

Maasai Tribes and Technology

Breann Lunghamer

Professor Weathers COMN 1600

University of Denver

Technology and media have become overpowering to the lives of those who are able to access it. It allows new ways for people to access information, interact, connect and communicate with one another in various ways. Over time it has gained more power and has taken over certain cultures and allowed them to become more technologically advanced. Although many societies and cultures have moved toward the utilization of technology, there are still many who have not. The Maasai tribes in Africa are an example of a society who have not implemented technology into their culture. Due to the Maasai's resistance to this implementation, they have been approached by outsiders to their tribe and encouraged to apply technology to their culture. With all the different ways media lets people communicate and spread information to one another, the Maasai tribes are at a disadvantage. Communication is crucial for the development of a culture and without it, it makes it difficult to retrieve and record knowledge. The increase of technology into cultures has led them to view the Maasai as primitive or undeveloped. This view of the Maasai is realistic with the importance of communication in the world, but does not mean the Maasai or other cultures should be forced to implement these types of technologies into their everyday life.

The Maasai uphold many customs and traditions that make it a unique culture. The boys and girls live in small houses with their mothers, made from cow dung and wattle. Maasai girls hold the society together and must go through many rituals as they developed into women. The women in the Maasai culture are a big concern to foreigners' due to the harsh traditions and gender norms of the Maasai. These harsh norms include the circumcision as young girls, common polygamy represented within families, forced loyalty to their husbands, and unable to choose their spouse. The men in the Maasai community have full control over who their children

marry and usually have multiple wives. They take control of herding cattle and the women are required to stay in the village with their children.

Along with the gender roles, the location of the Maasai has a large significance to their livelihood. Maasai Mara is a National Reserve in Kenya which contains several indigenous tribes called the Maasai. The Maasai Mara tribes are originated in Kenya and Tanzania since approximately the late 17th century and early 18th century. The Maasai people are dependent on land and livestock for their livelihood. Land provides the Maasai with sustenance and medical supplies, space for ceremonial practices, and grazing areas for their cattle. They use herbal remedies that they have formed throughout generations for any of their medical ailments. Pastoralism is the basis of their culture and they take pride in co-existing with some of Africa's wildest animals. They do not try and hunt any other animal besides cattle, which provides them with their necessary nutrients. The Maasai drink the blood and milk of the cattle along with eating the meat. They do not have a great interest in money and value their simplistic lifestyle. With their indifferent attitude toward money and appreciation of land, it is not difficult to see how the Maasai would not find technology necessary to their livelihood.

To examine how the Maasai tribes are seen through different cultures in society, it is important to analyze them from an ecological standpoint. Ecology focuses on relationships and interactions between organisms in a specific environment, but to examine the Maasai tribes' relationship to technology, the focus is laid on media ecology. Media ecology is defined as "highlights that social environments are, first and foremost, communication environments, which, in turn, are dominated by certain communication technologies at particular historical moments" (Ott & Mack, 2014, p. 313). Since ecology focuses on time and how people interact in an environment, the recent development of technology has changed many ecological

perspectives in society. The general study of media ecology has many different components including medium theory, time-based media, space-based media, orality, literacy, and third-wave media. All these components make up the different aspects of media ecology and can be used it as a lens for viewing the Maasai culture.

Time-biased media and orality are two media ecology terms that describe the current view of the Maasai to outsiders. Time-biased media focuses on the use of heavy materials and is usually labor-intensive, like carving or hand-writing as a form of communication. This type of media is characterized by a hierarchical government and tribal civilizations. The way it relates to communication and technology can be described as “do not allow for efficient or easy communication over great distances, the various communities that comprise such civilizations tend to be relatively independent and autonomous” (Ott & Mack, p. 316). This term describes the Maasai and their disconnect from the rest of the world. Another term that identifies with the Maasai is orality. Orality refers to “thought and its verbal expression” and describes cultures that do not communicate with writing but orally (p. 322). This view can be seen as inefficient and can lead to a loss of information and history for these tribes. Since the Maasai have not moved toward technology, they are at a disadvantage for being unable to record information effectively.

