



# ORETETI

Plants in the daily life of the Maasai

Kenny Matampash & Lucie Hubert





Today the most important thing  
is not to transform the world  
but to preserve it.

- Günther Anders

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**Kenny Matampash & Lucie Hubert**

Foreword by Nigel Crawhall

*UNESCO*



# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Preamble</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Team and methodology</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Biographies</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Part One: Maasai culture and plants</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Different regions, different flora</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Plant naming</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Plant uses</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Food</b>	<b>50</b>
Eating habits and food laws	51
Edible plants	54
Berries and fruits	54
Roots and tubers	54
Stems	55
Galls, seeds and pods	55
Gums and chewing gums	55
Inner bark	56

Alcoholic brews	57
Herbal drinks and soups	59
<b>Medicinal</b>	<b>64</b>
Main diseases in Maasailand	68
Parasitic diseases	68
Digestive system disorders or stomach upsets	68
Urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted diseases	69
Respiratory system diseases	70
Circulatory system disorders	70
Eye diseases	71
Fevers and malaria	71
Aches and pains	71
Wounds and skin problems	72
Internal wounds	72
Toothache and mouth hygiene	73
Broken bones	74
Women, pregnancy and infant care	75
Menstruations	75
Pregnancy	76
Delivery	77
Newborns and young children	78
Psychic diseases	80
Spiritual diseases	82
Western medicine versus traditional medicine	87
Threats and call for awareness and conservation of medicinal plants	89
<b>Veterinary, pasture and livestock</b>	<b>96</b>
Cattle	96
Bees	102



<b>Arts, crafts, ornaments</b>	<b>104</b>
Bows and arrows, swords sheaths and spear handles	105
Clubs, sticks and firesticks	106
Fire sticks and firewood	110
Cleaning sticks for gourds	114
Stools	116
Snuff and tobacco containers	117
Mats and mattresses	118
Cosmetics and ornaments	119
Fragrance and perfume	120
Dye	120
Tattoos	120
Ornaments	121
Toothbrushes	123
Toys and games	123
<b>Construction</b>	<b>126</b>
Huts/houses	126
Fences	132
<b>Ceremonial and initiations</b>	<b>136</b>
Spiritual link to the environment	136
Initiations and other ceremonies	139
Birth and naming	141
Enkipaata (pre-circumcision ceremony)	142
Emuratta (circumcision ceremony)	144
Murrano stage	147
Marriage	151

Ilamala	153
<b>Poisonous plants</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>Importance of conserving and protecting Maasai flora</b>	<b>158</b>
The threat to the flora	158
The threat to the transmission of oral knowledge	165
Threats to animal life and people	167
Possible solutions	169
<b>Part two: Catalogue of common plants in Maasailand</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>352</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>358</b>
<b>Plants classified by Maa/botanical/family names and their uses</b>	<b>358</b>
<b>Plants Maasailand classified by use</b>	<b>378</b>
Edible plants	378
Medicinal	380
Veterinary, pasture and livestock	382
Arts, crafts, ornaments	383
Construction	385
Ceremonial and initiations	386
Poisonous plants	386
<b>Plants classified by botanical name</b>	<b>388</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>394</b>
<b>Sites</b>	<b>397</b>

# Foreword

It is a pleasure to provide a foreword for this valuable project that helps document the mostly oral knowledge of Maasai pastoralists. In the context of rapidly declining biodiversity and the instability of the atmosphere and ecosystems due to climate change, now more than ever the systems of indigenous knowledge and their intergenerational transmission are matters of survival.

This publication is being produced as the United Nations celebrates the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019. Indeed, as documented by researchers globally, and as evidenced in the joint programme of work on the linkages between biological and cultural diversity of the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), this intimate and coproductive relationship between biodiversity and human knowledge systems is at the foundation of our history, our heritage and our common future.

Of the nearly 7000 human languages on Earth, only a fraction rely on written language. Most of the languages of our planet are highly localized and evolved within specific ecological niches that both define the content of the language and the relationships between the peoples of the territory. Maa, a member of the Eastern Nilotic language family, within the larger Nilo-Saharan language family, is both iconic and rich in its inventories and taxonomies of plants, animals, ecosystems and in recent work at UNESCO, we have also been learning about cloud, wind and atmospheric taxonomies.

