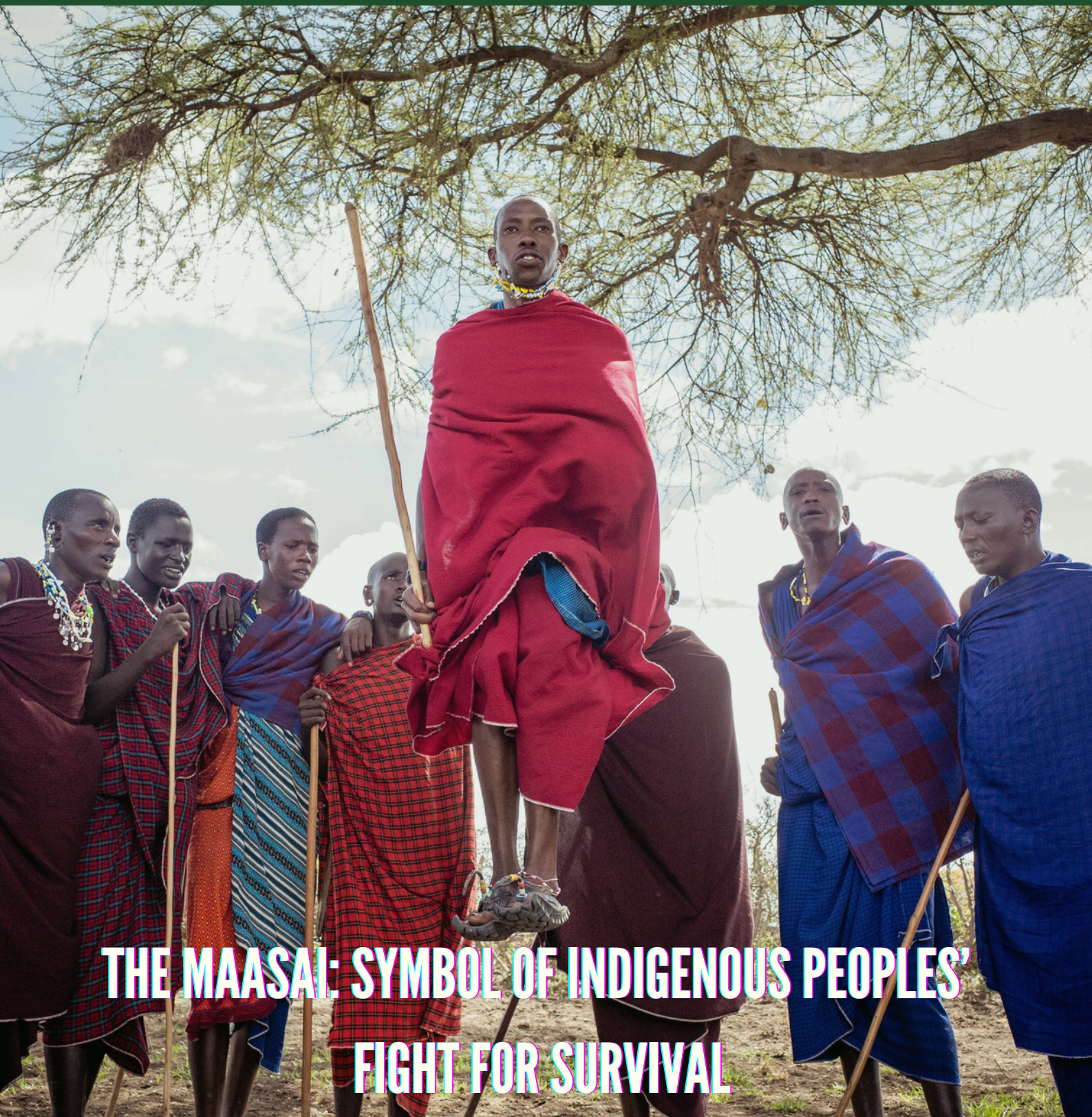


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THE MAASAI: SYMBOL OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES'
FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

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The Massai

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Who are the Massai?

Maasai are Ethnic Nilotic tribes inhabiting Northern and Central Tanzania as well as Southern Kenya. Maasai live in or along the most known national parks in both countries that include Serengeti, Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tarangire, Mkomazi, Mikumi in Tanzania and Maasai Mara in Kenya. While it's not clear as to when the Maasai arrived in today's Tanzania from the North, it is believed that they have arrived between the 13th to 16th Centuries. By the eighteen century, Maasai occupied a large area that ranges from areas lying 1° N. Lat., and 5° S and the meridian of 33° and 39° E. longitude. (cited from Through the Maasailand by Joseph Thomson 1887). Today, Maasai occupy less than 30% of the land they occupied in the 18th century and the height of their expansion.

