

A Maasai woman's age old art

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Severe drought has hit most parts of Maasai land and men have migrated with their cattle in search of water and pasture.

Left behind in manyattas in the driest parts of Kajiado and Narok are women, children and goats (goats, unlike cows, can survive in very dry weather).



Yangaso Parmat, a Maasai woman, builds a manyatta for her son in Kajiado. It is customary for women to construct huts.

Photos: Maxwell Agwanda/Standard

In the burning heat and dust, women fend for their children, trekking long distances to look for food and fetch water.

They also build new manyattas and repair old ones — which is their duty, traditionally. The architecture of the Maasai manyatta, built in the dry seasons when construction sticks abound in dried bushes, is a marvel to watch.

On a trip to cover famine in Kajiado, we deviated to record the painstaking duty of one old woman, putting together a manyatta that her son, who was away, would return to make a home in.

Hundreds of these huts are strewn across a vast scrubland of acacia trees and thorns, and from afar they resemble makeshift mounds of earth, rising a metre from the ground and blending with the terrain.

But it is hard work and time consuming.

Watching Yangaso Parmat, 70, make a home for her son is like watching a bird weaving a complex nest. It will take Parmat, a widow, over a month of tiresome tasks and often dangerous balancing on a sloping roof, as she literary knits sticks together, to complete the structure.

We found the hut half finished, with the woven shell of sticks almost complete. Parmat had been at it for two weeks, putting in about 12 hours daily.

"Once you start, you don't stop. We believe if you stop, something will go wrong with your finished house," she says via an interpreter.

No nails needed

Without a helper, she fetches all the building material.

Most of the other women constructing manyattas are young and newly wed, but Parmat's son is yet to marry, so his mother takes up the task.

The old woman starts most mornings with a five-kilometre journey to the bank of a dry riverbed, to cut the almost dry olkigirri sticks that thatch the network.

No nails are needed for this handiwork, as all sticks are joined with inkinyat ol tepesi (coarse fibre from a tree bark).

Three king posts, known as ang'athe, will be the central pillars of the house. The structure is rectangular at the base, about six metres long by four metres wide, but curves in at the roof, to give it a dome shape.

It rises just slightly above a metre from the ground and one has to bend low when entering.

The floor is dug a step below ground level.

Parmat, who barely looks up from her work as we arrive, balances her frail figure on the sticks and manages, seemingly effortlessly, to climb the roof.

She says: "The roof is the test of a good builder, it should never leak and the curves must be equal, otherwise the manyatta is abandoned or in constant repair."

She kneels on the roof, pulling each stick in and out and measures gaps with her thumb and index finger to ensure they are equal. The entire structure requires about 3,000 sticks but only 1,000 straight ones.

Each sturdy stick will pass through at least 20 joints tightly knotted together.

Partan will make partitions for two rooms inside — the main area, for cooking and sitting, and the bedroom.

When the network is complete, she will fill it with cow dung mixed with a special soil that glues it together.

For the roof, she adds coarse green grass which, when dry, adds to the 'cement' effect and holds like a concrete slab.

The floor of the house is also smeared with smooth cow dung, which dries to form a soft slab.

The bedroom, known as erruat, is traditionally laid with hides and other coverings like blankets.

The windows are very small — two on each long side — for fear of giving wild animals access.

The door, known as orike, is a detachable frame made of attached sticks.

Thorny hedge

Once the house is complete, Parmat's son will place a spear from the inside, at an angle, to hold the door in place.

A homestead like Parmat's, who has four sons, has as many as six houses, including hers and that of her co-wife.

Women pass on the art of this pastoralist architecture to their daughters and daughters-in-law. Men are forbidden from this work.

The Maasai believe a man who builds a manyatta will die.

A large Maasai homestead in rural areas is an enclosure of a thorny hedge with a narrow main gate.

Inside, there is another one for cows and a one for goats.

Hyenas and other wild animals are common here and it is the men's to come out at night to ward them off.

For Parmat and her womenfolk, weaving the structures is a delicate but rewarding task.

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