Reflections on Africa's Indigenous knowledge on parenting

Indigenous parenting practices of different communities in Africa

PARENTING IN AFRICA NETWORK

PARENTING IN AFRICA NETWORK
for the Ultimate Protection of Children

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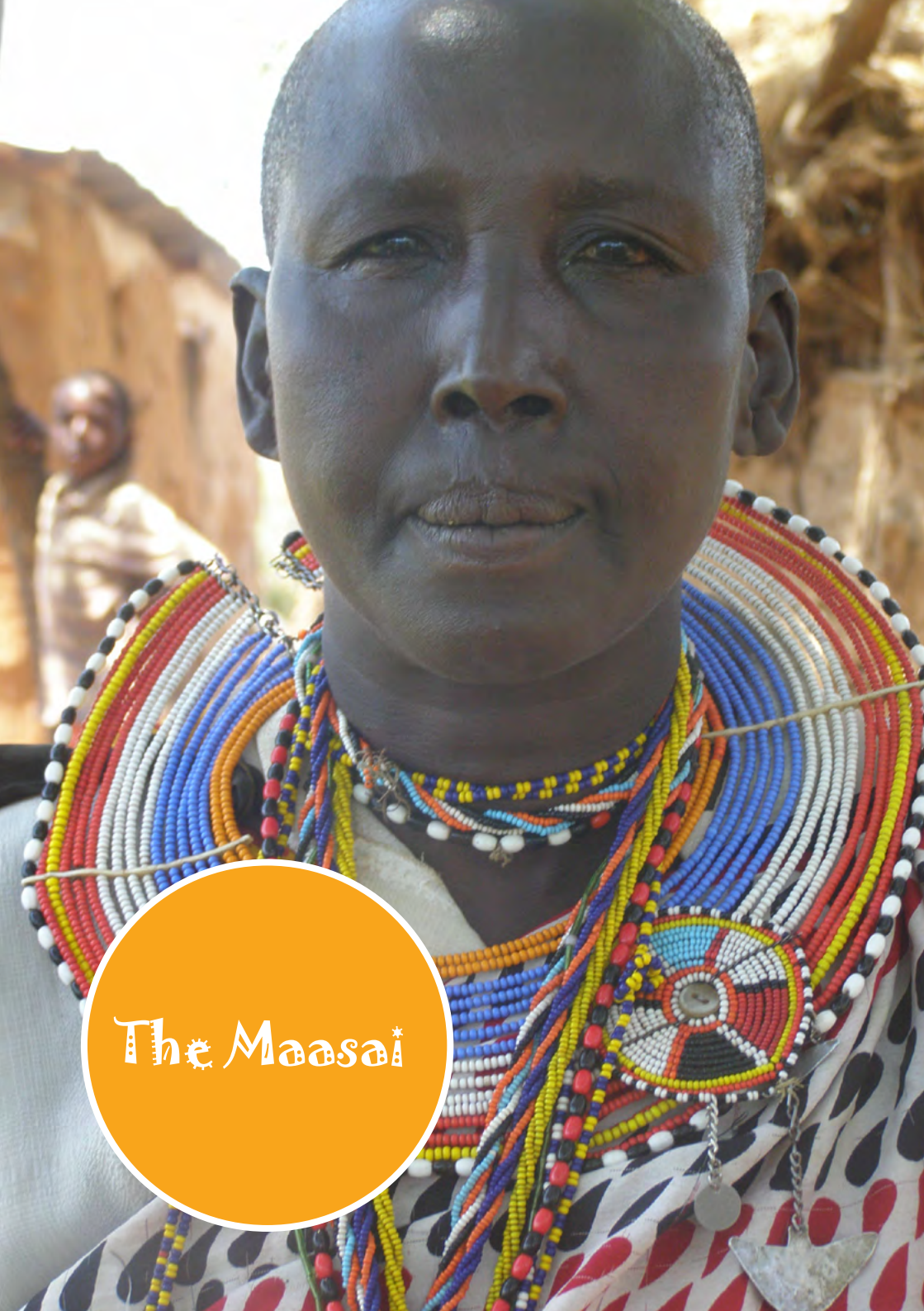
Africa is blessed with diverse cultures and tribes, these rich traditions play a critical part in shaping the lives of communities and the family unit.