From an ecological standpoint, the Maasai may be at a disadvantage for communication and may be viewed as undeveloped by their lack of technology. How people define progression and development have changed due to the new technological advances society has made. In the article, “The Meaning of Progress” the authors Slack and Wise used technology as a yardstick for progress and discuss the idea that the more technologically advanced someone is, the more they have progressed in society. This article unconsciously criticizes the Maasai people by the idea that if a society never implements technology into their everyday lives, they will never

evolve as a society. The authors present this idea as a bad and disadvantaging notion and discuss how the utilization of technology is the only way to gain material and moral betterment. These ideas presented can rationalize the intentions of many foreigners' who try and introduce this knowledge to the Maasai tribes.

Moreover, the Maasai are commonly described by foreigners' as semi-nomadic or primitive because of their lack of technology use. Foreigners try to introduce new knowledge to the Maasai through different technologies like cell phones. Cell phones are a symbol of mobility and modern communication around the world and impact the way people communicate every day and has altered certain cultures. The 21st century has been considered a period of "cell phone culture" with its presence on many people's lives. This idea of communication via cell phones can be seen on the basis of media ecology as "medium theory". The medium theory is "a research tradition that considers the technology or individual medium of communication to be equally important to, or even more important than, the content of media to understanding our social environment" (Ott & Mack, p. 313). Medium theory can be seen as a criticism of the Maasai because of their lack of communication through media and how they are putting themselves at a disadvantage for understanding their environment. Without the utilization of cell phones and how isolated the Maasai are, they have put themselves at a loss for understanding the world as a whole. The medium for communicating through technology provides a global scope of the world, multiple directions for communicating, and access to an abundance of knowledge. Cell phones would provide the Maasai a resource being able to access all the advantages technology provides.

The advantages that are seen with implementing technology into a culture can be viewed through conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption is "the belief that one can attain

membership in the “upper class” through the purchase of material goods and services” (Ott & Mack, p. 149). The encouragement to integrate technology into the Maasai culture can be seen by this idea. This belief shows how material goods are a gateway to opportunities and to a higher social class. Conspicuous consumption is a very Americanized idea of how to achieve upper-class status and is a theme of how people believe the Maasai should view new technologies. Space-biased media is another idea that focuses on secularism, materialism, and rapid social change. In contrast to conspicuous consumption, space-biased media focuses on how these materialistic items lead to a better outlet for communication instead of focusing on attaining a higher social class. Space-biased media contradicts how the Maasai communicate due to its focus on a centralized government and rationalization of democracy. This type of media can reach people in many different locations and dominates communication; it is the type of media the Maasai are encouraged to move toward.

In addition, the advantages the Maasai would have by implementing materials like cell phones into their lives is outlined in the article, “Embedded and Re-purposed Technologies: Human Mobility Practices in Maasailand”. This article identifies all the different advantages the Maasai would have by fully implementing cell phones into their culture. The authors Jessika Nilsson and Noel Salazar have done a study on how cell phones have positively influenced the Maasai within their pastoral ways of herding. The authors explain,

contemporary mobile technologies are making and reshaping the network that is

Maasailand, replacing and enhancing the historical network of codes and rules that made

Maasailand an efficient circulatory territory with fast informational exchange (p. 447).

There are many ways the Maasai would benefit from utilization of cell phones, especially within the communication between men who work to herd cattle. This article addresses the idea that

embedding technologies into a culture should be seen as allowing for an ongoing dialect between different generations within a culture, rather than as a radical change.

Furthermore, the idea of foreigners trying to introduce new resources like the cell phone culture to the Maasai can be viewed as the idea of ‘White Saviour’ complex. White saviour complex is defined as “This idea that it is the role of the White outsider to ‘lift’ the poor and oppressed in developing countries seems universal in the Western world and its thinking, with a continual reflection in literature and film” (Straubhaar, 2015, p. 384). This idea highlights the groups of people who have reached out to the Maasai in hopes of helping them become more developed as a culture. Many foreigners’ pity the Maasai for their “backward culture” and feel compelled to help them progress into contributing members of society. An example of how the white saviour complex is seen as a force to the Maasai tribes is through Straubhaar as

Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied (p. 384).

This idea exemplifies the reasoning behind the interference of foreigners into the Maasai culture. Although the Maasai have room to develop as a culture and in their livelihood, the ideas behind foreigners’ concern are significant. The Maasai are undeveloped, but should not be forced to develop technology into their everyday lives because of the pity they have received from outside their community.

