

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Maasai is a Nilo-Saharan language, related to Dinka, Nuer, and Songhai. Its closest relatives are the Turkana and Kalenjin languages, whose speakers live in western and central Kenya.

Maasai society is patriarchal, with the elders deciding important matters for each group or clan. The *laibon*, or spiritual leader, acts as the liaison between the mankind and God, named *Enkai* or *Engai*. The *laibon* also act as a rich source of Maasai lore and culture. The Maasai religion is historically monotheistic in spite of the fact that Christianity was brought to the area only at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Traditional Maasai life centers around cattle which constitute the primary source of food for the community. Equally key to the Maasai belief system is the notion that God gave the Maasai his cattle to watch over. This belief explains the tradition of measuring a man's worth in terms of his number of cattle.

Maasai architecture reflects the semi-nomadic lifestyle of the people in its use of indigenous technology to construct the houses. Maasai women generally maintain short hair and adorn themselves with woven and beaded jewelry. This headwork plays an essential part in body ornamentation. Maasai men, on the other hand, generally wear red garments and value ornate hairstyles.

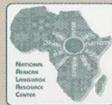
Lately, Tanzanian and Kenyan governments, with varied success, have tried to encourage the Maasai to adopt a more agrarian lifestyle.

STUDYING MAASAI IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some universities in the United States that currently offer MAASAI.

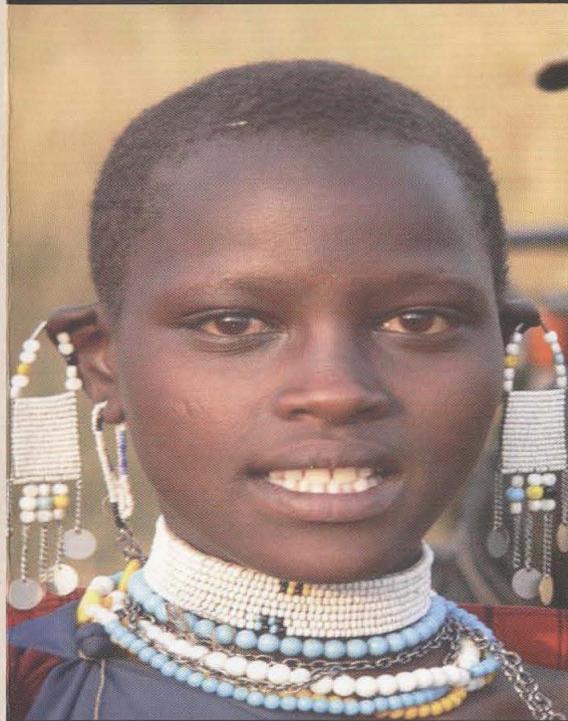
For more information, please contact the

National African Language Resource Center, or check the website, located at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>



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YOUNG MAASAI WOMAN

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

WHY STUDY MAASAI?

Maasai is the language spoken by the world-famous Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania. Each year, thousands of tourists pour into East Africa and an East African safari is hardly complete without a visit to areas inhabited by the Maasai people.

The huge popularity of the Maasai make knowledge of the Maasai language a necessary prerequisite for tourists and business people interested in East African tourism.

Anthropologists and other scholars investigating the unique semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Maasai will also find learning the language useful in their pursuits. Similarly, foreign diplomats, business and educational leaders, international aid workers, missionaries and Peace Corps volunteers benefit greatly from a knowledge of Maasai.

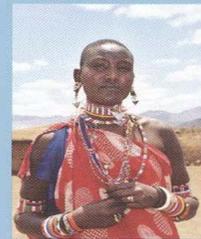
WHO SPEAKS MAASAI? PEOPLE AND CULTURE

The Maasai are an indigenous African ethnic group of semi-nomadic people located in Kenya and northern Tanzania. Due to their distinctive customs, dress and residence near the many game parks of East Africa, they are among the most well-known African ethnic groups internationally. The Maasai population has been variously estimated as 453,000 in Kenya and in Tanzania with a total estimated as "approaching 900,000."

Estimates of the respective Maasai populations in both countries are complicated by the remote locations of many villages, their semi-nomadic culture and their being the only ethnic group allowed free travel over the Kenyan-Tanzanian border.

There are twelve geographic sectors of the group with each having its own distinct customs, appearance, leadership and even language varieties. These subdivisions are: Keekonyokie, Damat, Purko, Wuasinkishu, Siria, Laitayio, Loitai, Kisonko, Matapato, Dalalekutuk, Loodokolani and Kaputiei.

According to Maasai oral history, the Maasai originated from the lower Nile valley north of Lake Turkana in southern Sudan and began migrating south around the fifteenth century, arriving in northern Kenya and central Tanzania between the seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries. Some ethnic groups were displaced as the Maasai settled in a long stretch of land from Kenya to Tanzania. Maasai territory reached its largest size in the nineteenth century covering almost all of the Rift Valley and adjacent lands from Mount Marsabit in the north to Dodoma in the south. This period of expansion was followed by epidemics which decimated Maasai cattle. In contemporary times, the Maasai have graying rights to many of the national parks in both Kenya and Tanzania as they move their great herds of cattle across the open savannah with the changing seasons. The persistence of a semi-nomadic lifestyle has fascinated people from different cultures.



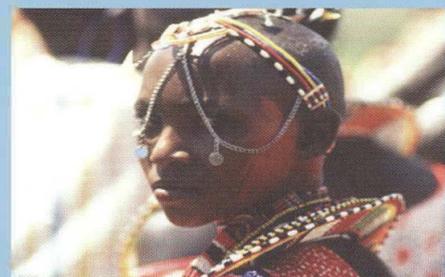
Maasai Woman in traditional outfit



Maasai man in full traditional regalia



Maasai herdsman and his herd



Maasai woman with intricate headgear