



## THE EVOLUTION OF SAMBURU ADORNMENT RUTH NYAMBURA<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Self-adornment plays a significant role in individual and social life in most communities. The Samburu place great significance on adornment. Adornment among the Samburu ranges from painting, scarring, attire and ornaments. The paper investigates the origin of the Samburu community and evolution of the adornment pattern to present. The paper 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. Adornment is a societal practice and basically the skin serves as a visible way of defining individual identity and cultural differences. Data was collected by oral interviews, archival search, non-participant observation as well as through the examination of secondary sources from various libraries. The data was analysed using Ex Post Facto design. The study will contribute to the maintenance of the Samburu adornment in the Kenya's historiography. Further, the research findings will be useful to researchers who may wish to study aspects of adornments among other communities.

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### Overview

A People's culture is synonymous with their civilization, with all its processes of continuity and change. Culture finds expression in a people's values, beliefs and rituals as well as possession. It is reflected in people's social, economic, judicial, political and value systems. The implication here is that the cultural identity of a people is based upon, and consists of, the totality of their values, norms, traditions, language and their inward and outward manifestations. All these combine and bestow upon a people or ethnic group a particular identity and niche.<sup>1</sup>

The history and culture of the Samburu offer a rich insight into the history and communities of Kenya. The Samburu community is made up of pastoralists who belong to the *Maa* speakers. The term *Maa* speakers denotes the large cultural affiliation of herders who share language, economy, social organization and history. These include the Samburu, Illchamus and the Maasai.<sup>2</sup> These herders are nearly similar in personal adornment, which could be explained by a shared place of origin and their interactions, which shaped their technology and adornment practices.<sup>3</sup>

The Samburu adornment is a subject about which historians should have much to say, yet they have remained silent. Indeed description of Samburu adornment has only been present in anthropological texts. Why should historians bother about adornment? Because around the globe man does something to adorn himself. While the question of why historians have not given the Samburu adornment attention, this chapter's major goal was to review the evolution of the Samburu adornment.

### Human Evolution and Adornment in Africa

Human evolution began in Africa. Over 90, 000 years ago hominids in Africa developed many modern anatomical features, and sometime before 100,000 years, in a period of interglacial climates, expanded their range from Africa to include adjacent warm-climate areas of the Levant. In this period the hominids concentrated more on food and securing shelter. Despite Ice-Age conditions, fully modern humans of that time advanced right across the eastern hemisphere

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<sup>1</sup> B.A. Ogot, "New Trends in Cultural History 'The Silence in Old Narratives'" *Journal of East Africa Research and Development*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1992, pp. 38-39.

<sup>2</sup> J. Holtzman, *Samburu*, New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

within a relatively few thousand years, even into periglacial climes.<sup>4</sup> Neanderthal and other hominid populations everywhere eventually became extinct in the face of the advance of fully modern humans. The crucial changeover was the development of language between 100,000 and 50,000. The ability of the hominids to use language, allowed humans to form significantly larger co-operative and habitation groups. In addition there was emergence of mental and imaginative capacities.<sup>5</sup>

Among the capacities were major new developments in tools, adornment, symbolic expression, and social relations took shape between 90,000 and 55,000 BCE. These include the making of deliberately fashioned bone tools in East Africa; shell beads in southern and eastern Africa; and very small backed stone blade found earliest in southern Africa but later also in East Africa. Another significant development by the period was the exchange of valued kinds of stone or other goods over distance, indicative of the emergence of social relations of reciprocity and formal procedures for cooperation between separate communities.

For 35,000 years human beings, continued to gather and hunt wild food. Then, separately in different parts of the world, the climatic shifts at the end of the latest Ice Age set off a long episodic “First Great Transition” of human history, they formed a culture that expressed people’s values, beliefs and rituals as well as their material possession. The major economic activities were nomadic pastoralism and hunting and gathering. They literally carried everything they owned with them. This included tools and large numbers of decorative and beautiful ornaments.<sup>6</sup>

Archeologists have found evidence that as early as 20,000 years later people did not just exist, they were living well. This was referred to as “Upper Paleolithic Revolution.” This time; man had stopped concentrating on obtaining food but turned to production of ornaments. As Fernandes writes:

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<sup>4</sup> S. McBrearty and A. Brooks, “The Revolution That Wasn’t: A New Interpretation of the Origin of Modern Human Behavior,” *Journal of Human Evolution*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2000, pp. 453-563.

<sup>5</sup> P. Lieberman and R. McCarthy, “Tracking the Evolution of Language and Speech: Comparing Vocal Tracts to Identify Speech Capabilities,” *Expedition*, Vol.49, No.2, 2001, pp. 15-20.

<sup>6</sup> S. Ambrose, “Small Things Remembered: Origins of Early Microlithic Industries in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Thinking Small: Global Perspectives on Microlithization*, Vol. 2, No. 12, 2002, pp.67-78.

One reason is that human beings now had enough time on their hands. They could obtain enough food for several days within five or six hours. This gave them time to think, dream and a desire to give those dreams form in tangible objects....Needles and pins were needed for sewing, blades were used for carving, cutting and shaping. There were grinding stones which may have been used to crush pigments such as ochre. Those with the talent to do so could now create objects like strings and hang things whose sole purpose was aesthetic beauty....<sup>7</sup>

Negri affirms Fernandes work by adding that patterns which re-occur throughout African societies are reproduced on the body since they represent the people's beautiful qualities. Similarly, social and ethnic values are imprinted using aesthetically pleasing designed patterns.<sup>8</sup>

Among the three sets of peoples of the three language families that predominate across the continent today, adornment probably began in early stages of human evolution. The Nilo-Saharan people spread out in the areas around the east of the middle Nile River in what is today the Sudan. Peoples of a second family, Niger-Kordofanian, spread across an emerging east-west belt of savanna vegetation from the eastern Sudan to the western Atlantic coast of Africa. In the same era, communities speaking languages of the Erythraic branch of the Afrasian (Afroasiatic) family expanded beyond their origin areas in the Horn of Africa, northward to modern-day Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

The return of colder, drier conditions in 10,900-9500 BCE set off a new round of subsistence innovation. Man found nature fascinating for he obtained his food by killing wild animals but it was in plants that he could depend with confidence. He also realized that the plants could be put to a wide variety of other usages. He could chew, use them as stimulants, paint and protect

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<sup>7</sup> B. Fernandes, *Who made the first Beads?* London: Harlequin Beads & Jewellery, Bead Information Library, 2009, p.45.