Since the establishment of Serengeti National Park, the first in Maasailand, in 1940, there has been a growing movement among conservationists and the Tanzania government to alienate more Maasailand for both filming tourism and hunting business. Maasai believe in a monotheistic faith, they worship a single deity called Enkai, or Engai. Engai has a dual nature in two races (colours) Enkai Narok (Black God) is benevolent, and Enkai Na-nyokie (Red God) is vengeful. For their spirituality, they have set sacred areas that are exclusively used for spiritual purposes to worship their deity.

What is their relationship with nature and how does it influences their way of life?

The Maasai community depends on nature for their livelihoods and survival. To the Maasai, Land for example is not only a piece of area but a defining feature of spirituality as in the case of Oldoinyo Lengai (God Mountain), Loormalasin, and Lemakarot,) all in Ngorongoro District.



A Massai standing near a tree

In these areas, Maasai do practice their spiritual rituals. Maasai of Ngorongoro for example use the Ngorongoro crater floor from endoinyo e rumbe, endoinyo enkitati, enkoitai oo Itwati, Sama and Enkoitokitok as traditional and cultural sites for performing:

- Passage ceremonies
- Confirmation of each age-set system and
- Conducting traditional ceremonies known as Enkipaata (at an interval of 18 years) of the coming of the new age groups. Apparently, 2023 is the commencement of the new age group for the Maasai so this is going to happen soon.



A Maasai girl brings some grass and earth to make a paste for plastering.

3. What is their role in the culture and in the preservation of the environment?

Maasai have established cultural norms that bind every society member to nature conservation. For example, a Maasai person will never cut a big tree from the trunk (tree bole) and anyone who violates this norm will be punished through societal practice as an uncultured person. These norms are enforced by elders. So because the Maasai uses trees to build houses, fire making and fencing their home, they only do with the tree branches, not the whole tree to ensure the same tree remains alive. Again, Maasai has made a norm that some trees are holy and should not be harmed in any way.

This includes trees as Iretet. Iretet is not used in any other means other than for prayers. so the tree will not be cut for fire making, for house making or any other factor. There are other trees that are of medicinal value to the Maasai and therefore the community will protect and never use the same unless for medical factors. It is on this means that the forest is protected and nature preservation is enforced by community moral rules.

Maasai nomadic lifestyle is also a mechanism to allow nature recovery and ensure there is no overexploitation of resources. Maasai move from one place to another to ensure that there is no overgrazing from their herds that may lead to environmental degradation as they know if that happens will have a detrimental impact on their well-being as a community

4. How do they preserve nature?

In addition to point 3 above, Maasai do preserve nature in many ways, beside forests, Maasai protect wildlife, as they say, they are second cattle to the one kept at home. Maasai has made a moral rule that wildlife should not be consumed by the community as they believe if that happens it will deplete all the animals. So Maasai do not consume wild meat and anyone who does this will be despised by the community. This is when the term Ndorobo was invented to despise people who hunt and consume wild animals. The animal person who lives on wild meat will hardly have any respect among peers in the Maasai community and so everyone tries to avoid that and ultimately guarantee animal welfare. Maasai normally divide their country into four main areas including a home, a place to tend to young calve, grassing areas for the rainy season and dry season pasture areas. So no one will make his home in any of the three grassing areas nor will anyone graze his livestock in the dry season during the rainy season. To Maasai however, wildlife has no restriction in accessing these areas in any season.





Maasai children in a village

5. How do the Masai teach their children about their environment and its importance?

Maasai generally teaches their children through folklore transmitted from one generation to the other generation. Part of the Maasai folklore includes significantly the role of nature in community interaction and survival. Again, as the children grow, they will be assigned to tend the family cows (mostly for male children) or assist parents in home chores (mostly for female children). Each of them will be taught the importance of nature in dealing with the assigned activity. The children will be taught about animals, plants, medicinal and poisonous trees and importance of the nature in rainmaking, matters of cultural and spiritual values.

6. How does climate change affect the Masai communities

The Maasai as a community do not control resources in their own territory, this affects their ability to adapt to the impact of climate change. Institutional barriers caused by the laws and government policies limit access and control over traditional lands and natural resources that are exacerbated by the impact of climate change. In many areas inhabited by Maasai, there are no reliable infrastructures, therefore, limiting to essential services like water, sanitation, disaster response and health care and therefore limiting significantly capability to respond and mitigate climate-related threats. Another area that relates to climate change and the Maasai is the traditional medicinal plants.

The Maasai primary medicines are derived from trees, shrubs, stems, and roots and can be used in a multitude of ways on treatment or prevention of diseases. With an unchecked climate crisis, this natural medicinal mechanism stands to be impacted. Again Maasai in Tanzania are already undergoing trauma from unprecedented land confiscation by the state leading to removal from their homelands, and loss of traditional cultural practices. Climate change impacts on the natural environment are worsening this trauma in many ways.

Being pastoral people, Maasai need rainfall and adequate grassing resources. Failure or shortage of rainfall for Maasai literally means a death penalty as cattle that are the source of food and livelihoods, a symbol of culture and faith may be wiped out by the inability to access grassing resources and water. Death of livestock in Maasai areas in recent years has been unprecedented.



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