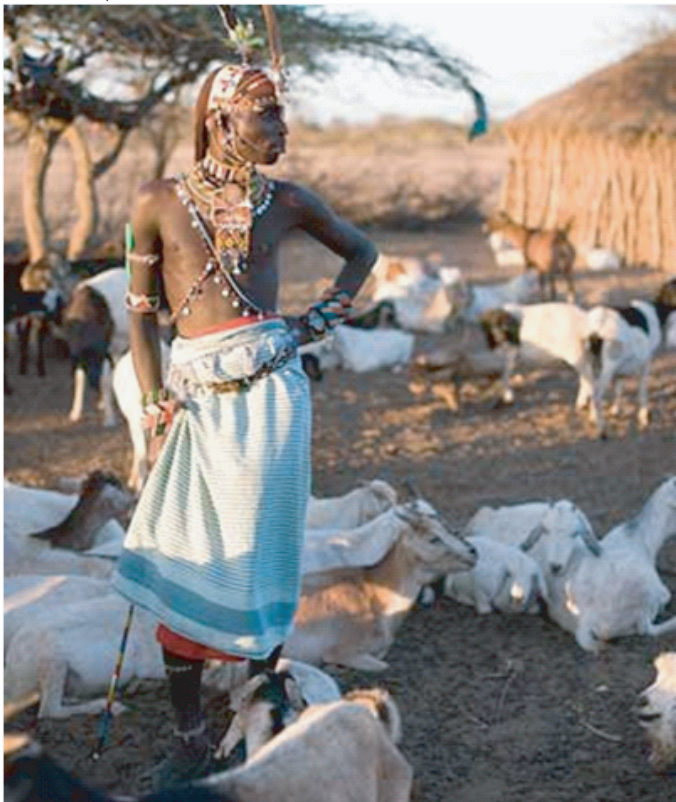


Real Safari Chic, or Why Only Tourists Wear Khaki

05/13/09 | By Shane Mitchell

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My friends Lopoyan Lemarti and Kundari “Boniface” Pasulan each have one foot in the modern world while the other remains firmly in the manyatta. (Kiswahili for village.) Conveniently, these two safari guides wear the open-toe sandals fashioned from recycled rubber tires that Kenyans call Thousand Milers. Lemarti is a Samburu; Boniface belongs to the neighboring Laikipiak Maasai tribe. During the hot, dry months before the spring monsoon season brings welcome rain to equatorial Africa, both wrap kikoï, a striped cotton sarong, around their waists. They also stack elaborately beaded necklaces and bracelets on their spare, muscular frames. Even here on the arid plains below the Laikipia Plateau, in this outmost region of northern Kenya, tribal styles change quickly—just proof that wearing last year’s look is social death in every culture. That’s why the three of us recently climbed in a Trooper and jolted overland from Lemarti’s Camp on the Uaso Nyiro River to a neighboring village on the Koiya Group Ranch.

After completing their morning chores, Maasai women often gather under the shade of a drought-toughened acacia to bead and sell new jewelry. On this visit, they laid out on the ground magpie-bright belts, bangles, chokers and tasseled collars. I

noticed that iridescent beads imported from India have come into vogue. While beadwork has been a favored personal adornment in Africa for thousands of years, more recent trade with the Far East and Europe has influenced accessories beyond indigenous traditions. As I negotiated for a beaded cuff and cow hair fly whisk, Lemarti choose a carved rungu club for his collection.

Then Boniface invited us into his mud-and-wattle house, where his wife Josephine brewed chai with fresh milk from their herd of goats. A cooking fire kept the communal room warm and slightly smoky, so carrying my tin mug back outside, I was immediately surrounded by children who grabbed up newborn lambs to show them off. They bowed shaved heads for me to touch their crowns with my palm in a formal greeting and then skipped away, giggling at the unadorned mzungu woman. Just then, honey bees swarmed my faded blue jeans. (Khaki is the default color for tourists on safari because it doesn’t show dirt or attract pesky insects, but since I look awful in tan my new whisk came in handy.)

Once the others finished their morning tea, I asked Boniface to show me how he wraps kikoï so that it doesn’t accidentally come undone and flop to the ground when trotting full tilt, iron spear in hand, through thorny scrub. “A warrior always shows his chest,” he claimed, pointing to an abdomen notched with ritual scars. (Before becoming a guide, Pasulan earned a college degree in AIDS counseling.) He



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untied a striped swath and then wrapped it round and round again on his narrow hips, folding the tasseled edge and tucking a corner behind his back to fasten it. Joining us, another warrior named Meggis Lemanyass showed me the pheasant feather in his ndarasha headdress and a plastic hand mirror stamped “made in China” strapped to a bicep sling. The metal charms on his chest bands jingled softly. Meggis’s kikoi was flipped over a beaded belt to expose a lethal-looking machete.

Back at camp, I talked tribal fashion with Lermarti’s wife, designer Anna Trzebinski, who embellishes her own line of suede coats and pashmina shawls with African bead patterns at a studio workshop in Nairobi. “When you are a warrior, your job is to adorn yourself and protect the tribe,” she said. “These men really are peacocks and will use whatever they come in contact with, from white ash for

body paint to plastic flowers for their headdresses.” Or, in Lemarti’s case, pairing his everyday beads with stunning crocodile wrist cuffs and a Gucci jacket for occasional forays to the Explorer’s Club in Manhattan. (Former members Ernest Hemingway and Theodore Roosevelt, both safari junkies, never looked so good in their rumpled khaki.)

Then Anna explained that the pepper-red checked wool cloth called shuka, which has become a Maasai trademark, was originally introduced by Scottish missionaries. It seems the tribesmen just picked apart stitches from kilt pleats, and then knotted the tartan like a shawl around their shoulders. That’s superplaid.

Shane Mitchell is Travel + Leisure’s special correspondent.

Photos by James Fisher