The Maasai

The African photo Safari continues

by Dave Gibson

Western culture has greatly influenced or completely changed the lifestyles and practiced social traditions of indigenous peoples across the globe. 800,000 Maasai of northern Tanzania and Kenya stand as a testament of resiliency to change, instead preferring their own ways over those of an unforgiving turbulent world. The governments of each country have implemented programs to encourage assimilation but most of the independent Maasai proudly live as they always have.

"Cattle is king" here and the number in your herd greatly dictates your status. In this patriarchal society, the more wives and children a man has, the greater his wealth. However, a man with a large herd and no wives, or a man with many wives and no cattle is considered poor. The milk, meat, and blood of the cow sustain them nicely, but goats and sheep along with maize meal, rice, potatoes, and cabbage - which they call goat leaves - have crept onto the menu. Fruits are gathered by the women who seem to do most everything, including milking, gathering of firewood, cooking, and most arduous of all tasks - hauling water. Often I would see women lugging one or two large containers of water alongside the roads for miles. It seems to me that this one chore alone would take at least half the day. The man's role is to herd the livestock and protect his land, cows, and family, possibly in that order. Women build the temporary 3 meter by 5 meter by 1 ½ meter high home called an "inkajajak" with interwoven sticks caked in mud, grass, cow dung, urine, and ash. The men encircle the camp or "boma" with an "enkang" (a fence of thorny acacia to keep the lions and hyenas out).

Even the Maasai haven't escaped secular influence completely. I'll never forget when I saw my first purple and red draped, "shuka" clad, warrior talking on his cell phone. Much of the Maasai's historical territory has been taken from them in the way of ranches, government projects, and game parks. I am here as a direct result of the latter. Some of the Maasai now supplement their livelihoods by giving tours of their villages and selling handicrafts. I was fortunate enough to visit one of these settlements near the Serengeti in Tanzania. Tall handsome people, they are wirily muscled - probably because of all the hard work that they do. The women greeted me into their world – resplendent in beautiful beadwork. The men began performing a traditional dance known as an "adumu." Facing us with colorful staffs in hand, they chanted as each one took his turn springing repeatedly into the air. The three foot height that even the middle-aged in their group attained was impressive. Encouraged to join in, I matched my jumping ability to theirs and was quickly outclassed and shown to be inferior. The outcome never in dispute, I suspect that they delighted in the pitiful predictability of it all.

As a dark cloud approached, a wind blew through camp scattering dust everywhere. Our visit was cut short as we hurriedly thanked our hosts and departed for our vehicle. One of the warriors was following me trying to get my attention. I was still wearing the "lion tooth" necklace that that he had placed there in hopes of making a sale. Having forgotten all about it, I returned what I later learned to be cow bone and worth about ten dollars.

The existence of the Maasai seems a hard one – akin to camping for your entire life. After traveling through exhaust-filled and poverty-ridden places like Arusha and Nairobi, I know that they have made the right choice.

Five years later: In the Masai Mara I had the privilege of meeting some of the Maasai people again. John is a goodwill ambassador for his tribe and was making the rounds from table to table greeting the new Kichwa Tembo arrivals. His village is only a mile away and tours were available, as in the Serengeti, for $30. That night he and the other warriors would be dancing at camp before supper and everyone was invited to participate. Afterwards Maasai

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crafts would be spread on the ground on blankets for viewing and purchase. John's village may seem rich in cattle at the moment, but when the grass dries up all of their cows could die. Hard currency earned now will carry them through those difficult times helping buy food, clothing, and medicine.