PARENTING IN AFRICA NETWORK (PAN) in partnership with AFRICA INTERACTIVE Kenya Ltd visited different destinations in Africa to showcase indigenous positive parenting practices that are still used in Africa but which are under threat because of modernisation. People are moving to the cities, and the close community, and family ties of the past, is under pressure.

In both this Brochure and its accompanying Documentary, we highlight, how the pastoralist community of the Gabra and the Maasai people in Kenya, East and the horn of Africa region; Bozo community in Mali, West Africa; Ndebele of South Africa, and the Swahili of the coastal strip of Africa 'skilfully' parented. From these communities in Africa, we share the following aspects of parenting.

- Pre-birth mother care
- Post birth mother and child care
- Instilling skills in Responsibility and Respect
- Child-parent interaction
- The role of fathers
- Sexuality and puberty
- Preparation for marriage
- Care of vulnerable children
- Role of extended family / living with grandparents.


The Maasai

The Maasai are a Nilotic group of semi-nomadic people located in Kenya and northern Tanzania. Among foreigners, they are among the best known of African ethnic groups, due to their distinctive customs, dress as well as residence near game parks of East Africa.

Pre-birth care

The Maasai midwife offers massage services to expectant mothers. It is believed that the massage helps in stretching the muscles of the baby and the mother too; this will eventually help the mother have a comfortable delivery. With the use of traditional herbs and oils, the Maasai midwife massages the expectant mother's lower abdomen and lower chest, near the diaphragm.

Post-birth and Child care

After the mother has given birth, she rests while feeding on milk mixed with traditional herbs. The Maasai community has a strong belief in the use of traditional herbs, which they believe are medicinal, to help in relaxing the new mother.

Once the baby is six months old, it gets exposed to the sun. Its grandmother, who also doubles up as a midwife, attends to the child by massaging her joints and applying herbs and oils. The Maasai believe that this helps shape the child's bones and gently stretches the baby's muscles, from their folded form, having stayed in the womb for nine months.

A newborn baby is weaned with milk; both goat's milk and cow's milk. Fat extracted from milk is also given to the baby. Later when the baby can take solid food, it is fed on kidneys and liver. This food helps the child to develop properly.

Responsibility

The Maasai train children, at a young age, on responsibility. Boys and girls from the age of four start to undergo training in herding lambs, checking out warts or bugs, basic milking and feeding the lambs; and eventually graduate to taking care of

mature cattle. For the boys, these trainings are usually done by the young Moran, or a warrior; while young girls are taught by their mothers and grandmothers.

Young girls learn house chores, fetching water from the river, collecting firewood and cooking. They are also shown how to herd lambs while playing, which helps frame their brains into handling multiple tasks, from a young age.

Respect

Each child belongs to an "age set" from birth. To control the vices of pride, jealousy, and selfishness, children must obey the rules governing relationships within the age set, between age sets, and between the sexes. The Maasai control these with taboos (prohibitions). A daughter, for example, must not be present while her father is eating.

Although the younger warriors may wish to dominate their communities, they must follow rules and respect their elders' advice. Young men and women are greeted by bowing their head to allow their senior to touch their head; this is a sign of great respect for their seniors.

Young girls are taught that they should respect their mothers and all women of her age group as well as all elders in general. They also should not enter any house when an elder is inside; they should wait until he leaves to enter the house. They should also never share a seat with their fathers. Most importantly, when they want to ask anything from their fathers, they should first check with their mothers whether the language they are about to use is appropriate.

Role of fathers

Fathers are the bread winners, and protectors of the home. They are the pillars on which the family leans for direction; they guide the home toward a common goal.

He also enables the members of his home to live in harmony, and leads in rearing their animals. As the elder of the homestead, he does not just sit about, and issue instructions: he actively takes part in herding, when the young men are away.

The Gabra

The Gabra, camel-herding nomads, are mainly found near the Chalbi Desert of northern Kenya and the highlands of southern Ethiopia. They are closely associated with the Oromo, and their non-nomadic neighbours, the Borana. They are of Cushitic origin.

The Role of the father

Fathers are regarded as pillars of the home and protectors. They are required to manage the leadership affairs of the home. The father is the head of the family. He is in charge of looking for food, taking care of and sheltering the animals. Women have a lot of housework to do: cooking and preparing the milking equipment. It is therefore the duty of the father to look after the camels. Boys also expect to learn from their fathers. Among the Gabra, it is the duty of the father to defend his family in times of conflict or war.

Responsibility

This pastoralist community instils discipline at a young age: between the age of three and five for both genders.

