

Motonyik: the bird head-dress

by Daniel Stiles



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A newly circumcised Maasai youth wearing the motonyik and dark shuka.

What do birds mean to the pastoral Maasai and Samburu? Certainly not food, as birds are a proscribed food. They are also not kept as pets or for their music-making qualities, and these people have little interest in bird watching or ornithology. Fashion is the answer, but of a special, ritualistic type. I have estimated that 2,400,000 of our feathered friends in Kenya will give up their lives to Maaspeaking youths between 1980 and the end of this century, assuming that traditions remain intact. What is the reason behind this avian slaughter?

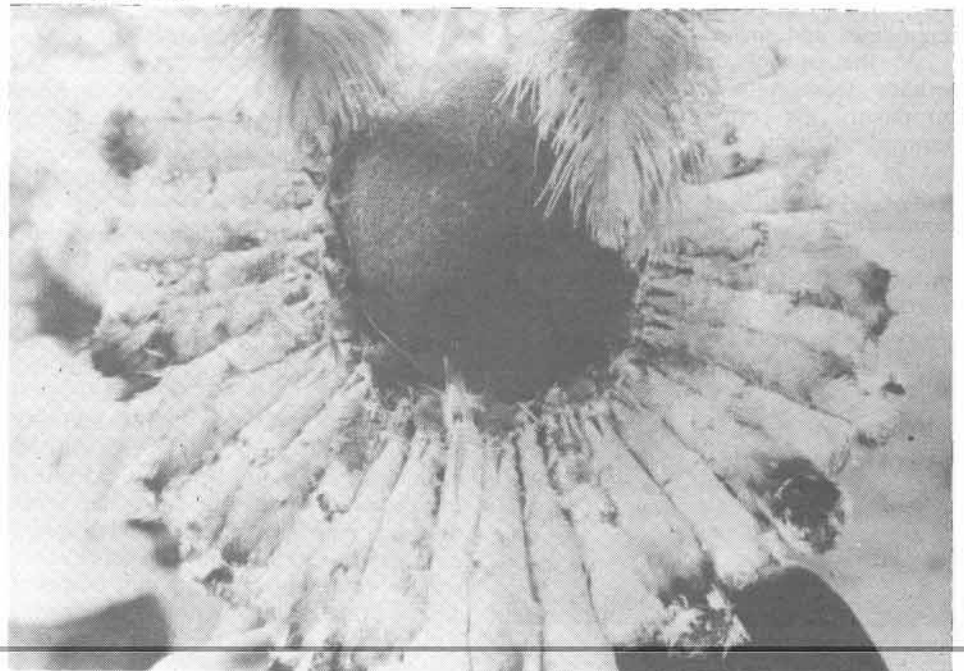
Most people who have made a few safaris through Maasailand in Kenya or Tanzania have probably come across the boys who are dressed in dark gray shukas and who sport very curious 'crowns'. These colourful crowns are made of birds and the whole attire is related to the circumcision ceremony. That is the reason for killing the birds. The head-dresses are called *motonyik* in the Maa language and are made by both Maasai and Samburu youths shortly after they have been circumcised. The *motonyik* contain up to 40 birds.

Maasai circumcision (*emorata*) periods are held in seven-year cycles. The *laibon*, a kind of spiritual leader, an-

nounces when a period will begin. Maasai and Samburu clans are divided into those of the right or left hand sides. One seven-year period will be devoted to the boys of the right hand clans and the next to the left hand clans. Circumcisions will usually take place for about four years of the period, then the elders close it when they feel enough youths have been circumcised, and then there is a three-year period when no circumcisions are held. There is some variation in the length and spacing of the periods and cycles, but the ones that I've just mentioned are the ideal. All of the boys who have been circumcised during each seven-year period form an age set (*ol porror*). The right hand goes first, then seven years later the left hand follows. The two age sets are associated into an age group called *ol aji*.

After a circumcision period is opened the elders get together to decide a propitious day for the first group to go through. When the boys to be circumcised find out—they are usually older boys or even young men who missed the previous period—they go out into the countryside to collect honey, honeycomb (for the beeswax) and ostrich feathers. The honey is used to brew

A close up of the motonyik, this one containing nearly 30 birds and the two ostrich feathers.