Another way the White Saviour complex can be seen is through tourism. The Maasai are originated in Kenya and Tanzania and recently these areas have been turned into tourist destinations. The Maasai have been struggling in the past years with poverty, famine, and

unemployment and the recent tourism is a possible outlet for the Maasai to escape their time of struggle. The tourism that has formed in this area is attempting to take away from their authentic culture. The way tourism can impact their people is by the introduction of new technologies, like cell phones or cameras. If a young boy or girl in the Maasai is introduced to a fancy cell phone by a tourist, this may impact their cultural views and hinder their appreciation for their simplistic life. In addition to this idea, tour operators and agents do not consult the Maasai before advertising about them, “the Maasai are represented in advertisements and tourism commercials as a primitive and backward community” (Akama, 2002, p. 43). way the Maasai have been represented in ads and in the media is offensive to the people in the community and represents them in an alienating way.

The way that advertisements represent the Maasai, relates how they are seen through a cultural and ecological view. The way they are seen as outsiders’ due to their lack of implementing new technologies can be described through the term “othering” or “dehumanizing”. Othering can be explained as “the processes whereby people who are different tend to be perceived as increasingly alien and distanced” (Phatoli, Bila, & Ross, 2015, p. 2) Due to the Maasai’s unique culture, they are viewed by many societies as uncivilized and are alienated. This can be seen in the ecological idea of third wave media, which idealizes computers and electronics and supports the idea that we are entering a new “intelligent environment” and “social memory” through technology (Toffler, 198, p. 176). Third wave media emphasizes the importance of technology and how it is an outlet for cultural success. This term contributes to the how the Maasai are viewed, and as new technologies advance, how they will be viewed in the future.

Even though technology may help with the development of a culture, it can also replace the customs that make it unique. Without having a great understanding of a culture, it is hard to know how implementing something like technology could influence them. Some Maasai tribes have begun to implement cell phones to help with communicating with other herders and to view market prices for livestock. Although, not all Maasai people are open to this idea. Technology has the potential to have a positive influence on the Maasai culture, but cell phones could also alter their entire cultural dynamic. It can be an overwhelming element of many cultures and could alter the way of life for the Maasai people.

Technology is becoming a large component towards the development of a person or a society. This concept brings forth the idea that without understanding a culture it is hard to be able to sympathize and understand them. Culture's should not be forced to implement technology into their everyday lives although it may lead them to a higher socio-economic status. The Maasai could benefit from the idea of implementing cell phones into their lives, but that does not mean they should have to. This implementation may lead to taking away from their timeless and unique culture. The Maasai are an import group or people to understand and analyze to form a larger view of how technology can be viewed through different cultures. The 21st century in the United States normalized and idealizes the idea of technology, making it a crucial part of American culture and development. It is important to use the Maasai as a lens for understanding how cultures who do not have the choice or choose to not implement technology into their lives, are deemed undeveloped. Although this disinterest will put them at a stopping point for development through the lens of many western cultures, they should not be forced to implement anything into their culture.

References

- Akama, J. S., (2002) The creation of the Maasai image and tourism development in Kenya.
- Sterry, P., & Akama J., *Cultural tourism in Africa: strategies for the new millennium*, 3 43-54. Retrieved from <http://www.atlas-euro.org/pages/pdf/Cultural%20tourism%20in%20Africa%20Deel%202.pdf>
- Nilsson, J., & Salazar, N. B., (2015). Embedded and re-purposed technologies: human mobility in Maasailand. *Mobilities*, 12(3), 445-461. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/17450101.2015.1099831>
- Ott, B. L., & Mack, R. L., (2014). *Critical Media Studies*. West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Phatoli, R., Bila, N., & Ross, E., (2015) Being black in a white skin: beliefs and stereotypes around albinism at a South African university. *Article Journal of Disability* 4(1) 1-10. Doi:10.4102/ajod.v4i1.106
- Slack, J. D., & Wise, J. M., (2005). *The Meanings of Progress*. New York: Peter Lang 10-25
- Straubhaar, R., (2015) The stark reality of the ‘White Saviour’ complex and the need for critical consciousness: a document analysis of the early journals of a Freirean educator. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 45(3). <http://dx.doi.org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/03057925.2013.876306>
- Toffler, A., (2011) The third wave, *A&C Black*, 3. 141-284. Retrieved from <http://calculemus.org/lect/07pol-gosp/arch/proby-dawne/materialy/waves.htm>