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ANTHROPOLOGY

# "RESISTANCE" TO ECONOMIC CHANGE: THE MASAI

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Under what conditions is economic growth likely to take place? This is a key question for all concerned with the future of the so-called "underdeveloped" countries. One way to tackle this problem is to examine conspicuous cases of *lack* of change and ask why change is "resisted." The African Masai of Kenya and Tanganyika were selected as a people who appear highly resistant to change. In this paper, the writer seeks to determine some of the reasons for this.[1]

*The Masai:* The 107,000 Masai (Fosbrooke 1948:1) are foot nomads who herd cattle in the southern Kenya and northern Tanganyika Rift Valley and on the adjacent interior plateau. They speak an Eastern Sudanic language and occupy some 39,000 square miles (Kenya 1947:39; Gower 1948) of land which varies from semi-desert to low thorn forest and low-grass-acacia savannah (Goodall & Darby 1944: 67).

The economy of the Masai is based on some 1.3 million cattle (Kenya 1947: 37; Page-Jones 1948: 51) and on large, but undetermined, numbers of sheep, goats and donkeys. After the "heavy" rains around April and May, the various sections of the Masai move on foot with their stock to the more arid portions of their roughly defined territories. Each local group, composed of 3 to 5 often polygynous families (Fosbrooke 1948: 43), builds near water a thorn enclosure or *manyatta* and inside huts for each wife. The young boys and the women herd and milk the stock until the pasturage within a radius of some 10 miles of the water is exhausted. Then the group moves on. As the temporary water holes dry up, the people converge on the :"permanent" water holes. Here they stay until the "light" November rains increase the water supply and permit somewhat greater dispersal. Though average annual rainfall ranges from 20 inches in the lower parts of the Rift Valley to 40 inches on the higher mountain slopes, the rains vary so much from year to year and place to place that only once in every seven or eight years are all the Masai able to find enough water for their stock without having to encroach on each other's water sites or risk entering tsetse fly areas (Page-Jones 1948: 51-2).

[1] The reader may be interested in comparing this analysis with H. K. Schneider's (1959) statement on "Pakot Resistance to Change," a paper not seen by the author until after the present paper was completed.

The Masai are divided into territorial units, called sections, which "own" water sites and grazing lands (Fosbrooke 1948:7). Young Masai males of a section or group of adjacent sections are initiated, after circumcision, into age-grades to which they belong for life. After initiation, the young men or *moran* (warriors) live apart in their own *manyattas* together with their mothers who provide food and with uninitiated girls who serve as sexual partners. They are relieved of their usual herding and other duties, and in the past particularly, went on raids for cattle. After some 10 years, or generally less nowadays, a man and his age-mates are made elders. Becoming an elder means marrying, getting a proper share of one's father's cattle, setting up one's own *manyatta*, and trying to become a "successful" Masai by acquiring many children, wives and cattle.

If there is drought, sickness (of men or cattle), infertility among women, death, or bad luck; or if a ceremony or cattle raid is contemplated; the *laibon*, the magico-religious leader of an area (who always comes from a particular patrilineal clan) is summoned. He determines the omens, provides the necessary charms, or supervises the required ceremonies in return for a fee. Other local problems are handled by the "elected" leaders of the senior age-grades assisted by general meetings of elders. Masai leaders have little authority; there is no "chief" of all the Masai. The nearest approach occurred early in the twentieth century when one *laibon* achieved such renown that his advise and consent was asked on important occasions by practically all the Masai (Fosbrooke 1948:13-23, 36-38). At the present time the colonial administrations operate through supervised District Native Councils and Native Tribunals.

This brief sketch partly demonstrates why the Masai were chosen for study. The present way of life is, with relatively few exceptions, the same as that described in the late nineteenth century by early European explorers. The question is: why have the Masai changed so little compared to most other African peoples?

*Early European Contact*: Before the English came, the Masai were apparently expanding their territory at the expense of adjacent agricultural tribes. Pottery-containing debris of agricultural villages has been found within Masai territory and an uninhabited "buffer zone" separated the Masai from their overawed neighbors. In about 1890, shortly after the Imperial British East African Company began operations, the Masai were decimated by a triple scourge: famine, smallpox and rinderpest. Fosbrooke (1948:10) tells what happened: "Whole families, together with their stock, were wiped out. In some cases the survivors lived by hunting or agriculture; in others they were adopted into, or carried off into captivity by, neighboring tribes. The tribe was in fact scattered from Lake Victoria to the Coast. But such was the urge to the nomadic pastoral life that, in the course of the next few years, most of the wanderers returned, and from their earnings or stealings commenced to build up new herds."