Far from being a quaint vestige of some previous era, the indigenous and local knowledge of biodiversity, the ability to observe and monitor changes, to assist in conservation of plants



and other species, the understanding of relationships of various drivers and conditions required for sustainability, are all key to our common future.

It is our hope that this publication is an asset to a new generation of Maa-language speakers, to everyone in East Africa, and more globally an inspiration to others to help sustain, regenerate and reinvigorate traditional, indigenous and local knowledge systems across the planet.

**Dr Nigel Crawhall**

*Chief of Section, Small Islands and Indigenous Knowledge*

*Natural Sciences Sector*

*UNESCO*

[...]

## Herbal drinks and soups

Today every visitor is welcomed in a Maasai home with a hot cup of black tea mixed with milk and sugar. Black tea drinking is a custom that was introduced by the British who introduced tea plantations in Kenya in the nineteenth century. Maasai people only drank hot herbal teas prior to that time, and although still popular, they are drunk less frequently.

Mixtures of herbs and meat soups have remained part of the Maasai diet. To make a herbal soup, barks and roots are gathered in the bush, cleaned, put in cold water and boiled for some time on the fire. Then they are discarded. For the meat and bone soup, selected pieces from a freshly slaughtered goat, sheep or a cow are boiled in water. This soup takes a long time to cook in order to get the marrow off the bone, which adds a lot of nutrition to the soup. When the soup is ready, the meat and bones are removed and a bit of animal fat is added to the soup, especially when the meat is only steak. This meat bouillon is then mixed thoroughly with a stick called *olkipere*, until the animal fat is completely emulsified. The herbal decoction and the meat soup are then mixed together and again thoroughly stirred with the *olkipere* for ten or fifteen minutes. The mixture is left to cool and later served in cups or small pots. This is called *imotori*.

The meat and bone nutrients are complemented by the flavours and medicinal properties of the plants. Some of the plant are strong and bitter, whilst others are soft and sweet. At



Herbs and meat soup



*Olkipere*





Barks and roots for herbal soups

*olpul*,<sup>21</sup> *ilmurran* or Maasai warriors prefer strong ones for their soups, while elders, women and children use the milder ones at home. These mixtures of meat and bone soup and plants decoctions<sup>22</sup> are not only very nutritious but have high medicinal properties.

Even though the Maasai eat a lot of meat and animal fat they tend to stay slim. Studies have shown that they do not suffer from cholesterol or heart problems.<sup>23</sup> Of course, as pastoralists, they walk extensively, which contributes to a strong heart and overall health. But the bark and roots decoctions that are drunk in combination with meat bone soups particularly strengthen overall health and well-being. They have a preventive as well as a curative effect. In fact these bitter plant mixtures fortify the whole digestive system. They help liver function, blood cleansing (especially the elimination of cholesterol) and they detoxify. They also cleanse and activate the overall metabolism, and especially the urinal system.

These mixtures have other health benefits: depending on the plants used, they can prevent hunger and thirst, as well as diarrhea or constipation due to increased meat ingestion. They can stimulate the appetite: after drinking these mixtures, one can eat more meat. At bush camps, *ilmurran* only eat meat, namely the meat of the cows they have brought with them. They need a reservoir of herbal decoctions in order to continue eating meat throughout the day. They dissect and clean the stomach of one of the slaughtered cows and then use it as a container to conserve the roots and barks concoctions called *olouni*. The *olouni* is constantly refilled to be ready for use.

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<sup>21</sup> Meat or bush camp (see further in the book).

<sup>22</sup> A decoction is a liquid made by boiling a plant in water.

<sup>23</sup> For example a study lead in 2012 on Maasai health, by Dirk Lund Christensen, an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen's Department of International Health, Immunology and Microbiology. <http://sciencenordic.com/maasai-keep-healthy-despite-high-fat-diet>

Herbal soups provide a high level of nutrients and help deter anemia in the Masaai population. They also have a beneficial effect on the neurovegetative system.<sup>24</sup> According to the herbs used, they can serve as a stimulant, eliminating fatigue and reducing fear by directly affecting blood hormonal levels. *Ilmurr*an drink special bitter herbal soups to develop courage and virility. These soups increase blood flow, boost stamina and induce fearlessness. After drinking these concoctions, they can walk long distances and feel more confident when confronting danger. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Maasai were known to be an indomitable people, and as one of the most feared East African communities. These herbal soups helped sustain and give them courage in their many battles against invasion.



