

Rites of Passage

MAASI

As with many tribes the Maasai have a distinct social structure based partly on significant stages of life (precise details vary between sub-tribes and under modern influences; the details here are deliberately vague and serve to give an overall impression).

The very young children simply play within the *Enkang*, or mind the cattle herds nearby as they get older. Then both sexes are initiated into young adulthood between the ages of 15-18 or more; this is done through circumcision. Western society (and increasingly Maasai women) argue against cliterodectomy (or - more harshly but perhaps more realistically- FGM Female Genital Mutilation) which 'prepares' the women for marriage. Boys tend to remain more keen to follow the ritual towards manhood.

Elders generally decide they need a new group of warriors every 6-10 years at which point (perhaps over a couple of years) all suitably aged boys are circumcised. This age-related group of warriors (*Morani*) live together in a *Manyatta* for anything from 8-12 years or more, learning and developing their survival skills (as juniors) and performing other warrior duties. In the past a *Moran* could be expected to prove his manhood by killing a lion armed with nothing more than a spear - but this process is no longer allowed under protective government animal legislation. The warrior's job is to protect his village and cattle from predators and other tribes, to take cattle grazing and search for new pastures (perhaps journeying for several days) and even to raid cattle from nearby villages ('justified' since the Maasai god *Enkai* had granted all cattle to the Maasai). Modern civilisation is forcing many of these activities to become traditional rather than real-life, however the passage into manhood still remains a significant step even today.

Women look after the young children, milk the cattle, repair the huts, collect fire-wood, prepare the food and may need to travel many miles to fetch water. Warriors eventually go through the *Eunoto* ceremony leading to marriage when they can take several wives and have children (the men are allowed to have relationships with any circumcised women of their age group); they also begin to acquire cattle. Finally they become respected elders. Elders look to *Laibon* (spiritual leaders, perhaps one per clan) for advice and expect them to provide rain and good grazing. Mt Kenya's three peaks (Batian, Nelion and Lenana) are named after three legendary *Laibon*.