These events take on more significance when it is realized that despite considerable efforts to teach the Kenya Masai agriculture and

despite efforts to recruit Masai labor for farms, few, if any, Masai now practice agriculture, and the very few who work for white settlers apparently work exclusively as cattle herders. Moreover, though the Masai live in an area noted for its game, they do not now hunt for food and they will not eat wild game. Masai feel that hunting, agriculture, and as a matter of fact, heavy manual labor of any kind, are low-status occupations. These attitudes form a basic part of their picture of their place in the world. This is shown in the following selection from an "origin myth" recorded by Hollis (1905: 269):

"The Masai then went away, and attended to the animals which had been given him.

"The Dorobo lost the cattle, and has had to shoot game for his food ever since.

"Nowadays, if cattle are seen in the possession of Bantu tribes, it is presumed that they have been stolen or found, and the Masai say: These are our animals, let us go and take them, for God in olden days gave us all the cattle upon the earth."

Thus, in this early period, despite a strong cultural ideology supported in a whole way of life, at least temporary changes in economic activity took place under conditions of extreme duress. This event provides an analogue to Wilbert Moore's general conclusion concerning another economic change, the change to industrial employment. Moore (1951: 307) states ". . . it is among the landless, the hungry, the politically powerless, and the socially disaffected that the first industrial recruits are most likely to be found."

Why, then, did the Masai not continue hunting or agriculture? It is possible that some did, but there is no evidence to that effect. The easiest explanation of the return to cattle-herding is that the Masai highly value their traditional way of life. This is undoubtedly true, but there may be an additional factor which is not usually mentioned. This is the fact that cattle-raising probably provides greater output for less effort than African agriculture or hunting. One index of this is the relatively small fraction of Masai who actually do the work. Fosbrooke (1948: 32) reports that, of the initiated males of a sizable sample of Tanganyika Masai, 57% were *moran* who are relieved of practically all economic duties except, formerly, cattle raiding. Moreover, the elders spend an appreciable amount of their time on ceremonies and other social and political activities. By traditional definition and apparently in actual practice, stock-herding, milking, and household tasks are done by the women and children. Finally, Orr and Gilks' nutritional study (1931: 30-32) shows that the Masai diet is superior to that of the neighboring agricultural Kikuyu. Given land and cattle, which the Masai have obtained in greater abundance than most other East African groups, the ease as well as the efficiency of labor appears to be higher than in agriculture or hunting.

*Later European Contact: Administrative Actions and Their Effects*: The repercussions of the 1890's and of the later removal of the northern Kenya Masai to the southern reserve had apparently died down by around 1920. However, the Masai were not able to go back com-

pletely to their former way of life because of the controlling presence of the British administration. Many of the actions taken by the administrators were designed to introduce changes into Masai life. A study of some of these actions and their effects sheds light on Masai economic and cultural change.

To look first at educational activities, one of the main activities of the Kenya administration has been to develop a fairly elaborate school system including "outschools" scattered throughout Masailand and accessible to practically every section of the tribe. Tanganyika schools have developed much more slowly, and it is only since World War II that outschools were started. Appreciable effort has been devoted to promoting agriculture and improving animal husbandry, but with relatively little effect. The little agriculture that has begun (only 820 acres were plowed in 1930) is apparently in the hands of Kikuyu women who have married Masai men (James 1939: 70). The slight effect of education on animal husbandry practices and the lack of development of a commercial dairying industry are usually attributed to Masai "conservatism" and their proud satisfaction with their lot. James (1939: 64) adds the suggestion that administrative efforts have not been too vigorous, possibly because of the antagonism of Kenya white settlers to Masai competition. It seems that certain additional factors are involved.