<sup>8</sup> G. Negri, *Illuminations: Savage Money*, London: Academic Press, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> C. Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002.

himself from wild animals, thus the need to domesticate and protect the plants. Further, man realized that plants produced scents that attracted wild animals easily for him to feed on.<sup>10</sup>

It is after this discovery that in a few areas of the world people began protecting plants and animals, in this fashion laying the earliest foundations for agriculture. The rise of agriculture after 9500 BCE, separately and independently in different parts of the world, quantitatively transformed the directions of human history. The deliberate tending of plants and animals multiplied by magnitudes the amounts of food potentially obtainable from the same amount of land. However, Nilo-Saharan people of the south eastern Sahara took a very different first step toward agriculture. In the mid-tenth millennium BCE, a belated shift to wetter conditions spread Mediterranean climate, with cool-season rains. This made the inhabitants move with their animals from one place to another in search of pasture. They had important contacts too, with the contemporary Afrasian communities east of them in the Red Sea hills region.<sup>11</sup>

These communities spoke early daughter dialects of the proto-Cushitic language. Earlier, the Cushites began, like the Northern Sudanese, to raise cattle and either collected or cultivated sorghum. Of importance is that the Nilo-Saharan people acquired glass beads from the communities living around the Red Sea hills. These beads had been imported from Egypt from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium.<sup>12</sup> As observed by Carrier while recollecting the role of beads in African culture:

After perfuming him with incense in the morning, the King and his sons were taken to their private quarters and dressed in glass beads. Shiny massive beads were worn on the neck and upper parts of the arms. Before retiring for the night the neck beads were removed and put in a special cabinet.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> K. Mehra, "Folk Use of Plants for Adornment," *Economic Botany*, Vol. 29, No.1, 1975, p. 29-46

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> B. Richard, *First Footsteps in East Africa*, Toronto: General Publishing Co., Ltd, 1987.

<sup>13</sup> J. Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700*. New York: Routledge, 1995, p.77.

Ilife notes that following aridity in the 5<sup>th</sup> Millennium, pastoralists from the Sahara had graves differentiated by age and gender:

The inhumations of men were the richest as regards furnishing fine pottery vessels painted with ochre and necklaces composed of beads of carnelian and bone, lib studs, lumb of ochre and shells....Inhumations of women contained, pottery vessels, personal adornments such as necklaces of carnelian beads, beads made of marine shells used to decorate loin cloth. Graves of children contained pottery vessels, necklaces, nose studs and lumps of ochre.<sup>14</sup>

On the same vein Oliver adds:

In looks these people were slim and tall. They wore little clothing but decorated their heads with tufts. Their primary occupation was herding cattle and there is no indication that they were cultivators.<sup>15</sup>

It is possible to conclude that the glass beads acquired by the Nilo- Saharan communities who were purely pastoralists became part of their trade items and adornment.

Hewitt affirms that in many traditional pastoral societies, which climate and custom permit scant clothing and body painting is common and considered to be artistically and socially valuable.<sup>16</sup>

On the same, Trowel observes, “the exposure of more parts of the body, because of their hot climate, made the African pastoralists skillfully decorate the body.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly Dunlap states that there is a relationship between modesty and nudity or scanty clothing. “Any degree of nudity is perfectly modest as soon as we become thoroughly accustomed to it. This is the case of pastoral nomadic communities.”<sup>18</sup> Cole concludes by adding that because pastoralists are by nature mobile people, they must create art that is easy to transport.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> J. Ilife, *Africans: The History of a Continent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.67.

<sup>15</sup> R. Oliver, *History of East Africa Volume 3*, London: James Currey, 1976, p.98.

<sup>16</sup> K. Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink*, Bowling Green State: University Popular Press, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> M. Trowel, *African Designs*, London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1980.

<sup>18</sup> K. Dunlap, “The Development & Function of Clothing,” *The Journal of General Psychology*, Vol. 1, No.1, 1928, pp.64-78.

<sup>19</sup> H. Cole, “Vital Arts in Northern Kenya,” *African Arts*, Vol.7, No. 2, 1974, pp.132-143.

Ilife mentions that these pastoralists may have been the Cushitic speakers who by the 5<sup>th</sup> Millennium had spread southwards from Sudan into East Africa through the Rift Valley. During their movement they found enough wet land with lots of rainfall and embraced the culture of fishing and pottery making. As rainfall declined thereafter, the Cushitic group sat around the fire place in the evening and painted their legs with ochre, put on necklaces made of chipped bones while asking the gods to bring the rains.<sup>20</sup> The Nilo-Saharan speakers with whom they exchanged food and cattle might have copied this culture although no exact archeological sources confirm this.<sup>21</sup> From the above inference it is possible to explain the factors leading to evolution of adornment among the Samburu of Kenya who trace their origin from the Nilo-Saharan people.

