



## THE ROLE OF SAMBURU BODY ADORNMENT IN CHALLENGING GENDER IDENTITIES IN THE ERA OF CULTURAL GLOBALISATION

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### ABSTRACT

*Samburu body adornment identifies a woman's beauty, husband and social rank in the community through colour, pattern and mass. In the last sixty years, as a result of Kenya's entrance into the global economy, Samburu women have turned the indigenous body adornment into commodities creating products for western tourists. The ability of Samburu women to create employment has articulated their empowerment and in turn challenged the patriarchal gerontocracy norms dominant in Samburu culture. The study was informed by cultural theory. Culture includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs and other skills acquired by man as a member of society. Cultural history focuses on the changes and practices in human agency. Culture is transmitted across generations through the memory which is a faculty of the individual mind. Data was collected by use of oral interviews, archival search, non-participant observation as well as thorough the examination of secondary sources from various libraries. The data was analyzed using Ex Post Facto design.*

**Key Words:** Samburu, Women, Culture, Gender, Globalisation

### OVERVIEW

Many pre-colonial Kenyan communities placed great significance on decoration of both functional and ritual objects, and the body. Among communities such as the Kuria and the Samburu, this was raised to the form of high art.<sup>1</sup> The Samburu place great significance on body adornment. The Samburu County covers an area of roughly 21,000 km<sup>2</sup> (8,000 mi<sup>2</sup>) in northern Kenya where the Samburu community live. It stretches north from the Wuaso Ng'iro River to the south of Lake Turkana and also includes Mount Kulal which lies just east of Lake Turkana. The County has three constituencies: Samburu East, North and West. The County is predominantly rural with more than 87% of its population living in rural areas. The County's headquarters is Maralal. Other main centers are Poror, Wamba, Archer's Post and Barsaloi. The County is divided into six administrative divisions: Baragoi, Kirisia, Lorroki, Nyiro, Wamba and Waso. Tourism potentials exist in the County. People travel from far and near to visit sites like Samburu National Reserve, Buffalo Springs National Reserve, Mount Ng'iro, Ndoro Mountains, Mathews Range (Ol Doinyo Lenkiyo), Kirisia Hills, and Loroki Forest which have contributed immensely to the development of the County.<sup>2</sup>

The Samburu are known to have originated from Sudan, settling north of Mount Kenya and south of Lake Turkana in Kenya's Rift Valley region. Upon their arrival in Kenya in the about fifteenth Century, the Samburu parted ways with their Maasai cousins, who moved further south while the Samburu moved north. The Samburu are considered even more traditional and remote than their Maasai cousins, and have maintained the authenticity of their culture by sticking to their ancient traditions and defying modern trends.

### DISCUSSION

Magor states, "Asis was believed to be the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent creator of the world giving fertility to men, animals, and plants and is, for that reason, called father."<sup>3</sup> Relative this research, it is important to note the lack of inclusion of women in the preceding statement. The Samburu believed Asis created men superior to women, thus men believed it was their right to subordinate women. Therefore, in order to please their god, men continually espoused power over women. In the same vein, Spencer argues that the male Samburu

<sup>1</sup>P. Spencer, *The Samburu: A Study of Gerontocracy in a Nomadic Tribe*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Spencer, *The Samburu*

<sup>3</sup> T. Magor, *African Warriors: The Samburu*, London: Harry N. Abrams, 1994, p.23.

considered himself the center of human perfection and the decision maker. Production of body adornment was solely a woman's work. This is due to the fact that it fell into the category of work that would mitigate male perfection if performed by males. Therefore, it was relegated to females who were already believed to be givers of life and creators of designs.<sup>4</sup>

The Samburu had no form of centralized government that maintained control over the population as a whole. Instead of a central authority, there was an age-set system based on rites of passage. Age and gender were the key axes in social organization, and, in the quest to uphold traditions

and rituals, social organization was dependent upon age-set rituals. Samburu society, was created by *Asis*, was patrilineal, patriarchal, and polygamous. Social organization featured an extremely hierarchal system, awarding elder Samburu men the highest status in the community for they were believed to possess spirits that directly implicated blessing or curse.

