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THE ECONOMIC UTILITY OF BEADS CULTURE OF THE SAMBURU TRIBE OF  
KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Beads have played an important role in the personal lives of Africans. They have been valued as currency, identification of status and as an artistic medium. Beads forms an integral part of the Samburu culture and have many uses and symbolic meanings. The first periodic beads market in Samburu District was established in Maralal town in 1991. The aim of this study is to clarify how the Samburu pastoralists reacted to the emergence of the beads market that provided them constant opportunity for trade. Equally it analyses the economic utility of this trade to the cultural systems and beliefs among the Samburu. The method applied in the study was largely qualitative research. This was done through library search, interview schedules and observation. Based on the findings, beads are used in all aspects of the Samburu lives and actually vibrate the culture. This study will be of help to historians, artists, ethnographers, anthropologists and the general public as a body of knowledge and reference material of the uses and symbolism of beads among other communities.

*Keywords:* Beads, Symbolism, Culture, African

*JEL Classifications:* F18, F19, L81.

1. INTRODUCTION

The origin of the Samburu community is difficult to piece together since the available literature is scanty. Nevertheless, one can gain insights into the Samburu past by using oral histories, comparative linguistics, archaeology, and by comparing the herders' material culture and traditions with those of neighbouring groups. Howard and Thompson describe the environs

where the Samburu have dwelt in recent times apparently as some of the oldest in which the human species has lived.<sup>1</sup>

The Samburu community is a nomadic pastoralist who belongs 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 Samburu, Maasai, Ilchamus and Yaku.<sup>2</sup> Linguistic sources identify the Samburu as ethnically and linguistically related to the Maasai. They speak a dialect called *Ol-Maa*. The term *Maa* is used by both the Maasai and Samburu in calling to attention to any anyone among their members who is being addressed. It sounds more of *Maaa!* than *Maa*. This linguistic source made a knot round the two communities depicting the Samburu as speaking a northern dialect of *Ol-Maa* while the Maasai was the southern one.<sup>3</sup>

Webster however, shows that the Samburu see the Maasai dialect in their language as evidence supporting the belief that they were once a branch of the Laikipiak Maasai.<sup>4</sup> The Laikipiak Maasai were a hegemonic group in the environs of the plateau that bears their name to this day.<sup>5</sup> Oral Maasai histories identify the Kerio Scarp which can be linked to the seasonal watercourse southwest of Lake Turkana, as their cradle land. Jacobs asserts that the Samburu traditions refer to a legendary place called Kerio as their place of origin.<sup>6</sup> A similar study conducted by Ochieng on the Rift Valley; for example, assume that the Samburu is a Maasai clan, Isampur.<sup>7</sup>

More evidence from oral sources indicate that the Samburu have been a distinct entity and refer to themselves as Lokop or Lokopani “people of the Land (nkop).”<sup>8</sup> Sobania adds that the Samburu reference to Lokop is after an eponymous ancestor who had to leave the Maasai after committing a homicide.<sup>9</sup> The Maasai call them *Sampurri*. This is in connection with Maasai term Sampurupuri or Sampurupur for butterfly.<sup>10</sup> While the Samburu acknowledge that the term comes from the Maasai language, they do not accept that the word is derived from the Maasai term for butterfly. The Samburu instead believe that their commonly recognized appellation comes from the skin bags that women traditionally carried when they visited, which were called samburr.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Samburu society, like many other indigenous cultures, is organized into specific age and gender groupings. Spencer states that the society has two key structural systems. First, the

<sup>1</sup>B .A. Ogot. (1992). “New Trends in Cultural History ‘The Silence in Old Narratives’” G.S. Were (ed.) *Journal of East Africa Research and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 38-39.

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

<sup>3</sup> E. Fratkin. (1987). “Age-sets, Households and the Organization of Pastoral Production: The Ariaal, Samburu and Rendille of Northern Kenya.” *Research in Economic Anthropology*.8:295-314.

<sup>4</sup> E. Webster. (1994). *The Boran, Rendille and Samburu: The Nomadic Tribes of the Northern Frontier District*.

<sup>5</sup> P. Spencer (1973). *Nomads in Alliance Symbiosis and Growth among the Rendille and Samburu of Kenya*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> A. Jacobs. (1965). “The Traditional Political Organization of the Pastoral Maasai” PhD Dissertation: University of Oxford.

<sup>7</sup> W. Ochieng. (1975). *An Outline History of the Rift Valley of Kenya upto AD 1900*. Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau.

<sup>8</sup> T. Fumagalli. (1977). “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.

<sup>9</sup> N. Sobania. (1980). “The Historical Tradition of the Peoples of the Eastern Lake Turkana Basin, Linguistics Hypotheses and Oral Tradition, or Are We the Language We Speak?” Documents pour servir à l’Histoire des Civilisations Ethiopiennes [Documents for Use for the History of Ethiopian Civilizations] 9 (1978): 87–88; Lee Cronk, “From True Dorobo to Mukogodo Maasai: Contested Ethnicity in Kenya,” *Ethnology* 41 (2002): 27–49.