### **Evolution of Samburu adornment**

The evolution of Samburu adornment seems to have revolved around their contact with their environment and contacts with their neighbours as a result of migration and settlement. During the first millennium CE, Nilotic speakers came to constitute a significant element in Kenya. The first group was the Southern Highland Nilotes, who trekked from the Southern Sudanese borderlands into the Western highland escarpment of the Rift Valley. There, they interacted closely with many of the indigenous hunter-gatherer groups, as well as the Southern Cushites. These Nilotes apparently adopted cultural institutions: including cycling age-sets and circumcision from the Cushitic speakers.<sup>22</sup>

Pavitt also hypothesize that the Samburu show traits of Hamitic acculturation. Hamitic speakers affiliates ancient Egyptians and communities living in the Southern Sudan region. Some practices included shaving of women's heads, removal of two teeth from the lower jaw, one legged posture while standing and elaborate dressing. Nevertheless, the ancient Egyptians circumcision ceremonies were similar to the Samburu. There are accounts of mass circumcisions and men holding the backs of the initiates which are reflected in the Samburu practices today.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ilife, *Africans*

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> J. Sutton, "East Africa before the Seventh Century," in G. Mokhtar *Ancient Civilizations of Africa*. UNESCO, London: MacMillan, 1981, pp.586-88.

<sup>23</sup> N. Pavitt, *Samburu*, London: Kyle Cathie Ltd, 2006.

Magor further adds that the Samburu warriors have similar adornment patterns with communities living in ancient Sudan that is, the use of red ochre and long braided hair.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, a study conducted by Fletcher on Egyptian mummies indicates that they:

Had well kempt hair. The artifacts found include bone, ivory, metal pins used to curl and braid red ochred hair...tightly braided tresses that were attached with beeswax were noted among the nobles.<sup>25</sup>

From the foregoing analysis, it appears the Samburu adopted their adornment from ancient Egyptian and Sudan communities.

From the Southern Highland Nilotes, an agro-pastoralist group of the Pokot group of Kalenjin speakers emerged.<sup>26</sup> They adopted elements of the social and material culture of the Southern Nilotes specifically the use of long, oval shields. The Southern Highland Nilotes on the other hand adopted the Pokot practice of seclusion period and “coming out” ceremony after circumcision.<sup>27</sup> Cohen a social anthropologist summarizes the general characteristics of the initiation ceremony through close examination of the Samburu, Maasai and Pokot as follows:

It is conducted by elders in specified time. It is done in seclusion and in small groups of same age. The novice is subjected to trials and both genders are involved. Rules are directed at the group rather than individuals. Non participants are excluded and there is a ceremony after the healing process.<sup>28</sup>

During the second half of the first millennium CE, Eastern or Plain Nilotes similarly quit their ancestral land in the Southern Sudan region and entered the Rift Valley of Kenya. Likewise, these ancestors of the *Maa* speakers abandoned the cultivation of sorghum and millet in favour of a pastoral mode of subsistence. Animal products from ostrich feathers, giraffe hides were used

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<sup>24</sup> T. Magor, *African Warriors: The Samburu*, London: Harry N. Abrams, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> J. Fletcher, *Cosmetics and Body Care in Clothing of the Pharaohs*, Leiden: Vogelsang Eastwood, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> Sutton, “East Africa before the Seventh Century,”

<sup>27</sup> J. Brad, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.

<sup>28</sup> G. Cohen, *Aesthetics and Colour among the Maasai and Samburu*, London: Duke University Press, 1988, p.46.

to decorate the skins made from slaughtered animals.<sup>29</sup> Dunlap further adds that, the earliest form of adornment among these pastoralists were items obtained in the hunt. “A proud hunter proclaimed his achievement by arranging a feather crown on his head to display successful acquired spoils of the chase”<sup>30</sup>

By the time the vanguard of the proto-*Maa* reached the environs of Mount Kenya, the group had divided into two main sections: the *Maa* and the Ongamo. The *Maa* remained in the area of Lake Baringo, while the Ongamo continued to move southwards.<sup>31</sup> Linguistically, the *Maa* began to split into Northern and Southern branches around the fifteenth century, with the North *Maa* trekking to the North and inhabiting the plains that extended North from Lake Baringo to the Southern environs of Lake Turkana. The region, being relatively moist compared to other Northern areas, was able to support the cattle and other livestock which the survival of the North *Maa* communities depended upon. According to Robert Shaw, by 1500 CE *Maa* speakers were the dominant group in the Rift Valley.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, the camel-herding Proto-Rendille Somali (PRS) culture inhabited the lands extending from Lake Turkana to the Juba River. By early sixteenth century, the PRS culture could be identified not only by its Somali language, but also by its possession of an age-set system and lunar calendar.<sup>33</sup> Ancestors of the Samburu are thought to have lived somewhere along the fluid boundaries of these two linguistic groups, that is: the Western fringe of the PRS culture and the Northern edge of the *Maa*. The interaction of the North *Maa* and the Western elements of the PRS culture are evident from mutual words borrowing. Schelee and Shongolo contend that most ornaments worn among the Rendille *murrans* are of Samburu origin and have Samburu names. The name red ochre, *ilkaria* is of *Maa* origin. Others include *ilmasi* for long braids, *nkeri* for long beads worn across the *murrans* chest and *ilkatar* for the arm bracelets by

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<sup>29</sup> Sutton, “East Africa before the Seventh Century,”

<sup>30</sup> Dunlap, “The Development & Function of Clothing,” p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> J. Sutton, *Thousand Years of East Africa*, Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1990.

<sup>32</sup> P. Robertshaw, *Early Pastoralists of South-Western Kenya*, Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1990.