For Samburu children, there is little discrepancy between their reception and treatment based on sex. However, as anthropologist Pavitt explains:

Tasks, which are later sex-specific, such as gathering firewood, weeding, milking, or grinding grain, are entirely interchangeable among boys and girls. Older than this there is increasing emphasis on the division of labor by sex, intensified association with groups of the same sex, and diverging expression of sexuality and the conduct of courtship.<sup>5</sup>

As such, men and women moved through a series of separate age-sets, which consisted of rituals based on both history and religion. Due to the importance of rituals among the Samburu, in the following section discussion of the most important rite of passage for both men and women, as well as explain male and female relationships and expectations of one another in order to show how this expression of a hierarchal belief in distinction between the sexes disassociated men from women in nearly all aspects of Samburu life.

Initiation into adulthood centered on circumcision and was the most important ritual in a Samburu's life. It was up to the individual boy or girl to decide when they want to undergo initiation. However, most started the process around puberty, at the age of nine or ten. Initiation took place over a period of two to three months and includes circumcision, a seclusion period, and a public coming out ceremony. It was relevant to note that because marriage happened immediately after circumcision, a female generally went through initiation in the night before her marriage, in this case, a man's other wives or other women helped the woman integrate into her new setting. This action may be viewed from two perspectives: "One is that the woman accepted her position in the patriarchal system the other is that the woman was making her own statement of solidarity outside and separate from the patriarchal order."<sup>6</sup>

Hence, circumcision symbolized a mark of social maturity and identity. Namely, in that when they have completed initiation, their expectations and position in society have altered and they are now expected to become fully grown, responsible members of society. However, the responsibilities and expectations of the respective sexes were quite different as expressed by Nakamura:

When a Samburu female completes initiation into adulthood, she is expected to come out of it with a full understanding of her roles as wife, mother, and provider. The suitable body adornment for a wife was the husband's duty. A newly married woman walked home with her husband with her entire body covered with a hide apron known as *logesana*. This apron was given by the husband to signify to the rest of the community that she had abandoned all her amorous affairs with the *murran* and that her husband had power over her procreative life. Upon marriage and onwards a woman is identified by the name of her husband, whereas a man is not.<sup>7</sup>

After marriage, a husband and wife maintained seemingly separate lives. As mentioned earlier, the roles each sex took upon becoming an adult did not encourage or create circumstances where a man and wife spent an excessive amount of time together, fostering an intimate bond. Couples did not confide in each other and often carried a great amount of enmity towards one another.<sup>8</sup>

Although both modernity and globalization have offered the opportunity for women to have more freedom, most research suggests that animosity towards the opposite sex still persists. Jepkorir elaborates on a woman's position within the community: Woman is a property, and must do as she is told and all the work. Women accept these

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<sup>4</sup> Spencer, *The Pastoral Continuum: The Marginalization of Tradition in East Africa*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> N. Pavitt, *Samburu*, London: Kyle Cathie Ltd, 2006, p.34.

<sup>6</sup> Pavitt, *Samburu*

<sup>7</sup> K. Nakamura, "Development in Flamboyant Ornaments: Social Changes of the Samburu *Murran*, Kenya," *Africa Report*, Vol. 3, No.4, pp.32.

<sup>8</sup> Pavitt, *Samburu*

truths, but not without resentment. They often complain that they are “treated like animals” or “traded like cattle.” The resolute is an undercurrent of hostility equivalent to a long-standing armed truce.<sup>9</sup>

The Samburu have been dependent on and committed to both pastoralism and agriculture as their primary subsistence modes throughout their history. It is estimated that the majority of the Samburu today are primarily pastoralists who live off products of their herds’ milk, blood, and meat, and who keep cattle, goats, and sheep. Cows are the single most important animal for the Samburu, as it represents a family’s social and economic status within the community. In the recent years, pastoralism as a livelihood has undergone an increased number of challenges. The Samburu have seen a reduction in their land area as a result of the establishment of protected lands by the Kenyan government. As a result, pure pastoralism is no longer an option for the Samburu. Westernization and globalization have caused the Samburu to both integrate their primary subsistence modes into the modern cash economy and also find ways to use their material culture as a commodity.

