



EXPLORE

Field Notes National Geographic explorers, photographers, and writers report from around the world**Tanzania**

The Maasai: changed, for better or worse, by cell phones

TIMOTHY BAIRD *Geography researcher*

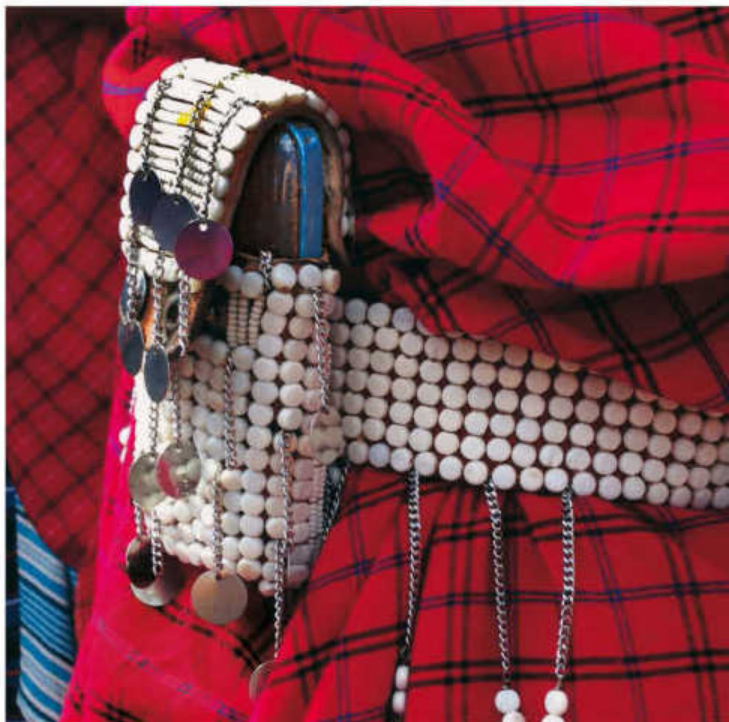
The Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania live a semi-nomadic, pastoral life, seeking out areas of fresh pasture and building enclosures to protect their livestock. For cultural anthropologists who wonder how off-the-grid people are being changed by a world of screens, Internet, and fast communication, the Maasai are an ideal test case.



Tim Baird is observing the transformation in progress. “Phones are a profound new tool for them,” says Baird, a Virginia Tech geography professor who has studied Maasai cell phone culture under a National Geographic grant. Instant connectivity where none existed before has changed the type of people a Maasai person can reach, he says, and the type of information shared. That includes weather data for farmers, market prices for livestock, and—even though tradition sometimes dictates arranged marriages between young girls and older men—ways for girls to flirt with boys their own age. After all, Baird notes, even some older-model mobile phones can access Facebook.

Phones can store money, which has introduced Maasai to mobile banking (and its untidy companion, fraud). Business transactions are faster and more efficient when they don’t have to be conducted face-to-face. When Baird convened groups of Maasai to discuss phone culture, men consistently mentioned two things they photograph: women and cows.

Baird has heard the criticism that 21st-century technology is diluting the historically



Even simple cell phone models call for accessories, which in East African Maasai villages are often handmade.

rustic culture. But that critique rarely comes from Maasai themselves, who, according to Baird’s findings, generally see a mobile phone as a tool that’s empowering rather than intrusive. “They’re not jumping on Epicurious to see how to make a soufflé; they’re using phones in ways that are relevant to their lives,” he says. “Phones help them solve their problems.” —*Daniel Stone*

Myanmar (Burma)

Journeys with beloved elephants

MOLLY FERRILL *Young Explorer*

Ferrill reports: My first insight into the Burmese people’s respect for elephants came from Ma Lwin, a shopkeeper in a farming village in the western Bago Mountains. It was