<sup>10</sup> J. Holtzman. (1995)*Samburu*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

society has at least six distinguishable levels of segmentary descent system. The levels in ascending order are the lineage system, the hair-sharing group, the sub-clan, the clan, the phratry and the moiety. Sub-clan is group of recent and past blood related men where age mates address each other by name, and others by *murata*. Girls of the sub-clan are avoided sexually. Three quarters of a man's stock friends are members of his sub-clan. Sub-clans make a clan. Clans make a phratry. The Samburu society has eight exogamous phratries composed of several clans. Each phratry and age set has only one ritual leader called *launoni* with certain ceremonial duties and ritual powers. The phratries perform their activities at different times, place and follow different codes. All Samburu elders and warriors are very aware of their phratry, clan and sub-clan and their customs. The eight phratries are, namely: Masula, Pisikishu, Iingwesi, Nyaparai, Lorokushu, Longeli, Lukumae and Loimusi.<sup>12</sup>

The second social structure is based on the age set and age grade system. Here the life of a male is divided into three age grades: boyhood, *moranhood* and elderhood. Boyhood starts just after birth and ends with an initiation ritual which includes circumcision done around 15 to 25 years. Boy children, *laieni* are tasked with helping the Samburu family care for livestock and carry out other simple daily tasks. Circumcision inducts boys into warrior status called *moran*, at the same time the boy becomes a member of an age set. *Morans* are responsible for providing protection to the entire community, including its livestock. Each age set has a unique name and with intervals of twelve to sixteen years a new age set is formed. The third stage is that of elderhood, *lpayiani* where the warrior is allowed to marry. Males in *moranhood* form one age set while elders constitute several age sets. The male elders are those who protect Samburu culture and provide direction for the community. They direct the *morans* on security matters, resolve community conflicts, and issue edicts that determine behaviour and values in the community.<sup>13</sup> During the field study, there were six age-sets in the elderhood: Lkuroro (formed in 1976), Lkichili (1960) and Lmekuri (1936).<sup>14</sup>

A woman, *ngoroyoini* do not belong to any age set but adopt the age set of moran while unmarried and with their husband's age-set after marriage. Their lives are divided into two stages: being married and unmarried, they are circumcised when they marry. While unmarried and uncircumcised they are called *ntito* or *ntoiye*. Some who are circumcised after marriage are called *surmelei*. After marriage there are several terms for women according to their age or situation: *nkaibartani* for a bride or a young recently married woman. Once married, a Samburu woman is responsible for building and maintaining the family home, *manyatta*, caring for children, and providing daily meals, water and fuel for her family.<sup>15</sup> The other two categories are *ntomononi* for a woman who recently had a baby and *ensat* for an old woman.<sup>16</sup> Below is an analysis of the Samburu use of beads in relation to gender and age.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The analysis and discussions in this paper are predominantly based on secondary data and materials.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 SYMBOLISM OF BEADS AMONG THE SAMBURU RITES

<sup>12</sup> P. Spencer. (1965). *The Samburu: a Study of Gerontocracy in a Nomadic Tribe*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

<sup>13</sup> N. Pavitt (1991). *Samburu*. New York: Hendry Holt & Co.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> L. Young (ed.). (2012). *Silent Sacrifice: Girl Child Beading in the Samburu Community of Kenya*. Nairobi: Pro Rights Consulting.

<sup>16</sup> N. Pavitt (1991). *Samburu*. New York: Hendry Holt & Co.

Culture is partially based on symbols which represent certain ideas, beliefs or behaviours that people of that particular culture understand and are able to communicate effectively with. Wearing a certain kind of bead can tell whether a person is happy, tell the social status, beauty, spiritual status within the community; the association with a particular group or tell a period of life of an African.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Samburu are anxious to have children of both sexes, the male child was preferred because they said they males were the mainstay of the stock while the females would soon leave the homestead. The first adornment of a new born baby is called *alliam*. This is a yellow necklace of beads for the girl and a green one for a boy. The yellow beads signify wealth and beauty for Samburu girl child and families often expend significant resources on beads for their girl-children. Green is a sign of pasture and cattle for the community.<sup>18</sup> At around three to four years, girls continues wearing wired bead necklaces and this is made by their mothers while boys never anything.<sup>19</sup>

After circumcision girls attend a “coming out” ceremony at which they wear numerous massive coral beads, which may have to be borrowed from members of the extended family. This is designed to enhance the girl’s charms and to improve her chances of finding a good husband. If the family does not have enough beads, extra ones will be rented from another family that has the beads, but not a girl of the right age.<sup>20</sup>