<sup>33</sup> E. Fratkin, “Age-sets, Households and the Organization of Pastoral Production: The Ariaal, Samburu and Rendille of Northern Kenya,” *Research in Economic Anthropology*, Vol.8, No.2, 1987, pp. 295-314.

women.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the Samburu influenced the people who would become the Rendille in the way they pierced their earlobes and removed their incisor teeth. While circumcision appears to be originally a Cushitic practice, the Rendille likewise must have adopted some Samburu aspects of the initiation rite.<sup>35</sup>

Beads had been items of trade in Africa since antiquity. Arab and European traders had brought beads to the interior of East Africa as early as 1000AD with the main aim of encouraging indigenous consumption of foreign goods.<sup>36</sup> The Rendille acquired carnelian<sup>37</sup> beads from Marlie European traders in exchange for ivory in the early 1500. The beads were supposed to be hang on a giraffe tail hair. The beads acquired a local name *mporo*.<sup>38</sup> The *mporo* beads were worn by married women in marriage ceremonies. These beads were acquired by the Samburu who had been intermarrying with Rendille since 1760s.<sup>39</sup> Their intermarriage brought forth the Ariaal or Masagara community whose dialect has been drawn from Samburu and Rendille communities. Falkenstein states that Ariaal are “an outcome of the coalition between the Samburu and Rendille.”<sup>40</sup> More evidence is available from oral traditions.<sup>41</sup>

Beginning of the late 1790s the Samburu community divided community members into generations and eight exogamous phratries composed of several clans. This is when the warriors were barred from going out with married women. Something called ‘Lminong’ was also invented which barred *murrans* from eating at home as a way to separate them from the young and the

<sup>34</sup> G. Schelee and A. Shongolo, *Islam and Ethnicity in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia*, London: James Currey, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> T. Fumagalli, “A Diachronic Study of Change and Socio-Cultural Processes among the Pastoral Nomadic Samburu of Kenya, 1900-1975”, PhD Thesis, University of Nairobi: Institute of African Studies, 1977.

<sup>36</sup> M. Fitzgerald, *Beads Become Big Business*. Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1992.

<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that there is evidence of Carnelian beads around Lake Turkana region from as early as 400BP although there is no evidence of any cultural significance of these beads to pastoralists.

<sup>38</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, pp. 7–21.

<sup>39</sup> M. Amin. et.al, *Beautiful People of Kenya*, Nairobi: Camerapix Publishers International, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> E. Turton, “The Pastoral Tribes of Northern Kenya 1800–1916.” PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1970, The intermingling of the two ethnic groups has made it so that ‘one-third of the Samburu claim Rendille descent and many marry Rendille women.’”

<sup>41</sup> P. Spencer, *Nomads in Alliance: Symbiosis and Growth among the Rendille and Samburu of Kenya*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973, Oral traditions aver that “for many centuries, the two [Samburu and Rendille] fought against their common enemies together, migrated to new tracts of land together, and lived interspersed with the Samburu herding their cattle and the Rendille herding their camels together.”

elderly. Then the warriors were advised to associate only with girls and if caught with the elders' wives, they would be cursed. From then, a man was to participate in five *Imuget* ceremonies during his passage through *murranness*. Each ceremony was to mark a change in social status.<sup>42</sup> The 1790s marked the origin of the Samburu beading culture using carnelian beads which had been acquired from the Rendille since the 1760s. Swadener elaborates:

There was a big inter-generational fight all across the community territory, something that caused huge division among the married and non-married. The fight was when the sixth generation was circumcised and this was between *Lkukuyat*, *Lwantaro* and *Lg'erejon*. One of the moran leaders at that time of the *Lkipipilat* generation was found chatting with a married woman by the girl he had beaded in a married woman's house, she therefore decided to steal the spear which is normally left outside the door of the house; she took the spear and hid it in her 'singira'. When the warrior came out of the woman's house, he found that the spear was not there. He got so much worried that he called for an urgent crisis warriors meeting where he told the warriors what had just happened. After the warriors meeting, elders were called upon to help in solving the problem. One elder, a community leader gave the affected *murrans* two choices; either to go for raids with other *murrans* at Mount Tirre (today in southern Ethiopia) get as much cows as possible as only way to cover the scandal or try to have sex with all married women in the *manyatta*. The warrior decided to go for the first choice. He went for raids and lead his fellow *murrans*. When they succeeded the elders decided to put the rule of warriors 'beading girls' using the newly acquired *mporo* so that they don't keep on seducing married women.<sup>43</sup>

This explains the origin of the practice of warriors beading girls among the Samburu.

On the same, the Samburu emerged with a political system characterized by gerontocracy dominated by elders and ritual elders. These elders urged on the need to scarify the body of a

<sup>42</sup>H. Cole, "Living Art among the Samburu" in J. Cordwell. (ed.) et al, *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, London: Mouton Publishers,1979, pp.87-103.

<sup>43</sup> A. Swadener, et al, *Does the Village Still Raise the Child: A Collaborative Study of Changing Child Rearing and Early Childhood Education in Kenya*, Albany: New York Press, 2000, p.87.

new initiate to identify him from the rest of the community and to permit him to join *murranship*. Although from the field the informants did not have a clear reason for scarification, Radcliffe Brown in his study on African cultures offered a possible answer:

In Africa scarification was a mark symbolizing added value to all boys and girls who were at the threshold of adulthood. The individual was made to feel that his value, strength and qualities of which he may be proud was not by nature but was received by him from the society he was admitted to. The scars on his body were the visible marks of this admission.<sup>44</sup>

On the same, Radcliffe adduce that the women of East African pastoralists were noted to be scarred from the mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century to display responsibilities and roles within the community. The programme of marking followed a traditionally prescribed order. The first phase concentrated on the torso, at the age of about ten. The second phase was carried out under the breasts after menstruation and on the back, arms and legs after the birth and weaning of the first child. He adds that scarification not the only body modification used to denote rites of passage for a woman. Among other practices, a woman who had given birth wore a tight band, usually made of bark, around the limbs and waist to reshape the body. The pain caused as the band restricted the growth of extra fat bears witness to her acceptance of her new role within the tribe. Anyone refusing to undertake the rite of passage was once certain to be ostracized from the community. Radcliffe ascertains that this was a similar practice noted among the Southern Sudan communities in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>45</sup>