Masigot mixing meat soup with olkipere

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<sup>24</sup> The neurovegetative system or autonomic nervous system of the human being is a control system that acts largely unconsciously and regulates bodily functions such as the heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, urination, and sexual arousal.

[...]

## Cosmetics and ornaments

Maasai are often described as beautiful because of their tall bodies, their dignified attitude and gait, and their magnificently colourful jewellery and dress. For both Maasai women and men, beauty is a very important aspect of their culture. The beauty of their crafts is the external expression of their sacred connection to EnKai, which links them to nature and the cosmos. This sacred connection is gained through an initiation process that enables them to create, preserve and nourish their own 'centre' and give them dignity.



Young Maasai ©Xavier Péron

“Our red robes and our jewellery merely serve to crown in some way what already exists in our deepest being. Our beauty is the reflection of our soul... The vibrant colour of our clothes is a good way of symbolizing our passion for life. Our jewellery is considered in terms of beauty; however its actual beauty depends on the person, man or woman, who is wearing them. God did not create us with jewellery and flowers on our heads! Similarly, the beauty of the jacaranda does not emanate from its big mauve flowers but from the tree itself.<sup>42</sup>

The Maasai view cosmetics as a beautiful adornment to their traditional attire. Some plants provide cosmetics, which can be applied in different ways: as scent-perfume, dye, or for tattoos. Cosmetics have been commonplace in Maasai practice and tradition for centuries.

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<sup>42</sup> Kenny Matampash in 'Return to Life', ed. Return to Life, 2009, page 34.

# Ceremonial and initiations

## Spiritual link to the environment

Maasai believe in one God, named EnkAi, who is omnipresent on earth and in the universe. EnkAi is a Supreme Being but he is not an anthropomorphic God or a celestial Father placed above mankind. He is a daily presence close to his people and which is deeply felt. He gives life to all beings, men, animals, plants and the whole of nature. EnkAi is the source and lifeline to their existence. The connection to EnkAi feeds all beings like the umbilical cord feeds a baby inside the womb. This link between mother and child is the philosophy, which fundamentally connects the Maasai people to the divine. Nourished by the same source, all are connected and interdependent.

*Kenny Matampash: The attachment we have to plants and environment is a spiritual attachment: we are all living beings and we communicate as brothers and sisters. Plants are living, they have feelings, they have emotions. When you go to the forest, the quietness of the forest itself is communication to the soul. It soothes the tensions in you, it gives you sanity. The sounds of the branches and leaves, of the wind, water and birds are part of the communication. The forest is like a mother, it feeds you. There is a deep relation between humans and their environment... For us, as 'living' persons, to get connected (the soul inside us) to the 'living' plants can only happen through loving them. It is an attachment in between the plant and us. It is not abstract. Some people might say: 'Ah no! What do you mean? Trees cannot have feelings!' Because they themselves are dry, they do not have feelings. It is you and the tree, and the love in*





Oreteti tree



*between the two that creates the living in you and the living in him. Sometimes I go to the forest and I feel attracted by a tree. I touch it and I feel there is something and I see the beauty of the flowers. That attraction is already a communication. It is not that the tree is saying: 'Hello Kenny!' or I would say: 'Hallo, Mr. Oreteti'. No, that attraction that I feel is already the talk. And when you look at trees dancing in the wind, each one of them has a different style and my appreciation of that movement is already communication.<sup>47</sup>*

*Salaon: In everything the Maasai do with nature, they firstly seek the blessing from EnkAi. There are special plants or trees with a very important significance, like Oseki, Oloiren or Oreteti. These are the sacred trees of Maasai. Sacrifices of animals, spotless bulls or sheep are made under these trees, as offerings to EnkAi, with gratitude to nature. Before you pass under them, you talk with them and offer a present, like a stone. You then go on your way, asking blessing from EnkAi for a safe journey, happiness, good life. As for Oreteti, you are not supposed to cut this tree. Oloiren and Oseki have a strong energy that you can feel. You may cut them, but not Oreteti; it is the most special tree. Oreteti bleeds when you cut it.*

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<sup>47</sup> Interview by Lucie Hubert, Loita Hills, May 2017.