So far as can be judged, the husbandry practices being taught are those followed by the English settlers. They are clearly based on breeding up native stock to larger size and greater milk production. This in turn requires richer grazing and less disease than is found in Masailand, because large animals cannot survive on sparse pasturage, particularly during the dry season. The English in Kenya obtain better animal nutrition partly by being in areas of better rainfall and water supply; partly by raising forage crops for feeding during the dry season; and partly by fencing their land (which means controlling wild animals which destroy fences) so that the amount of grazing can be controlled and the animal manure spread evenly to fertilize the pasture. Few, if any, of these practices appear feasible for Masai individuals. Rainfall is light and irrigation does not seem feasible on any appreciable scale, so the possibilities of growing forage crops are limited. A large fraction of Masailand is in game reserves where wild animals cannot be killed, and game is so prevalent in the rest that a large-scale effort would be needed to reduce it to a level where fencing was feasible. The presence of game also makes necessary the Masai practice of kraaling their cattle at night as a protection against wild animals, even though this leads to inefficient fertilizer distribution. The relative scarcity of sites with sufficient water to supply cattle the year round and the fact that land use is communally controlled also make fencing difficult. Furthermore, an individual who tries to raise larger animals has little chance of success because he has no control over the number of animals grazed by his neighbors, and thus no control over the level of nutrition available to his own animals. Page-Jones (1948: 52) sums up the situation in this way: "Intensive mixed farming seems thus impossible for the majority of Masai:

one might almost go so far and say that these people have in fact achieved a balance with nature in which they put their land to as good a use as present conditions allow."

This reasoning, however, does not apply to the reluctance of the Masai to have their animals vaccinated against rinderpest, bovine pleuro-pneumonia and East Coast fever. This resistance, which appears to be diminishing, may in part be wait-and-see caution; in part a result of the distrust the Masai feel toward their administrators (reported in both Kenya and Tanganyika); and in part the effect of other factors not reported. It is not clear whether similar behavior is found in connection with modern human medical care, but the Masai apparently make considerable use of the medical facilities provided for them.

One change definitely related to education is the employment of Kenya Masai in both the Kenya and Tanganyika Masai native administrations. Furthermore, in 1943, Tanganyika Masai graduates of a school established a few years earlier in that area began to be used in the Tanganyika administration. This occurred in spite of the fact that Tanganyika Masai parents have not been sufficiently interested in education to fill the eighty places available in the school (Tanganyika 1943: 47; 1944: 62). In the absence of data about the background of these educated people and about their attitudes towards the choices available to them, it is not possible to determine the significance of this occupational change. It is probably important that entering government employment would be one of the few occupations open to the Masai where the economic rewards and social status would equal or exceed those available by following traditional ways. However, this would not be a complete explanation. We do have a report of a conversation with one of the very few Masai who have gone to college which provides a few glimmerings of light. Tombo, the Masai youth involved, was attending Makerere College in Uganda at the time, and is a painter of vivid pictures of Masai and their cattle. Elspeth Huxley (1948: 270) gives the following report of their conversation:

"I do not wish to lose touch with my people," Tombo said. "In the holidays I go back to the life of the Masai. It is a good life. I go out to herd cattle with the others. No Masai, you know, can give up his love of cattle. I know them all and I love them all and when I return they recognize me, but at first they do not like my smell. As time goes on they get used to me. . . . And the food? Masai food is more wholesome. Here, I get tired of bananas. But Christians are not allowed to drink blood."

"And the young men who have not been to school — do they distrust you?"

"They do not understand why I should want to leave to seek education. But I know that education must come. If we Masai do not realize this, others will become top-dogs over us. For myself, I wish to go back to teach at the Government school at Narok, and help to educate our children. I do not want to live away from my people."

Since these statements were not recorded *verbatim*, they should be

used with caution, but two points seem to emerge. Education and government jobs, for a few Masai at least, apparently have acquired a high status meaning as tools for maintaining the prestige and power of the Masai relative to other groups. Secondly, becoming a Christian may be a step to becoming oriented towards Western values. There is very little information on missionary activity except for Fosbrooke's statement (1948:22) that there are a few Masai Christians who are "completely skeptical" about Masai magico-religious beliefs and practices. How missionaries have been able to bring about such changes is an important subject needing further investigation.