The Gabra usually have large families, and live communally. Thus, children are taught the aspect of responsibility at a young age. For example, by collecting camel pellets from the 'kraals' and mimicking the herding of camels, all Gabra children start developing their skills from this game.

The children stratify the pellets to represent the different ages and sexes of the camels: the male camels, female camels and the yearlings. From this, the children start to develop various skills: while they are playing around with the pellets they learn how to milk, how to restrain the dominant male (by tying one forelimb), and also orient themselves on how to mould pellets into milking gourds such that they can use the moulded gourd for imaginary milking. Boys start playing with camel droppings from the age of three and initially learn to lock camels in a kraal.

Childcare and nutrition

The Gabra live in the dry region, therefore access to fresh vegetables is a challenge. They depend on camel milk and meat, which they believe has a nutritive value on the children. Markedly, during meals, priority is usually given to children, who are fed first because they cannot stay for long hours without food.

Their traditions dictate that parents allow children to be fed first, because of scarcity of food in their land. Also, they highly value camel milk because it is stomach friendly, compared to other types of milk. Once consumed, camel milk is gentle to the stomach, and is of high nutritive value due to the different plants that the camel eats, many of which are medicinal.

Child-parent interaction

Children in the Gabra community spend a lot of time with their parents and grandmothers. The nomadic life enables them train their children at a young age to take care of livestock, mainly milking and feeding and thus, they spending more time instilling values during their interaction.

Gabra people like keeping camels because they are able to endure harsh climatic conditions, unlike cows, goats and sheep which cannot. They live in dry and barren areas where pasture and water is scarce. Therefore, children learn to take care of animals during these seasons. Girls, from the age of three, learn to collect firewood, and due to spending more time with the mother in the makeshift kitchen yard, they learn domestic chores like cooking.


The Swahili

Kiswahili, derived from Arabic and Bantu Languages, is spoken by various communities inhabiting the great lakes region, including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Child care and potty training

The Swahili start potty training their children at a very young age. Girls are traditionally potty trained between ages of 3 - 3 ½ months and the boys are trained at 4 - 4½ months.

After a morning baby bath, the baby is fed and when it's time to relieve itself, the baby gets restless and uneasy. It's with these signs that the mother or grandmother puts it between her two legs. The mother can dig a hole where the waste will fall into, later to be disposed at the latrine.

The Swahili live in a communal/extended family setting; therefore anyone experienced in childcare can train the children.

Sexuality and puberty

The Swahili believe that when a girl is 13, she's ready to be initiated into womanhood, through training. Apart from learning about house chores, she is usually

taken to a “Kungwi”, an instructor who will train her for about two months on basic womanhood issues and her breaking phase into puberty. This helps shape her into womanhood.

A “Kungwi” does not need to be an elderly woman, as long she is married and has gone through the same training; she qualifies to train the adolescent girl. Boys are usually trained by their fathers and / or uncles who offer advice through “Barazas”- social meetings - that get organized at the homes.

The instructor teaches the girl how to maintain cleanliness and behave as she grows older. While staying with the instructor, the young girl also learns how to maintain personal hygiene in puberty. She is also advised on how to let go of childish behaviours.

Marriage preparation

The Kungwi also acts as a marriage instructor. After the girl’s fiancée has proposed to her, she is again taken to the Kungwi for final coaching on basic marital responsibilities: From cooking skills, to intimacy issues, respect for her husband, how to handle in-laws and keeping away from other men.

The Kungwi therefore restricts her in her home for at least one month, so that she can retain her virginity. She should stay so until the day her husband comes for her. This is the most valuable aspect of the Swahili tradition, and girls are usually rewarded for chastity.

Wedding preparation

When the girl's day to say 'I do' has comes, the home is actively charged with a flurry of activities and movements to make the wedding an unforgettable experience. The bride is the main subject of true beauty: she gets cleaned up by the Kungwi, who expertly and patiently executes and leads in the beautification process.

The bride is cleansed with fragrant oils and her face, neck and legs massaged. A mixture of coconut oil, water and (sandalwood) is made in a bowl and the women rub the mixture onto the bride's body, to purify it. Her skin is also adorned in elaborate designs of henna. Perfume and scent being especially significant in Swahili married life, the young bride's skin is scrubbed until it is silken and scented with essential oils of spices and tropical flowers. The essential oils of spices are also used to consecrate the marital bed.