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What are the curious 'crowns' you sometimes see being worn by Maasai and Samburu boys?

...Motonyik

honey beer (*maratina*), the beeswax for blunting the tips of specially made arrows and the ostrich feathers will go into adorning the future bird head-dresses. Several more groups of boys will be circumcised over the next four years, with ages ranging from 12 to 18.

Following the circumcision (this ceremony has been written about in many places so I won't go into it in detail), each boy goes to his mother's house to recuperate. During this time the boys work on making small bows and the wax-tipped arrows, helped by older friends who have already been circumcised. After a few days, when the boy can walk, he comes out of the house dressed in a dark grey *shuka* made of charcoal-blackened and oiled skin or dark cloth which has been rubbed with oil. He also wears women's ornaments and puts white paint on his face.

He is now called *ol sipoloi* and he spends his time trying to shoot *ndito* (young girls) with the blunted arrows, for which he can claim a piece of jewellery if successful, usually a ring. He also goes around killing birds. If the boy passed the circumcision ceremony without flinching he can kill the colourful ones, such as superb starlings, kingfishers, orioles and weavers. If he flinched, however, he is only allowed to put dull-coloured birds into the wooden frame of his *motonyik*.

Birds are killed with the little bows and hard-tipped arrows, with throwing clubs and with stones. They cannot be trapped. The boys wander through Maasailand for two or three months while they heal, all the while adding birds to the crown. The dead birds are cleaned out and stuffed with ashes and grass, the work often being done by previously circumcised boys as a sign of comradeship with the newly circumcised. The head-dresses are not worn all the time, but are important during ceremonies and special occasions.

At the end of the healing period, perhaps three months after the circumcision, the crowns are at last disposed of, being put under the main bed in the boy's house. His head is shaved for the first time since the circumcision and he discards his black clothes and women's ornaments to take on the red garments and ornaments of a warrior. He is now called *ol barnot* (the



Ashes are put into a gourd until needed for stuffing the birds.



Daniel Stiles first came to Kenya in 1971 as an archaeological assistant at the digs at Koobi Fora, East Lake Turkana. He has conducted archaeological and anthropological research in many countries in Africa, Europe and Asia and has a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley and a post-graduate degree in geology from the University of Aix-Marseilles, France. For over seven years now he has left the stones and bones of the ancient past to concentrate on past and present human-environment relationships, first as a lecturer at the University of Nairobi (1977-81) and more recently working for the United Nations. He has conducted extensive human ecological and ethnographic research with Marsabit District pastoralists, with a bit of archaeology and geology thrown in, and also studied Kenya coast hunter-gatherers (mainly the Aweer) for three years.

shaved one) until his hair grows long enough to be braided, when he becomes one of the *il moran*, a true warrior.

For fun, I have tried to estimate how many birds are killed to go into the bird head-dresses. Because of the long circumcision periods and alternating cycles I have made the estimate based over a long period of time, from 1980 to 1999.

I took the 1979 Kenya census figures for all males in the 0-4, 5-9, 10-14 and 15-19 age classes and calculated the proportion they made up of the entire male population, then applied those proportions to the total Maasai and Samburu male populations (age breakdown by tribe is not given in the census). There will naturally be some error, but not significant. I came up with the following totals for the combined Maasai-Samburu male population in 1979:

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|-------|--------|
| 0-4 | 29,360 |
| 5-9 | 25,749 |
| 10-14 | 21,667 |
| 15-19 | 17,585 |
| | <hr/> |
| | 94,361 |

Between 1980 and 1999 most of these boys, in addition to some not yet born in 1979, will have gone through the *emorata*. To allow for mortality and other factors, let us assume that only 80,000 undergo the ceremony and make the *motonyik*. Let us also assume that each of these boys will kill on average 30 birds. The total is 2,400,000, or an average of 120,000 birds a year for the 20 years.

Since the birds that the Maasai and Samburu kill have wide distributions even these large numbers pose no threat to species survival, but I wonder what the local ecological impact is. Do insect numbers rise significantly, do more seeds end up germinating, or are bird numbers so great that essentially nothing happens? There's a nice Ph.D. topic for someone.

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