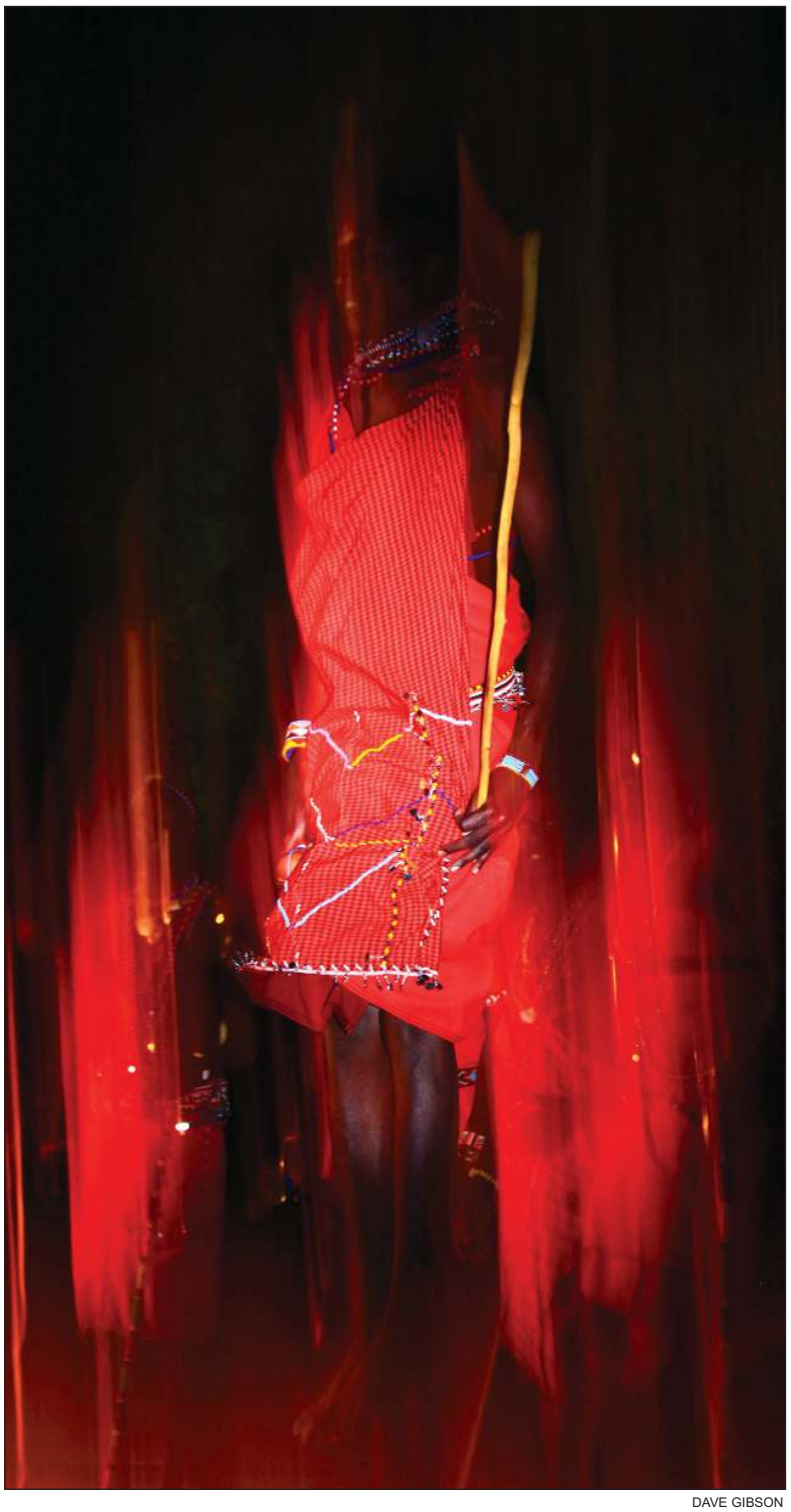
Knowing my vertical limitations, I elected to observe the show from the ground with my camera. Yips announced the commencement of ceremonies with the warriors slowly lunging forward in a line to the rhythm of their chants. When the jumping contest ensued, I was amazed to see that even some of the staff members who had participated leapt almost as high as the Maasai! When I showed John the blurred special effect pictures a few days later, he expressed displeasure like he'd never seen such awful photos. "They are too red and you can't see the faces" he exclaimed. He thought another position would be better and I should remove my flash extender because it was making the images too gray. I couldn't convince him otherwise and considered his advice a bit like me trying to tell him how to dance or herd cattle.

My Maasai guide to the village spoke the best English that I heard during my entire trip. He showed me the leaves of a bush which they use to brush their teeth. The bark of the quinine tree is invaluable in treating malaria which is a constant threat. A small child was playing amongst rocks and shyly disappeared when I approached to take another picture. The Maasai make good photo subjects and understandably have grown weary of having their images captured. Although I was told that I could take as many pictures as I liked, it was only because I'd paid for the privilege. The necessary evil was graciously tolerated for the good of the village. Think of a stream of strangers coming into your living room, snapping a few photos, and then leaving. Women and children relaxed in the shade of stick tables displaying intricate beadwork for sale. Two goat kids were tied to bushes likely entrees for that evening. After elaborately decorated smiling women greeted me with song, I was allowed inside the "boma."

Following my guide, I ducked down and squeezed my shoulders together to enter a primitive hut. The ceiling was no more than 5 ft. high with an earthen bench to one side of the entryway. Attached was another small enclosure to house small animals. A pictograph adorned a dung and mud plastered wall that rose from the dirt floor. Through another small portal was the ever smoking fire pit and beside it the sleeping chamber. The platform had only cow skins for cushioning and was hard as a rock! Preferring a padded mattress, three pillows, and two comforters myself, how the Maasai can sleep on it I found hard to imagine. The village was in the process of moving to a new site. The new village (already under construction) will be right next to the old village – which will be burned to the ground! There's no reason to wander too far when life is good.

