, but scores of animals died in pens before the state-run meat company could process them.

Even if drought eases and the grass comes back, Maasai advocates say the herdsman simply don’t have enough land left. Meitamei Ole Dapash, founder of the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition, estimates as much as 70 percent of Maasai communal territory has been sold or appropriated in recent decades, often for agriculture.

Some Maasai allege the Kenyan government, renowned for corruption, has simply stolen their land for more profitable enterprises. From the herders’ perspective, they have no choice but to trespass on game reserves. “You can’t tell me to sit and die because tourists are coming and so they

don’t want to see your cows in the park,” Dapash says.

Scan the horizon near the Mara reserve and you’ll invariably spot a Maasai in red, armed with knife and staff, watching his herd. Though one of Kenya’s smaller tribes—estimates peg Maasai numbers at a few hundred thousand—the people are recognised internationally as the face of pastoral culture here.

The Maasai have a devotion to their livestock that borders on worship. In traditional circles, wealth is judged by head of cattle. Before the drought, a poor family might have had 30 cows. A rich family, 500.

“If a Maasai does not have a cow, he’s not taken to be someone in the community,” says Meitamei Lepore, as he escorts tourists on a bushwalk. “He’s *dorobo*. He’s not a person.”

Men follow their cattle for miles each day. Women carry water, gather firewood and wash clothes. Their staples are milk and cattle blood. Medicine comes from the herbs in the forest. Running water is defined as a bush stream. Houses are built and rebuilt of sticks and mud and dung.

At Oltepesi village, some families can’t afford even the uniforms and textbooks required to send their children to primary school, and of the children that do go, many eventually drop classes to help their parents in the fields or at home.

Pastoralists are hardscrabble people and hardly strangers to poverty. But then this is the worst drought in decades.

“We have never seen this in the history of our pastoral lives,” says Kakuta Ole Maimai, founder of the Maasai Association, an advocacy group. “These people have maintained this lifestyle for centuries and centuries. But what happens when the cattle are gone?”

For now, the Maasai will lean on tourist profits, says Koikoi, the village spokesman. So as each dusty tourist van pulls up, children mob the foreigners for food and candy.

As the traditional dance continues for the benefit of the safari-goers, a young man blows hard into the spiralling horn of the kudu, and the show begins. Adults in colourful dress toss shawls on tourists and haul them into the dance performance.

This is their new life. Women spend almost as much time making jewellery to sell to Westerners as they do tending to traditional duties. More and more, men lead tourists instead of cattle on walks through the bush.

John Cleave, chairman of the powerful Kenya Association of Tour Operators, says this evolution was inevitable. In a developing nation hungry for income and investment, it’s only natural for pastoral traditions to yield to other industries—including tourism, he says.

“I really have sympathy,” Cleave says. “They are losing their cattle. But the harsh reality is that they’re not contributing to the economy.”

The drought may force change in traditions, but advocates say with more investments in education, rural infrastructure and markets, the Maasai can modernise. For example, many pastoralists have already embraced cell phones; Koikoi fishes one from his shawl to answer a client’s call while leading a tour. ■

FACING PAGE: As their cattle starve amid drought, Maasai pastoralists like Meitamei Lepore (right) and his brother David (centre) lead tourists on bushwalks for income.