Incense smoke is used to purify the home and both the bride and groom. Patchouli, ylang-ylang, coconut oil and cloves make up a popular mix for wedding couples. Ylang-ylang is believed to have aphrodisiac properties and the flowers are placed in the bedroom. The wedding couple is both massaged for up to a week before the ceremony.

The Swahili stress that the bridal decoration should not end on the wedding day. The adorning should continue even in her home. The Swahili believe that with this beautification, it is very rare for Swahili men to stray from their homes, since their wives know how to 'take care' of them.


The Iteso

The Iteso people primarily live in Iteso District of Uganda and across the Kenya-Uganda border in Bukedi District (Uganda) and Busia District (Western Kenya). At the time of the last reliable census in Uganda, there were over 600,000 Itesos in Iteso District, and 300,000 living in Bukedi District and Busia District on the Kenya side of the border. The Iteso speak an Eastern Nilotic language, which belongs to the Iteso family of Eastern Nilotic speakers: the Karimojong of Uganda and the Turkana of Kenya.

Role of grandparents and instilling values

It is at the fireplace that the Iteso Grandmothers/fathers pass on to their grandchildren, social values and skills that they'll use in their adulthood. In the evenings, while sitting beside the fireplace, grandparents tell stories, whose morals are stressed to inspire grandchildren to be wise and make sound decisions.

Instilling social skills and discipline

The Iteso appreciate a morally upright child. In the past, to instil discipline, a child would usually be asked by his parent to go over to the neighbour's house and call him to come over. The neighbour would in turn reward the child with an egg. The egg was kept by the grandmother or father in a hatchery; this could be used to multiply the child's investments and as the chicken multiply, they could be exchanged for a goat or sheep then later exchanged for a female calf. These could eventually build up a stock of livestock which could be later used by the young man as dowry when it was time for him to marry.

Because of the high price of eggs and the poor economic situation of many Itesos, this practice has faded away.

The role of the father

The Iteso regard the father as an icon of moral strength and direction. He's the authority on which the children and wife lean on for advice, provision of basic needs and guidance. Fathers are required to instil certain values to their children to enable them become responsible persons in future.

According to the Iteso, boys from different homesteads of the village could be called to help cultivate a neighbour's farm, and they would do it without hesitation. This rotational farming activity still goes on today and it helps in cutting down the costs

of cultivating as one uses locally available labour. It is this collective aspect of social interaction that helps a young man identify a girl, from a specific home, to marry because most homes are well known to them.

Sexuality and puberty

The Iteso community instils education on sexuality at the age of 12 for girls, and 15 for boys. Those who live in an extended family setting are able to do this with the help of grandparents. Girls are taught about handling menstruation, keeping high moral standards, keeping good company and respecting their virginity, because the Iteso believe that virginity is sacred.

Boys on the other hand are taught about their sexuality and the ability to manage their feelings for the opposite sex, by uncles or grandparents. It is at this stage that they can also be advised to identify a specific home to relate with as future in-laws. All these trainings are done by the grandparents because most young people freely open up to their grandparents.

The Bozo

The Bozo are predominantly located along the Niger River in Mali. The name Bozo is thought to derive from Bambara bo-so, 'Bamboo house'. They are famous for their fishing and are occasionally referred to as the "masters of the river." Their language belongs to the Soninke-Bozo subgroup of North-western Mande.

Responsibility through fishing

Fishing is the primary source of livelihood among the Bozo people. Both men and women are taught these skills at a young age, male child start getting basic training in crafting a fishing boat, knitting the fishing net and fishing. Men are usually taught to fish, at the age of ten, by their fathers; while women are taught how to prepare fish, for sale or consumption, by their mothers.

Very early in the morning, young men go fishing after they make the fishing net. Bozo parents teach their sons the importance of work. These values are expected to help the young men to be good and responsible people in future. When they grow up to have their own families, the young men are expected to pass on these fishing skills to their school-going children.

Child-parent interaction

Women in the Bozo community usually help their family members. For instance, they can help their sisters in law with house chores. Daughters keenly watch their mothers cook, so that they too can learn. Mothers ensure that the girls learn, from a young age, how to manage the home and take care of the family.

Since childhood, the girl also learns domestic chores such as washing dishes, laundry, cooking and fishing with fish traps. The child is expected to follow the teachings of the older people in the community. This shapes their values, enabling them be responsible.