I was shown how to build fire with two pieces of wood. The secret is to spin a straight sharpened stick of softwood in your hands with downward pressure onto a piece of notched hardwood. I thought of the TV survival shows where the host labors for an hour to achieve fire. The Maasai had flames in less than a minute! I was bettered by my genial hosts once again as all I got when I tried was smoke.

On my way out I noticed a somber woman holding a baby in the doorway of her hut. A teenage girl peered over her shoulder and a young boy pushed against his mother's hip to squeeze a glimpse at the odd-looking camera toting tourist. I crouched down low waving to him to which he reciprocated and smiled. It even made his mother laugh although she was careful not to show her teeth. Connecting for a moment, I will always remember that boy and my visit with the Maasai.



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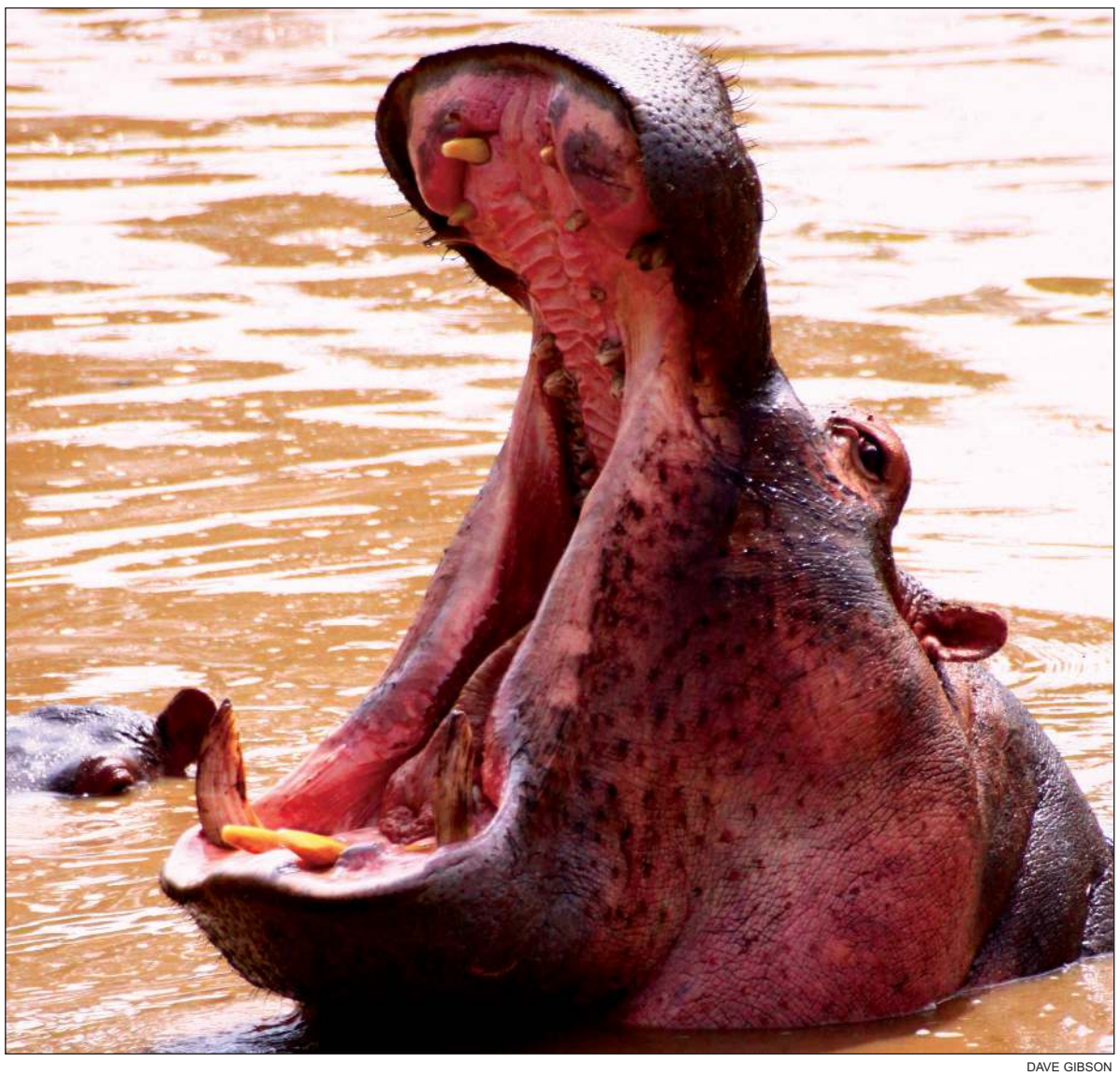

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