In Turkana oral histories, the camel herders recall their occupation of E Turkana, the land that would become their contemporary home. In the region between Mount Pelekech and the great alkaline lake that bears their name, sometime in the period between 1760 and 1800, an ancestral Turkana leader first encountered a group of people whom they called the Ngikor or Kor. The Turkana remember coming across “red people” who had light skin and “coloured their hair and

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<sup>44</sup> R. Brown, *A Handbook of African Laws & Customs*, London: Heinemann, 1935, p.315.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

bodies red with clay.”<sup>46</sup> The Turkana further claim that they acquired camels from the *Maa* speakers. Turkana traditions states that their ancestors drove these people from the highland region and persisted in raiding the Ngikor for their livestock.

The period 1800 to 1900 was characterized by major evolution on the trend of adornment among the pastoralist communities. This emanates from the many ecological disasters that occurred in this period. During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, the Turkana engaged with a number of wars of expansion in which they drove the Samburu beyond the tip of Lake Turkana. In this process, the Turkana acknowledge to have assimilated many of the Ngikor. This explains the massive adoption of the Samburu *murrans* practice of adorning themselves with ochre adopted by the Turkana. On the other hand to emulate an appearance that was different to their own, the *murrans* adopted the elaborate Turkana hairstyle of plastering the crowns and backs of their heads with blue clay. Larick further argues that such borrowing could have included weapons like spears and bows.<sup>47</sup> The Turkana hairstyle lasted for fourteen years, by which the Samburu moved to the North of their former homeland and the *murrans* resplendent once more in traditional ochred braids.<sup>48</sup>

In 1840s, the Samburu had moved near Lake Baringo. The Samburu by now lacked the cohesion and political structure of an identifiable community as the Turkana were still forcing them out of their territory. Here they were allied to the Ilchamus who still live beside this Lake.<sup>49</sup> The closeness is affirmed by Pavitt who stated that “the Ilchamus have close kinship ties with a section of the Lmasula, the largest, of the eight Samburu clans”<sup>50</sup> Similarly Anderson contends that:

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<sup>46</sup> J. Lamphear, *Traditional History of the Jie, Aspects of becoming Turkana*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>47</sup> R. Larick, *Sedentary Makers and Nomadic Owners: The Circulation of Steel Weapons in Samburu District, Kenya*, Nairobi: Institute of African Studies, 1984.

<sup>48</sup> Pavitt, *Samburu*

<sup>49</sup> P. Spencer, *The Pastoral Continuum: The Marginalization of Tradition in East Africa*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

<sup>50</sup> Pavitt, *Samburu*, p.9.

Strongest and most dominant cultural influence on the Ilchamus has undoubtedly come from the Samburu. This is reflected in language, mode of dress, the arrangement of the clan system and the various other social institutions.<sup>51</sup>

In the era between 1840 and 1860 the Samburu were now living around Mount Nyiru and Mount Kulal. Here they wrestled against the Galla and they were able to acquire herds and arms that made them expand further to the pastures along the eastern shores of Lake Turkana. Many Galla families were assimilated to the Samburu to such an extent that a number of clans can trace their origins back to them. The Samburu- Rendille alliance was able to contain the Turkana who had occupied as far as Elbarta Plains but this was for a shortwhile.<sup>52</sup>

A study by Ettagale shows that the Samburu adornment has existed due to trade with other communities from Europe and East Africa. Ettagale states that as the Samburu assimilated the Galla they also acquired few trade items which had been introduced to the Galla from Arab traders, sailing down the East African coast in dhows from around 1855. The Arab traders introduced tiny, colorful glass beads which were uniform in size and had been imported from Czech Republic. These beads, already drilled with precise center holes, could easily be strung on threads or sewn onto leather. Their variety meant they could also be arranged in contrasting colours and geometric patterns. This revolutionized the look of ornament in East Africa and other parts of the continent.<sup>53</sup>

In 1869 a cholera epidemic struck, marking the beginning of catastrophes among the Samburu. The seriousness of this epidemic is vividly recounted by James Christie, a medical doctor in Zanzibar in the early 1870s. According to him, Venetian traders who had gone to Samburuland contracted cholera and out of 150 that started the journey home, seven reached the coast alive.<sup>54</sup> In this period “trade routes carried four epidemics of cholera and possibly new trails of venereal diseases.”<sup>55</sup> As the epidemic spread south, it swept across Maasailand leaving in its trails of thousands of people dead. The Samburu suffered greatly from this scourge given that it spread

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<sup>51</sup> D. Anderson, “Cow Power”, *African Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1, 1983, pp. 227-260.

<sup>52</sup> Magor, *African Warriors*

<sup>53</sup> B. Ettagale, *The Glory of African Beadwork*, Oxford: Oxford University Printing Press, 2000..

<sup>54</sup> P. Francis, *The Story of Venetian Beads*, Lake Placid: Lapis Route Books, 1979.