Taking care of orphans and vulnerable children

The role of the village chief, with the help of his advisors, is peace-building in his community. When a child is orphaned, he is entrusted to the closest relatives to care for him/her. The adoptive family handles all the orphan's needs such as health, safety, clothing and enabling him/her to fit into the new family.

The Bozo community is mainly Islamic. Most of the family values are not only traditional, but influenced by Islam. Orphans are the responsibility of the members of the community, and are given basic provisions just like any other member of the community. They are expected to become responsible people. However, special attention is given to young ones.

Sexuality and puberty

When the girl reaches puberty, she goes to live with her grandmother. The grandmother teaches her feminine values and will also monitor her sexual transition into maturity. She learns the role of women in the home: helping the husband meet family needs. She is urged to behave well: an obedient and respectful child is loved and adored by all, while a rude and disobedient one is rejected by all. Young boys spend time with their fathers in the sea, fishing, where these teachings are instilled.

The Ndebele

Although the origins of the South African Ndebele are shrouded in mystery, they have been identified as one of the Nguni tribes, representing nearly two thirds of South Africa's black population and can be divided into four distinct groups: the Central Nguni (the Zulu-speaking peoples), the Southern Nguni (the Xhosa-speaking peoples), the Swazi people from Swaziland and adjacent areas and the Ndebele people of the Northern Province and Mpumalanga.

The two Ndebele groups were not only separated geographically but also by differences in their languages and cultures. The Ndebele of the Northern Province consisted mainly of the BagaLanga and the BagaSeleka tribes who adopted the language and culture of their Sotho neighbours. The North Ndebele resided in an area stretching from the town of Warmbaths in the south, to the Limpopo River in the north; and from the Botswana border in the west, to the Mozambique border in the east.

Role of fathers

The Ndebele fathers uphold and pass on their culture and traditions to their children. They provide direction and advice in the home. A Ndebele father works closely with his wife to maintain social order, provide food and protect the home from external threats. He helps his son in identifying a bride, and deciding from which home and family she ought to come. The father also works closely with the uncles of the boy, during the Lobola (bride price) negotiations.

During conflicts within the community, fathers consult the chief and his council for help. Cultural preservation is critical in this community; whose responsibility rests with the Ndebele father.

Sexuality and puberty

The Ndebele talk to their teens about sex, to enable them make sound choices as they advance into adulthood. Boys are cautioned against chasing around after girls, because they could contract sexually transmitted diseases in the process.

They are taught to respect themselves. When boys begin puberty, the Ndebele take them to initiation school because they are about to become men. Here, they are taught to behave responsibly, and manage their sexuality as adults. The boy is taught about the Ndebele culture, how to behave as a man and how to look after

his wife. When they return from initiation, his father, uncle or grandfather assesses whether he is ready for marriage. The seniors try to add on to what the boy has learned during their conversations.

Care of orphans and vulnerable children

The Ndebele are communally responsible for orphans and vulnerable children, led by the chief, who allocates specific stable homesteads to care for the orphans. The less privileged, the sick and vulnerable children also receive psychosocial support.

Marriage preparation and Lobola (dowry)

The Ndebele regard marriage with the highest esteem. Parents expect that their families shall be unified through marriage. In most cases when a man identifies a girl to marry, they will ask for their family name. Ndebele are known to address each other by their family name. This helps determine whether the families are related, to them or not. After identifying the ideal family, the suitor will send senior family members and his father, to the family of the bride, after which the negotiations start. Respect, dignity and preservation of the Ndebele cultural pride is important in these negotiations.

When the bride arrives, she's advised not wear jeans or trousers in the home of her in-laws; the bride never goes to her father in-law's house. She must kneel when she serves the older males; she must send a child to deliver whatever message that's intended for her father in-law. Also, she must always be wearing a blanket; when she comes upon her father in-law, she must be discrete: they should never meet eye to eye with her father in-law.

Lobola is very important to the Ndebele. When a boy wants to marry, dowry must be paid to the bride's family. Traditionally, by paying Lobola shows that a groom is capable of taking care of the bride. It also reminds the groom that there was an exchange of cows for the bride: some material transaction was carried out to enforce the marital vows.

Cohabitation is not regarded as a marriage. The Ndebele tradition, dictates that two families come together, and one family has to pay a certain price for the marriage to take place. An animal must be slaughtered to bring these families together. In the future, if the children face marital conflict, they can be assisted by the two families

because they are now one big family. Lobola is thus, a symbol of unity between the two families.

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