

On a recent trip to Kenya, Dr. Kathleen Ryan of the Penn Museum, along with Paul Mitchell, Louise Hansen, and Erika Hoff, excavated pastoral Neolithic sites in the Laikipia Plateau to identify when the enzyme for milk digestion may have developed in the span of human evolution. The expedition included frequent interactions with the Maasai, a nomadic hunter-gatherer group, whose pastoral practices date back to the late Stone Age. In this photo essay, Jennifer Chiappardi, a member of Dr. Ryan's team and Assistant Photographer at the Penn Museum, shares her experiences with Maasai schoolchildren.

The Children of Maasailand

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S PERSPECTIVE

BY JENNIFER CHIAPPARDI



TOP, Students from Elerai Primary School gather around the author. BELOW, the Maasai culture places great emphasis on cow herding.



Over the past few years, while accompanying Dr. Ryan on her trips to Kenya, I became especially interested in the daily life of the Maasai people. I wanted to learn more about the differences and similarities between Americans and the Maasai, particularly among children. During our last field season, we had the opportunity to visit two Maasai schools: the Elerai Primary School in Njukini, Rombo and the Olosho Oibor Primary School in Ngong Hills Division.

Dressed in their school uniforms, the Maasai schoolchildren smiled from behind their wooden desks as we entered their classroom. As we began our conversation, they took turns telling us about their favorite subject—often math or science. Their science teacher laughed, “Are you sure, or do you just say you love science because I am here?” The classroom, which was tightly packed with students, filled with laughter. The comfortable atmosphere in the room was supported by the positive interactions between the students and their teachers.

The children were particularly intrigued by stories of schoolchildren in the United States. They listened closely as I told them about how children in the United States play musical instruments in school and take art and photography classes. A 15-year-old boy in Grade 8 asked, “You can take your camera to school, and they will teach you how to use it?” The teacher exclaimed, “Can you imagine a school such as that?”



LEFT, The author shows her camera to a young Maasai boy. RIGHT, Children at Ngong Hills Preschool gather for class where they recite the alphabet and sing songs. Construction of this school building is not complete, with the roof still to be added. ABOVE, School children at Ngong Hills look through the window of their schoolhouse.

Young boys are responsible for tending livestock as part of their daily chores. Since cattle are so important to the Maasai people, this job is highly honored.



In 2002, Kenya's government made primary school free for all Kenyan children. Prior to this, the cost of education was prohibitive for many families. Maasai families, whose wealth is determined by the number of livestock they own, could not always afford to send their children to school. Also, attending school regularly during times of drought can be difficult for Maasai children as families may need to travel great distances in order for their livestock to graze.

Education offers a reprieve from the physical demands of daily chores. Boys as young as five years old are responsible for looking after the families' sheep and goats, and older boys are responsible for tending to cattle. In the morning, they must corral the livestock to make sure they are all healthy. The girls are tasked with collecting firewood and water and are in charge of making the morning meal, which is often bread and tea. These chores must



Children at Ngong Hills Preschool sit for their daily spelling lesson. In school, Maasai children learn English and Swahili, but their native language, Maa, is spoken at home.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, An 8th grade boy at Elerai Primary School writes at the chalkboard during a science lesson. Eighth grade students at the Ngong Hills School sit together for class and discuss the differences between Kenyan and American education systems. An older child helps a younger student receive his lunchtime meal of slow-cooked maize and beans.

be completed before school begins at 7:00 am. Students walk to school, which, for some, takes up to an hour. One student told me that it took him only five minutes to walk to school, to which the rest of class responded with laughter. Regardless of travel time, tardiness is not tolerated and, in some cases, truancy carries a harsh punishment.

The younger children attend school from 7:00 am until 1:00 or 2:00 pm. The older children, in Grades 3 through 8, attend until 5:00 pm. Some families can afford to send their children to school with lunch, but many cannot. International and domestic aid programs often provide lunches for the children, but the ebb and flow of funding changes with the seasons. As the head teacher at Elerai Primary School, Katato Saita, explained, “When they see green on the trees they will not send us food, because they believe, if it is green, we have food. That is not true. Many families have nothing to send.”

Head teacher at Ngong Hills Primary School, Joseph Ole Tipanko, showed us a large cooking pot of corn and beans for the children. This mid-day meal cooked all morning while the children were in classes. At lunchtime

the children lined up, youngest to oldest, with their bowls. After their bowls were filled, the younger students walked home with their lunches.

The primary subjects taught are math, social studies, science, Swahili, English, and religious studies. The children often go outside for games like football, which the students at Elerai Primary School play with a wound string ball. They asked me if I could bring balls for them when I visit next. After school, they must go home and complete their chores. The boys go to the field to collect the livestock and make sure the animals are secure for the night. The girls gather the evening firewood and help make the evening meal.

Like all children, Maasai children are filled with curiosity and aspirations. The classroom included children who wanted to be teachers, doctors, nurses, and politicians. One young boy amused the whole class when he declared his dream of becoming a tourist! ●

JENNIFER CHIAPPARDI is Assistant Photographer at the Penn Museum.