Though the shifts to government jobs have apparently been few, their implications may be great since it has generally been such educated government employees who have acquired new values and aspirations and spearheaded African political movements. Whether political ideas are beginning to develop among the Masai is not clear. There is only the negative evidence that political activities are not reported. Even though the Kenya Masai live adjacent to the Kikuyu, they did not participate in the Mau Mau uprising.

Another significant effect of British administration has been the prohibition of cattle raiding. This prohibition has not been completely effective (Masai administrative reports mention a number of raids each year), but raiding has definitely diminished and it is usually punished when it occurs. This has had two direct effects: the *moran* have been left relatively unoccupied, and the *laibon*, who depended to a great extent on their share of raided cattle, have had to expand their sale of charms and ritual instructions to maintain their position Fosbrooke (1948:20, 33). The altered position of the *Moran* led some of the Kenya elders in 1946 to try to abolish the *moran* system entirely, but the youth resisted and a compromise was worked out in 1947 whereby the *moran* period was reduced to three years (Kenya 1947: 8). This action of the elders is difficult to understand in view of Fosbrooke's statement (1948: 33) that elders do not want the *moran* abolished because then they would have to provide cattle and wives for their sons earlier than usual. James (1939: 67) reports that the lack of activity for the *moran* has given rise to ennui and a loss of interest in life among them. Though his evidence seems quite meagre, some such change may be beginning. About all one can conclude on the available evidence is that the control of cattle raiding has introduced an instability into the Masai social system, but that the nature of the instability is not yet understood. Aside from earlier marriages and therefore somewhat increased economic activity on the part of the young men, no significant direct economic effects seem to have resulted from the prohibition. A possibility that should be investigated is that the absence of a source of non-inherited cattle from raiding may be leading to an increased development of hereditary wealth. However, this may be offset by the random and often large losses which occur during droughts.

European contact has also introduced money into the life of the Masai. Before that, transactions were apparently on a barter basis. The Masai exchanged cattle for grain and possibly beer from agri-

cultural tribes; for iron goods from the Masai "caste" of ironsmiths and from the Kikuyu; and for animal skins and cattle slaughtering services from the Dorobo hunters occupying Masailand. Some of these exchanges undoubtedly continue, but new factors have been added.

In the first place, Masai must pay their hut and poll taxes in cash. Masai tax rates are the highest in the area because of their greater wealth (£1 in Kenya, 15 shs. in Tanganyika in the 1940's). In many African areas, such cash taxes have led Africans to seek wage work, but the Masai have been able to pay them by selling cattle.

In the second place, the administrations have tried to centralize cattle transactions in controlled markets where cash is used in order to control the spread of disease. In addition, strenuous administrative efforts have been made to increase cattle sales. Meat was needed to relieve shortages in other native areas and, during World War II, to meet military needs. Moreover, reduction of the number and improvement of the quality of cattle grazed has been a major administrative objective in order to reduce overgrazing and the threat of soil erosion. During World War II when quotas were used (and met with some resistance), sales were increased to an average of some 44,500 head of cattle per year, but they dropped immediately afterwards (Kenya 1945: 4; Tanganyika 1943 through 1947). For "normal" years, it has been possible to discover data only on the Kenya Masai. They own approximately half the Masai cattle and apparently sold an average of about 13,000 head per year during the latter part of the 1930's (Kenya Ag. 1933, 1935, 1936; Kenya Vet. 1937, 1938). These figures do not include all transactions because some take place (illegally) outside the markets, and adequate data on sales of sheep, goats, donkeys and hides and skins do not seem to be available.

The reluctance of the Masai to sell their cattle has irritated many administrators. It is usually attributed to the high, almost sacred value that the Masai place on their cattle. The value of cattle is indicated by their place in myth and folklore, by their importance in ceremonies and marriage, by the prestige value of large herds, by the almost personal relations established with the animals, by refusal to kill cows, by intricate cattle terminology, by much metaphor based on cattle life, by elaborate beliefs and practices concerning cattle diseases, and by the high status of beef, blood and milk compared to other foods. There is no doubt that cattle are highly valued and that they are part of a prestige system as well as the major element in the subsistence economy.

But despite their high value to the Masai, the Masai do sell them. They prefer, as noted earlier, to sell cattle rather than work in order to pay taxes. Moreover, a permanent quarantine has been in force since 1923. This prevented the Masai from selling as many cattle as they wanted (James 1939: 66) until the period of World War II when the administrations radically increased their demands for cattle sales. Administrative inconsistency as well as Masai attitudes have both played a role in the cattle selling situation.