<sup>55</sup> Ilife, *Africans*, p.185.

from their country to the south. The disease spread fast due to the mobility of traders into the land, warfare and clustering of large defensive settlement like the alliance formed by Samburu and Rendille. Indeed, the first explorer to cross Samburuland in 1888 Von Hohnell realized that the Dassanetch and Marlie European traders had participated in regional trade with Samburu and Rendille in the 1870s and introduced Venetian beads to the market. Venetian beads made of red and white glass beads vibrated the culture of the ailing Samburu population as observed by Hohnell:

The Venetian trade beads soon became available to the Samburu and Rendille and were named after and used to replace the pre-existing beads. This pattern of beads acquisition led to *mporo* necklace's evolution. The native bought beads in large quantities which increased the size of *mporo* necklaces from the pre-existing bead or two hung on a giraffe tail hair. Samburu and Rendille, and Samburu and Rendille women's neck ornaments generally, grew quickly.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile in the Lake Turkana basin, Turkana had consolidated their gains by the last quarter of the nineteenth century and continued to terrorize the Samburu to the eastern side of Lake Turkana. Unfortunately for the Samburu, this scourge occurred at a time when they had been weakened by the spread of smallpox from Abyssinia.<sup>57</sup> As Kjekshus observed:

Small pox.... In the 1890s...attacked the adults as well as the young and it therefore seems possible to conclude that the disease was re-establishing itself in this period after many years absence from East Coast.<sup>58</sup>

The Samburu associated smallpox with the Somali who were traversing northern Kenya during this period on trading missions. The community believed that due to mixing with many people,

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<sup>56</sup> L. Von Hohnell, *Discovery of Lakes Rudolf and Stephanie: A Narrative of Count Samuel Teleki's Exploring and Hunting Expedition in Eastern Africa*, London: Longmans, Greens and Co, 1894. p.146.

<sup>57</sup> Ilife, *Africans*

<sup>58</sup> H. Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika, 1850-1950*, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1977, p.132.

in the course of trading, the Somali were responsible for the spread of the afflictions and measures were taken to avoid coming in contact with their trading partners.

Similarly rinderpest wiped out the Samburu livestock wrecking their economy. This was affirmed by an informant who stated that “The Samburu could no longer make clothes from animal skins, pay bride price or trade with other neighbouring communities.”<sup>59</sup> To replenish their depleted herds the Samburu were forced to provide menial services to the Rendille as they rented some of their herds. Payment involved gifts of a few cows and promise of some calves after birth and full rights over the milk produced by the rented herd. This is how the Samburu were able to partly revive their economy.<sup>60</sup>

Some of the Samburu groups moved to live among the Elmolo who lived on South-east shores of Lake Turkana. The Samburu depended on the Elmolo diet based on hunting, honey gathering, bee keeping and fishing. However most Samburu families were destitute after losing all their stock and took other activities such production of mats, baskets and shoes from hippopotamus hides.<sup>61</sup> While the Elmolo embraced the Samburu language, circumcision and use of spears as affirmed by Spencer<sup>62</sup>, The Samburu on their part acquired hides, skins and ivory. This was crucial to the Samburu adornment, since from the 1890s the murrans abandoned their wooden earplugs and instead used the Elmolo ivory earplugs.<sup>63</sup>

Warriors procured ivory earplugs from curved raw ivory. Informants from Lmekuri age-set stated that ivory earplugs are believed to protect a warrior from harm and other misfortunes.<sup>64</sup>

This report was affirmed by Bronner who stated that:

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<sup>59</sup> Leshonga Leina, O.I April 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Republic of Kenya, Samburu District Draft Report: Ministry of Economic Planning and Development and Institute of African Studies, Nairobi, 1983.

<sup>61</sup> Pavitt, *Samburu*

<sup>62</sup> Although Spencer affirms that the language replacement of Elmolo by Samburu had already been completed before the turn of the nineteenth Century, Brenzinger disputes this and affirms that between 1890 and 1900 the Elmolo spoke a mixture of Elmolo and Samburu, kept no livestock and male circumcision was not practiced, two features in Samburu culture.

<sup>63</sup> Pavitt, *Samburu*

<sup>64</sup> O. Kahindi, “Cultural Perceptions of Elephants by the Samburu People of Northern Kenya,” MA Thesis, University of Strathclyde, 2001.

A Samburu is strictly forbidden from consuming certain animals such as warthogs, zebra and elephant no matter the circumstance. The Samburu believe that cattle would perish from the smell if elephant meat is brought into a homestead. An elephant is a second god to the Samburu. However from the 1890s the Samburu embraced ivory as part of their dress code<sup>65</sup>

Ivory became part of Samburu adornment symbolizing status. Each phratry and age set had only one ritual leader, *launoni* with certain duties and ritual powers. The phratries performed their activities at different times, places and followed different codes. Arnoldi and Ezra noted that at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century all Samburu *launoni* wore ivory finger rings and an elephant tail tip, *lenyau*, on their chest to signify their importance and status in the community.<sup>66</sup> Besides symbolism the Samburu used ivory as a protective charm. To protect babies from dying at birth, Samburu fixed a necklace talisman, *riati*, made of ivory on the child immediately after its birth. Similarly, during the *mutai* famine in the 1890s food was scarce and boys undergoing circumcision lost a lot of blood due to poor feeding. Boys were given ivory bracelets, *rap* to protect them from death and confer them blessings to prosper and retain their family line.<sup>67</sup> This practice has continued to present although it is not easy to acquire ivory since the government banned poaching of wild animals from 1990.<sup>68</sup>

Lynch and Robbins in their study on the relationship between art and ownership among East African pastoralist noted that “there exists a strong relationship between an engraved mark on an animal in a herd and a mark branded on the owner of that herd.”<sup>69</sup> They observed that brands on animals were made using a hot iron to differentiate sex and species of the animal. This was a common practice among Turkana, Maasai and Samburu pastoralists. The said pastoralists since

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<sup>65</sup> G. Broner, “Vegetation and land use in the Mathews Range area, Samburu District, Kenya,” PhD Thesis, Albert-Ludwigs University, 1989.

