Kenya
Series 1
Elementary (K–6)
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THE MASAI AND COWS

The role of cattle is central in the life of the *Masai* (a group of indigenous Kenyans). The reliance on cattle for both survival and wealth has allowed the Masai to preserve traditions that have been passed down for centuries. Respect for this traditional way of life has formed the cultural identity of the Masai, who have become a symbol of Kenya.

Starting Points

1. Do you ever do things that others consider “old fashioned”? Why do we often continue traditional behavior even when there are alternatives? Are there benefits to doing things the traditional way?

2. Have you ever lived on or visited a farm? How does relying on animals for your food or income change the way you think about or treat them? Imagine if life revolved around cattle. How would your life be different? How might it be the same?

3. The Masai way of life may seem out of style to people from industrialized countries, but the Masai enjoy their way of life. Why would it be difficult to impose a “modern” lifestyle on the Masai? How has preservation of their traditional way of life preserved the Masai identity? Would changing their lifestyle change who they are?

Information

The Traditional Masai

In the grasslands of East Africa live the semi-nomadic Masai (see Traditions Visual 1). The Masai speak a language called *Maa* and have a reputation for being fierce warriors, although this has often been exaggerated. The Masai rely on their herds of cattle for both survival and wealth.

The Masai have lived the same lifestyle for thousands of years. They have a fierce pride in their traditions and strive to keep them alive. They do not value a formal education like many western cultures. While some of the younger Masai receive a formal education, leaving their villages and families to take on other jobs, most Masai children do not attend school. Though they do not have a formal education, the children learn the necessary skills of life from their elders. Their entire life revolves around the tribe and their cattle. As a result, children have a lot of time to play and help with the chores (see Traditions Visual 2).
Masai Warriors
At a young age, Masai boys start to learn the duties of grown men. The boys’ games and chores imitate the duties and skills that will be necessary for them to perform as adults. They play games involving spear throwing, jumping, and running. Boys also learn to herd cows and protect them from wild animals. Young men become strong, swift runners, and experts at spear throwing and archery. During a period of seclusion, they are taught orally by the village elders. All these activities prepare the boys to go through the rites of manhood. After initiation rites, the young man becomes a warrior, or moran.

To become a moran, the boy must kill a lion with nothing but spears and knives. The requirement has the dual benefit of proving the boy’s abilities and eliminating lions that kill precious cattle. Traditionally, the warriors also raided other tribes’ cattle and fought battles with those tribes.

Masai and Their Cows
The Masai people believe that God created cows just for them and that the cows belong solely to their people. A man who owns many cows is considered rich. Because the Masai rely on their cows as their staple food source, they rarely hunt or farm. However, the Masai do not use them for meat. Instead, they prick the cows in the neck and mix the blood with the cows’ milk. They are careful not to let the cow bleed too much, and they take care of the wound to prevent infection or death. Old cows may be killed for meat. After a cow dies, the Masai use the hides to make clothing and other necessities.

The cows must be protected and kept healthy. All the boys learn how to watch for wild animals that might harm the cows. If they see a predator, they yell and wave their arms to scare it off, but if the animal does not run away, they must fight it. They must also be able to recognize if a cow is getting sick or pregnant; Masai men are very skilled in healing and birthing cattle.

Cows need a lot of grass, so the Masai generally stay in open grasslands. The Masai build their houses where there is a lot of grass for their cattle, and when all the grass is gone, they move to a new area. They build their houses from sticks covered with cow dung and their beds from woven branches and grass.

Masai Housing
Because the Masai live in semi-desert areas, their houses are unique and called manyattas (see Traditions Visual 1). During the summer months, the house becomes the coolest place; during the rainy season, it provides a great shelter. The walls of the Masai house are built with cow dung mixed with red, or loam, soil. Doors and walls are molded when the dung is workable and it becomes very hard after it dries. The roof is made of tall grass that is bound in bushels and layered on top of the walls. Sometimes grass is not used at all since grass is not always available. In that case, the Masai simply extend the walls and form a rounded roof.
Activities

1. Visit a cattle ranch or dairy. Talk with the owner and his family about living around cattle. Observe the animals and approach them if possible. What are your impressions? What would it be like living with and taking care of cows every day?

2. Play the Masai jumping game. Two people hold a stick close to the ground. The rest of the group lines up and takes turns jumping over the stick. After everyone has jumped over the stick, the two holding the stick raise it up a few inches. Everyone jumps over the stick again. When someone cannot jump the stick they are out. The one who can jump the highest wins. Why do you think Masai children play this kind of game?

3. Write an essay about why traditions are so important to the Masai. Think about the traditional Masai way of life. Why do you think they hold so firmly to their traditions? Do you know other groups of people that consciously preserve a more traditional lifestyle?

4. Fold a large piece of drawing paper in half. On one side write the word “Traditional.” On the other, write the word “Modern.” Draw pictures that compare and contrast your life with the life of the Masai. Are there parts of your life that might fit under both categories? Have your ideas about these two words changed after learning about the Masai?

Discussion Questions

1. What does the Masai treatment of cattle demonstrate about their culture?

2. Why would the Masai people believe they have a right to take other people’s cattle? How do our own cultural values affect the way we view other people’s lifestyles or even their belongings?

3. Have you ever moved? What was it like? How would you feel if you had to migrate every few months according to the needs of your livestock? What if everyone you knew did the same thing?

4. The Masai do not focus on formal education. Do you think that they should be required to go to school? What would a moran need to learn in school?
Traditions Visual 2: Masai Home and Children