In addition, one must ask a question which is seldom asked: why, from their own point of view, should Masai want to sell their cattle? What could they get with the money that they want? On this crucial point there are practically no data. If Orr and Gilks' figures on nutrition (1931: 29) are approximately correct, the Masai must buy an appreciable amount of maize, since the Masai grow hardly any. Remarks about drinking suggest that grain for beer, or the beer itself, is also purchased. Examination of recent photographs indicates several types of purchased goods: metal tools and weapons; ornaments, especially iron or copper wire for women's bracelets and necklaces; and cloth. Fosbrooke (1948:21) remarks that the *laibon* are able to get around the country more easily because of motor transport, but administrative vehicles are probably used. Apart from this last possibility, there is little indication that Masai consumption has changed much, or that they need much money to make such purchases as they do make.

Finally, one must examine the nature of the relations that have developed between the Masai and Europeans. This is important because non-Westerners often become sensitive to disrespectful behavior and derogatory attitudes on the part of Europeans. This may lead to efforts to equal or outdo Westerners with important consequences for economic and cultural change. The character of East African political movements indicates that this has happened. However, the Masai appear to differ from the Kikuyu, for example, in their apparent lack of concern about mistreatment by whites. Some distrust has developed in the course of administrative operations as the following Kenya incident indicates (Kenya 1945: 19-20):

"At the second meeting the Chief Native Commissioner attended and put forward a proposal for leasing a large portion of the country grazed by the Kaputei section as a relief area for the Wakamba. It need hardly be said that this proposal received no support whatsoever from the Masai, . . . The reaction, however, to the proposal has been unfortunate in that the Masai tend to view with suspicion other proposals since made to them . . ."

It is not clear how deep such feelings are, but administrative reports indicate that they cause considerable difficulty. However, Masai pride seems little affected as the following perhaps overdramatic statement suggests (Willis 1930: 289, quoted in James 1939: 64):

"They walk the streets of Nairobi with the air of free savages, not deigning to gaze into shop windows, or manifest any interest in the white man's wonders. They ask no favours, except to be left alone."

This relative insensitivity to white evaluations appears to have several sources. The Masai economy has functioned at a relatively high level so there has been little economic pressure of the sort found among many other African peoples. Also, the Masai appear to have held, and to continue to hold, a position of relatively high prestige in the eyes of their African neighbors. This can be accounted for partly by their military prowess and partly by the fact that their abundance of cattle is admired by other tribes who also value cattle highly, but have fewer. Therefore, the pattern of Masai life probably receives

important outside support. Maintaining this position under modern conditions has apparently become the concern of some of the educated Masai, as was indicated above.

Furthermore, in contrast to what usually happened when Europeans encountered Africans, an appreciable number of English appear to have developed a genuine admiration for the Masai. This can sometimes take extreme forms, as Elspeth Huxley (1948: 96-7) indicates:

"So strong is the appeal to certain natures of their manly, forthright, arrogant bearing, of their physical beauty and courage, and of their free, hard, simple lives — so much more attractive does it seem than our own confused and dubious existence — that officers often fall victim to a complaint known both in the Kenya and Tanganyika administrations as Masai-itis.

" 'When a D. O. starts to shake,' I was told, 'then it's high time to move him on.' Masai *moran* can work themselves up, by a sort of autohypnotism, into an hysterical condition in which they quiver all over. In olden days a posse of *moran* in lion head-dresses and long spears all shaking together as a prelude to battle was said to be a fearsome sight.

"Once there was a D.C. who walked into Arusha in sandals and Masai battle-dress carrying a spear, and went into a shake in the Provincial Commissioner's office."

"For fear of Masai-itis, it is unusual nowadays to leave a man in Masai country for more than two or three years."

Another example is the attitude of Lord Delamere, one of the most prominent of the early Kenya settlers (Huxley 1935: I, 151, 154):

"But Delamere preferred talking to the Masai to the company of most white men. In the evening the seat of the buggy would be taken out and placed in the living-room at one side of the fire. Delamere and anyone who was staying with him would sit in chairs on the opposite side and the herds would be summoned.