<sup>66</sup> M. Arnoldi and K. Ezra, *Elephant: The Animal and its Ivory in African Culture*, California: University of California, 1992.

<sup>67</sup> Kahindi, Cultural Perceptions of Elephants by the Samburu People of Northern Kenya

<sup>68</sup> S. Oldfield, and N. McGough, *A CITES Manual for Botanic Gardens*, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> M. Lynch and L. Robbins, “Animal Brands and Interpretation of Rock Art in East Africa” *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1977, p. 538.

antiquity branded similar marks on their bodies especially on the upper arm and thighs. On the contrary, Gartner states that branding as an adornment practice may have been picked by the Samburu from their interactions with the Elmolo in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>70</sup> Pavitt emphasizes on branding and states that:

When the Samburu moved in with the Elmolo there was need to brand each animal, so as to make work easier when looking for a missing one. Each animal was branded with the individual marks of a particular section or clan and ears cut in a special way to identify the owner's family.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, Larik contends that:

The Elmolo were known to have good craftsmen who also made mats and dresses from hides and skins. They also had blacksmiths who composed songs and sang as they worked especially when smelting by use of bellows. They scarified their bodies to wad off tiredness. This exercise brought enjoyment of the work and admiration from the onlookers who would often come to watch the blacksmiths or wait for their gadgets to be made. The blacksmiths sung to praise their works, tools and beautiful bodies, relate their experiences or expectations. This encouraged the onlookers who would request for similar marks on their bodies by the blacksmiths. Some of the onlookers were the Samburu young men<sup>72</sup>

The 1890s calamities and diseases among the Samburu were attributed to pollution influences that blocked internal digestion and blood circulation. These pollutants included eating the wrong foods, introduction of contagious substances from ill people and sorcery. Treating these health problems aimed at relieving blockages through herbal purgatives, laxatives and consultation of diviners, *loibonok* who dispensed protective medicines. Among the Samburu over 120 species of trees and shrubs were employed as purgatives, emetics and poultices. The plants, trees and

<sup>70</sup> U. Gaertner, *Elmolo*, New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 1995.

<sup>71</sup> Pavitt, *Samburu*, p.16.

<sup>72</sup> R. Larik, "Spears, Style and Time among Maa Speaking Pastoralists" *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, Vol 4, No. 3, 1985, pp. 206-220.

shrubs were used by the Samburu to cleanse and protect the body from evil people. The protective charms are worn to date to protect cattle and children from evil people.<sup>73</sup> One informant affirmed:

Immediately after birth, a string known as *alliam* is tied to the umbilical cord. It is made from traditional herbs known as *mparruai*. The *alliam* naturally falls off after some days. Its aim is to protect the child from evil eyes.<sup>74</sup>

In addition, from the 120 species the Samburu discovered that a variety of fragrance shrubs could be chewed and used as toothbrushes and deodorants while others like *Malvaceae* (Samburu name not known) was used as a protective wrist band for the bride.<sup>75</sup>

The Dasanetch who inhabit the Omo Valley in southern Ethiopia also welcomed the Samburu in their midst just like the Elmolo. The Dasanetch grew tobacco and cereals, having settled among these agriculturalists, the Samburu took to cultivation and as the physical environment improved they kept cattle through which they would revert to pastoralism. While some of them accumulated enough stock and rejoined their kinsmen to the south, others settled permanently among the Dasanetch and are today represented by the *Kuro* clan which traces its descent from the Samburu. The *Kuro* clan speaks a mixture of Samburu and Dasanetch languages. They are farmers but practice the Samburu culture.<sup>76</sup>

Having acquired cattle, the Samburu moved into the Leroghi and Laikipia plateau in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Leroghi plateau had been a home to the Laikipiak clan who were part of the Maasai since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Laikipiak had clashed with the Purko and Kisongo sections of the Maasai and were defeated in the 1880s. However Joseph Thomson, one of the earliest European explorers in the area states that this defeat did not result in the complete disappearance of the

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<sup>73</sup> E. Fratkin, "Traditional Medicine and Concepts of Healing among Samburu Pastoralists of Kenya" in *Journal of Ethnobiology*, Vol.16, No.1, 1996, pp.63-97.

<sup>74</sup> Lediran Lesilele, O.I. October 2012.

<sup>75</sup> Fratkin, "Traditional Medicine and Concepts

<sup>76</sup> P. Gifford, "Observation of Modern Settlement as an Aid to Archaeological Interpretation" PhD Dissertation, University of California, 1975.

Laikipiak. The Laikipiak families were absorbed by other neighbouring groups including Turkana, Ilchamus around Baringo and Samburu on the Leroghi. Rainy explains that the demise of the Laikipiak Maasai is believed by the Samburu to have been due to their selfish behaviour. In Samburu Language Laikipiak literally means “the selfish ones”.<sup>77</sup> Batheleme acknowledged that the Samburu intermarried with the Laikipiak in the early twentieth century and shared cultures.<sup>78</sup> Although oral sources attest the presence of Laikipiak in the Leroghi was a distinct entity.

Ettagale argues that from the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Laikipiak and Samburu used the same colours as symbols in their functions. For instance, Blue represented the sky and embraced *Nkai* who was the creator and giver of life. Green represented grass, a sacred element revered because it nourished the cattle that played a central role in the cycle of life. White was the life-sustaining colour of milk.<sup>79</sup> Evidence from the field approves Ettagale’s study. An informant gave an example:

Children are very important in our culture. They are a symbol of wealth. If a woman has a child or two yet fails to become pregnant again for some while, she will affix to her hair long strands of blue and pale green beads which will hang down her back as a good omen for pregnancy. Old women will advice her on the best months for wearing the beads but August is often favoured because *Nkai* blesses us with rains which replenishes the grass. If she conceives, she will continue to wear the beads until she gives birth and after birth she pours her first milk to *Nkai* as a form of thanksgiving. The Maasai also have a similar practice.<sup>80</sup>

The above evidence asserts that the Samburu use coloured adornments to appease their god and protect themselves from the evil spirits in the community.

