

NOTES ON THE MASAI

HAVING recently had occasion to travel some 150 miles through a portion of the Masai Reserve in British East Africa, it occurred to me that a few first-hand impressions of these interesting people might be of interest to readers of this *Journal*. The country through which our party travelled, *i.e.*, between a point 60 miles south of Nairobi and the Anglo-German frontier, is uninhabited except for a few groups of the nomadic Masai tribe. They were occasionally met flitting from one part of the country to another searching for better pasturage for their cattle. In such a case there would be only a dozen or so of the Masai, driving anything from 200 to 500 head of cattle before them. The men wear a soft dark-coloured cloth suspended from the shoulders and hanging front and back. They are invariably armed with either knife, bow and arrow, or Masai spear. Sometimes all three are carried.

All the weapons are "home-made." The string of the bow is of the sinews of antelope; the arrows are of the vicious barbed type found also in Northern Nigeria, and are frequently poisoned. The Masai spear, as is well known, is a most formidable weapon some 7 feet long, and consisting of solid steel blade and shaft connected by a short wooden centre-piece. Travellers have seen one of these spears driven through a lion from chest to haunches. The spear is, as a rule, however, used for stabbing and only thrown in cases of emergency. The Masai men will do no work, nor even carry a load. A Masai guide can scarcely be induced to carry a traveller's umbrella. The men are fine, clean-limbed and of haughty mien. They live entirely upon meat and blood obtained from the animals slain by them and upon milk

from their cattle. They own no land and they do not till the soil, even near their own villages. The women are not more industrious, but they carry heavy loads when the tribe is migrating. They adorn themselves in a manner which must make work of any kind almost impossible. The legs between the knees and ankles and the arms from shoulder to wrist are bound with very heavy coils of thick brass, copper or steel wire, while their ears are deformed by enormous coils of similar wire suspended through the lobes, which are dragged out to a length of six or nine inches. Five or six pounds' weight of brass wire is by no means an unusual load for each ear.

The Masai villages form a remarkable contrast with the character and temper of the people, and in fact are the lowest form of dwelling I have ever seen. The village consists of a square of huts some 5 feet high and formed of wattle daubed thickly over with cow-dung. The entrances to the huts are very narrow, apparently for the purpose of puzzling the lions. All the entrances are towards the centre yard, which is floored all over with thick cow-dung. At the back of the huts which form the outside of the village is piled a thick screen or "boma" of thorns for protection against lions, as all camps or dwellings must be protected in this district.

The Masai wage constant war with the lions, who do immense damage to the herds of cattle. The villages are from 40 to 100 yards square, and appear to belong to no particular members of the tribe, who wander from one to another. I am told that the villages are sometimes circular, but they are not so in the district we visited.

The Masai cattle are the wealth of the people, who will not sell a single beast or sheep for any money. Consequently the herds become very large and difficult to guard from the depredations of wild beasts. The herds are driven at night into the centre of the village and the entrance is closed.

The Masai, in spite of their want of firearms, have little or no fear of lions, and when they are in numbers they often "round-up" a lion and kill him, with little damage to them-

selves, by sheer worrying. It is upon such an occasion that the feat is performed of catching the lion by its tail. One of the warriors surrounding a lion will dash in and seize the lion by the tail, and then drive his spear behind the shoulders into the beast's heart. The performance of this seemingly incredible feat is vouched for by reliable eye-witnesses, and we were offered the opportunity of seeing it for ourselves, but time did not permit of the arrangements being made.

The Masai men are not permitted to marry until they become full-blown "warriors," which cannot be until they are 30 years or so of age. They may then acquire as many wives as they can afford, the method of purchase by barter for cattle being similar to that of most African tribes.

The Masai in East Africa are now perfectly quiet and well behaved, but they will not, so far, take to cultivation or industry of any kind. The value they place upon human life is very small, and private quarrels over cattle appear frequently to end in the slaughter of one of the contestants.

I asked one Masai why he did not cultivate a piece of land and grow food for his own requirements, and he replied that "God had not told him to do that, but only to kill beasts and to eat them."

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