With the entry of Samburu body adornment into the global economy, the Samburu women similarly were able to integrate their body adornment to fit in the global market. Having the capability to trade, Samburu women have gained more resources and, thus, more opportunities to create and manipulate colour schemes and patterns. The Samburu women are aware of what Westerners expected to see in the market, most often a traditional item that can be worn in a modern society. As a result, the Samburu women have realized they must sacrifice their own identity and that of their culture to a certain extent in order to create a cultural product that would sell in a global economy. A bead seller explained:

An overall preference for red colour was regarded beautiful since it was linked to life. Different coloured beads alternating between red and white, red and blue were acceptable, as well as stringing several red beads together. What were not considered beautiful were groupings of yellow and black, brown or plain black. Such colours were likened to colours of goats and starvation.<sup>10</sup>

The Samburu women have realized they have to create a combination of almost all colours because that is what is considered “hot” in the market.<sup>11</sup> The element of patriotism and being of Kenyan origin has influenced the production of body adornment by the women using the colours of the Kenya national flag and emblem. Political parties have similarly embraced the use of specific colours and beaded clothes, hats and shoes famously known as ‘Maasai sandals’ in making their slogans and campaign outfits.

While some materials still originate in Samburu, a majority of the materials, in particular the beads are now imported from other countries. This has necessitated the need to open more bead markets for instance in Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru and Eldoret. In this way Samburu women are able to migrate to larger cities where some settle for the rest of their lives. The women are able to sell their body adornment to visitors for profitable prices because tourists are unaware of the local value. In return the Samburu women have learnt to strategically create the beadwork. By using traditional techniques, Samburu women from the 1990s employed hybridism. Mudimbe expounds on hybridism:

First it takes the sense of an interrupted tradition, not out of desire for purity which would testify only to the imagination of dead ancestors, but in a way that reflects the conditions today. Second, a methodical in the artist’s labour beginning, in effect, with an evaluation of the tools, means and projects of adornment within a social context transformed by colonialism and later currents, influences and fashions from the West.<sup>12</sup>

Exposure and exploration of other cultures by Samburu women proves evident in their body adornment. Straight affirms this by stating:

Some cultural traditions still form an integral part of the Samburu daily life. Often women blend the old technique with modern elements to present a fascinating contrast of old and new. Across the Samburu land you will find stylized images of airplanes, Coca cola and beer bottle tops fixed on the bangles and bracelets.<sup>13</sup>

Samburu women blend old and new techniques to create necklaces that supplied the Western viewer with thoughts that the art they just purchased is indeed “traditional.” The “old” implies the traditional techniques that the woman applies to create the necklaces. The “new” implies the ways in which Samburu women conform to Western standards as to what is popular at the time.

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<sup>9</sup> R. Jepkorir, *African Women and Globalization: Dawn of the 21st Century*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Lena Lelesit, November, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> J. Akama, *Cultural Tourism in Africa: Strategies for the new Millennium*, Arnhem: Association for Tourism and Leisure Education, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> V. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> B. Straight, “From Samburu Heirloom to New Age Artifact: The Cross- Cultural Consumption of *Mporo* Marriage Beads,” *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 104, No.1, 2002, p.21.

With the integration of old and new technique comes empowerment. Under this circumstance, empowerment is perceived as, "a process by which people acquire power and command real resources within and outside their locality."<sup>14</sup> Thus while a Samburu woman produce body adornment for her family she is free to sell her ornaments and acquires cash to provide for her family and save the extra cash in the bank.

Samburu women have learnt to depend on the idea that African adornment is authentic and original. An informant from the field further explained:

tourists want to hear the history of the body adornment they are about to buy. Beside narrating the story, the woman may remove the body adornment from her own body and place them on the tourists so that they feel reassurance and satisfaction knowing they are indeed receiving a piece of authentic body adornment.<sup>15</sup>

Thus Samburu body adornment speaks no longer just to the indigenous community, but now serves also as an aesthetic commodity, an economic bridge to the 21<sup>st</sup> century for these women and their families.

### SUMMARY

By investigating the concept of globalization, it becomes apparent that Samburu women have used their skills in designing body adornment to fit within the global market. This has provided avenues for the women to feel empowered and challenge gender identities constructed previously by patriarchal domains in Samburu community.

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<sup>14</sup> V. Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Frameworks*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Lolesan Lalesa, O.I, November, 2012.