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<sup>77</sup> M. Rainy, “Samburu Ritual Symbolism: An Adaptive Interpretation of Pastoralists Traditions,” *Journal of Social Science Information*, Vol.28, No.4, 1989, pp.785-819.

<sup>78</sup> J. Barthelme, *Fisher-Hunters and Neolithic Pastoralists in East Turkana, Kenya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

<sup>79</sup>B. Ettagale, *The Glory of African Beadwork*, New York: Rizzolli, 2000.

<sup>80</sup> Lolopida Lewoso , O.I December 2012.

Ettagale further adds that red is the most significant colour among the Samburu and Maasai. It represents life, purity, youthfulness and vigour. In the context of this argument, Ettagale adds that Samburu women's' and young men's' red ornaments is a form of colour coding. Colour coding is key because the power of beadwork to communicate meaningfully very much depends on the design and patterning of colours. He defines colour coding as the use of various colours to convey meaning in a given context. The author goes on to discuss the colour schemes of the traditional style of Laikipiak and Samburu:

The Maasai and Samburu combine the following colours in their ornaments white, light blue, grass green, pale yellow and red. They never have such colour schemes as black, pink, brown, orange or purple. These colours are associated with evil and bad omen. Of them all red is the most dominant.<sup>81</sup>

This position is in consistent with the theoretical views of Ellis and Westermarck in their study on African pastoralists and their extensive use of red ochre. They maintain that the original purpose of red ochre was to attract attention to the genitals and their erotic functions thus increasing the observer's sexual interest in the wearer. The use of red ochre provided a major indication of individual's willingness to participate in a free 'sexual market.'<sup>82</sup> An informant added that long red ochred hair among the *murrans* was a sign of peace, beauty and strength.<sup>83</sup>

On the same, another affirmed:

the reason why the Samburu *murrans* paste their hair with red ochre is to create a shade to shield their eyes from the sun and the enemy. similarly red ochred attracts women and makes the *murrans* sexual and more handsome.<sup>84</sup>

Another added:

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<sup>81</sup> Ettagale, *The Glory of African Beadwork*, p.178.

<sup>82</sup>J. Ellis & E. Westermarck, *African Pastoralists*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1903.

<sup>83</sup> Lekamario Sidai, O.I, October, 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Lekiyani Lekupe, O.I, October, 2012.

From a young age, Samburu women collect necklaces made of wire and wooden beads. Over the years until her marriage, she can amass a collection around her neck that weighs twenty to thirty pounds. The beads serve to elongate her neck and create a pleasing sound when she engages in courting dances. She paints her beads with red ochre to convey fertility that represents the colour of menstrual blood.<sup>85</sup>

From 1900, Laikipia was left open for encroachment though still dominated by Maasai. Waller argues that because of the severity of the situation, violent raids during this time were acts of desperation rather than strategically motivated.<sup>86</sup> Land in Laikipia became available and many different pastoral groups slowly started to migrate towards the area. These included Pokot, Tugen and Samburu. The Laikipia plateau gained another interest group of white settlers who started to arrive in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Conclusion

Body adornment has enormous significance to human beings. The quest for beautification is central to all cultures. What can be said more certainly is that the Samburu are one of the several East Africa Nilotic people. Their adornment shows traits of Egyptians and the Sudan communities. That is shaving their women's heads, removal of two middle teeth from the lower jaw, performance of initiation rites and adoption of a one legged stance while herding.

It is in this paper that evidence was adduced to indicate that the Samburu adornment has existed due to contact with the environment, their political and social institutions, religious values, warfare and trade. The contact between the Samburu and other communities such as, Turkana, Rendille and Ilchamus contributed to a great extent to the evolution and development of the Samburu adornment from the pre-colonial period.

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<sup>85</sup> Musa Lekamario, O.I, October 2012

<sup>86</sup> D. Waller, "Pastoral Poverty in Historical Perspective" D. Anderson & V. Broch (eds.), *The Poor are Not Us: Poverty & Pastoralism in Eastern Africa*, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999, pp. 20-50.

For instance, The Rendille community shares common boundaries with the Samburu in the region of the Ol Doinyo Lenkiyo, Ndoto and Nyiro Mountains. Though Cushitic, the Rendille shares similar cultural traits with the Samburu, like the *murrans* age set system. Evidence from the field study indicates that the *Mporo* neck bead worn by a Samburu bride has its origin from the Rendille community.

This paper was unique in expounding the impact of the late 1790s where the Samburu divided the community members into generations. It is from the generations that a man was to participate in five *Imuget* ceremonies during his passage through *murranshood*. The ceremonies were marked by changes in social status marked by adornments. Among the key adornments was the origin of the practice of warriors beading girls.

The ecological disasters of the period between 1800 and 1900 was characterized by major evolution of the Samburu adornment. For instance the Samburu *murrans* adopted the Turkana hairstyle of plastering the crowns and backs of their heads with blue clay, a style that lasted four decades only. Similarly the Samburu contacts with the Galla led to acquisition of colourful beads which had been introduced in East Africa by Arabs. By the end 1890s ivory acquired from the Elmolo became part of Samburu adornment symbolizing status of warriorhood and as a protective charm.

It was evident that contacts with their environment made the Samburu make use of over 120 species of trees and shrubs. The species were employed to cure, protect the body from evil people and most importantly as toothbrushes and deodorants. From the findings, it was evident that Colour was key in Samburu adornment because of the power to communicate different aspects of the Samburu culture. Red colour was the most dominant and significant.