"All his herds were Masai.

. . . Visitors who stayed with him at Equator ranch did not always share his enthusiasm for the evening ceremony. They found the odour from the half-dozen tightly packed Masai squatting on the buggy seat, their naked limbs smeared with rancid butter, rather too overwhelming. But fear of their host's notorious temper kept them silent. Nothing annoyed him more than to hear his favourite Masai ridiculed or abused."

Thus, Masai life seems to strike a responsive chord in many Britishers who come in close contact with them, and this probably counteracts to some extent the negative responses received from others. However, the data are too fragmentary both as to Masai attitudes and the details of their contacts with whites for any but tentative conclusions to be reached.

*Some Implications*: What tentative conclusions may be drawn from the Masai case concerning conditions which promote or inhibit economic change and growth? Let us look, first, solely at the Masai in

the second quarter of the 20th century. Viewing this picture suggests that societies are not likely to be strongly motivated to make economic changes if their economies are thought by their members to be functioning effectively; and if, at the same time, they are not subjected to severe foreign domination or to severe threats to their own view of their own superiority and prestige. This suggestion is consistent with other cases, such as early Chinese reactions to Western contact. (See, for example, the sources in Teng & Fairbank (1954). It is also consistent with the general pattern of responses to different kinds of contact developed by Linton (1943) in his study of nativistic movements and with Moore's stress (1951:304ff) on the importance of "pushes" as a cause of seeking industrial employment.

But there are cases which indicate that the hypothesis is incomplete, such as the case of rapid changes carried out by the Polynesian Maori of New Zealand between 1840 and the 1860's (Firth 1929, 1959; Merrill 1954, n.d.). After their prowess as warriors had been established in European eyes and before any kind of close administration by the New Zealand government had developed, the Maori made radical economic changes. They adopted wheat growing with animal-drawn plows, they milled their wheat in their own water-powered flour mills, and transported goods to and from the market cities using a large fleet of native canoes and purchased coasting vessels. These changes were partly the result of rivalry among Maori kinship and "tribal" units, and partly an effort to demonstrate their capabilities to Europeans.

A similar potentiality for change is at least hinted at for the Masai in Tombo's concern (Huxley 1948: 270) that "others will become top-dogs over us." Why has this not resulted in greater change? The question points to at least one missing element in the previous hypothesis: the factor of the absence of real alternatives for economic advance which do not require people to leave their own society in order to take advantage of them. It has been argued that the alternatives in agriculture and animal husbandry which have been made available to the Masai are not very practicable, at least on a significant scale. The one kind of alternative that does offer real economic and other advantages, though on a limited scale, is government employment among the Masai at levels requiring considerable education. And this alternative has met with appreciable Masai response once an educational system consistent with the Masai way of life was worked out. Absence of real alternatives, as a matter of fact, may account at least in part for the apparent satisfaction of Masai with their way of life, and their apparently "limited wants" for new things. Sol Tax (1957: 147) has developed a similar argument on the basis of experience with the Indians of Guatemala:

"Change in an individual is a function of alternatives presented to him; and when given realistic choices, nothing in my experience with Indians indicates that they are slower than we are to accept the ones which seem to them to be in their interest. The difference is of course in the alternatives presented; and if in contrast to us, Indians have changed little from one generation to the next, a sufficient reason is

that (in the same contrast) few acceptable novelties are presented. The moral of this observation is that one should not speak of people as conservative, or use the term progressive as a personal characteristic, until it can be demonstrated that they are averse to accepting alternatives that are clearly (and by their own definition) advantageous."

Looking back at the early period of European contact with the Masai when the basis of their whole way of life was destroyed, it may be seen that the Masai were able to adopt economic activities they otherwise despised when they had to, and that they were able to do so sufficiently well to exploit the available, but difficult, alternative of building up a basis for returning to cattle-herding in their traditional territory. What looks like mere persistence of a traditional way of life from aboriginal to modern times really involved a major effort to restore that way of life after it had been almost completely destroyed. If, in the rapidly changing African scene, new real opportunities appear for better satisfying Masai aspirations, it might be expected that the Masai would grasp them with the same skill they displayed in the past. It will be interesting to see whether, in the next few decades, this guess turns out to be correct.

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