During circumcision of both boys to *moranhood* the boy receive massive beads from his mother. The beaded necklaces wish him luck as he joins youth hood. Equally the *moran* attains the age of beading. Girl-child beading involves Samburu *morans* giving specialized beads to an uncircumcised girl to signify the commencement of a sexual relationship. Girls may be as young as nine years old when they are beaded. The process begins with negotiations between the moran and the girl’s mother, as well as the girl’s brothers, who often also are *morans*. Once the relationship is agreed, the girl’s mother builds a hut for the couple called a ‘*singira*’ where the moran will have access to the girl for sex. During the process of beading the moran brings large quantities of coloured beads as well as other goods to the girl as way of appeasing her. Because these relationships take place within clans, the process generally does not lead to marriage and pregnancy is forbidden. The uncircumcised girls are still considered children themselves and thus it is a taboo for them to give birth. However, when pregnancies do result, beaded girls may be forced to have a traditional abortion or to give up the newborn for infanticide or for adoption into another ethnic community. Some girls are beaded at a very young age, even as young as three or four, and the *morans* wait for them to grow older before beginning a sexual relationship.<sup>21</sup> A Samburu *moran* wears strings of beads across his chest and back plus bands of striped beadwork around the neck. When he becomes an elder he surrenders his beaded attire, but he may still use beaded objects such as a tobacco container or the traditional *rungu* stick as a symbol of authority.<sup>22</sup>

Beads define the concept of a woman’s beauty. A beautiful woman in Samburu means well defined long neck and coloured body structure. The only way to achieve this is to wear beads from infancy to old age. Beads are believed to make a woman feel feminine and beautiful. A woman puts on more beads after circumcision. The beads vary from neck rings, bracelets and anklets.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> C. Orser. (1996). *A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World*. Germany: Springer.

<sup>18</sup> Moses Lekamario O.I. January, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Laiman O.I. December, 2012

<sup>20</sup> N. Chamberlain. (2005). *The Samburu in Kenya: A Changing Picture*. London: New Castle University Expedition Committee.

<sup>21</sup> L. Young (ed.). (2012). *Silent Sacrifice: Girl Child Beading in the Samburu Community of Kenya*. Nairobi: Pro Rights Consulting.

<sup>22</sup> M. Carey. 1986. *Beads and Beadwork of East and South Africa*. Aylesbury, U.K.: Shire Books.

<sup>23</sup> N. Kyoto. 2005. *Adornments of the Samburu in Northern Kenya: A Comprehensive List*. The Center for African Area Studies, Kyoto University.

In Samburu community, marriage is considered an important part of the initiation rites that usher one to adulthood. Beads are useful and symbolic. Beads are presented to the wife to be as her wedding gift by the husband to be. The wedding ceremony itself is symbolized by coloured beads. A variety of beads are worn around the neck and wrist. Beads of different colour are worn by both the bride and groom as well the family representative present. The colour of beads that the couple wear match with the colours of their dress.<sup>24</sup> Beads were/are used to taken off once a person dies in this community. The removal of beads signify end of life and beginning of a new world away from reality. In addition, a deceased wife removes all the beaded ornaments she wore. She had to stay with a bare neck until the dates for mourning the husband were over. This was an expression to indicate that the husband who by tradition must dress and provide the wife with all the precious ornament was no longer there.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.2 ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE SAMBURU BEADS

Beads industry plays a great role as a means of livelihood, as goods for exchange and as a symbolic vehicle to recreate society and culture. There were serious droughts in 1974, 1984, and 1994 in Kenya. Equally cattle epidemics were prevalent in 1978 and 1990. Above all, a drought damaged their cattle most severely in 1984; the cattle herd are reduced by half or completely destroyed.

The Kenyan government and development agencies responded by promoting agriculture, wage labor, and school education. Some Samburu immigrated to the large cities most likely Nairobi to find work as night watchmen. Other Samburu with formal education found work as public servants. As a result, the numbers of persons with income in Kenyan currency have increased. Beads trade was irregular until the opening of beads market in northern Kenya including the Samburu territory. In 1991, a periodic market of beads was opened, the largest centre being Maralal.<sup>26</sup>

Since the establishment, the market is held every week on Thursday. Some years later, auction facilities were added. Members transport beads from all over the Samburu District. Most of the buyers are Kikuyu, Pokot, Meru, Nandi, Turkana, Rendille and Maasai. They in return acquire clothes, food, tobacco and glass. Infact elders confessed to have sold livestock to buy beads for their wives and lovers.<sup>27</sup> The livestock which had been a measure of subsistence has become a measure of conversion into cash to buy beads. The Samburu basically trade to acquire “something necessary” in either cash or for more beads. The concept of *ainyangu*, which means “to acquire something necessary in exchange for property,” exactly represents the basic way of trading at the beads market.<sup>28</sup>

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Beads among the Samburu community continue to be used and held in high respect. They are made of ostrich eggshells which are common around the Kalahari Desert. They have equally been imported through trade and today we have beads made from gold and are used in different ceremonies such as child naming, adolescence rites and weddings. One other popular substance for beads is glass. Bottle glass is melted and recycled into a variety of colors and patterns. These types of beads are irregular and signify a sense of luxury for the individual wearing it. Beads function as a family possession. When the family earnings are bad then the beads are sold. The price of the bead is established on its weight. Bead materials provide amber,

<sup>24</sup>B. Jackson. 2008. *Bead by Bead: Reviving an Ancient African Tradition*. Jacana Media.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> J. Watts. (2011). *Perspectives on the Material Culture of East African Societies*. New York: Abrams.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Lekamario, O.I January, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> P. Evangelou, 1984. *Livestock Development in Kenya's Maasailand: Pastoralists, Transition to a Market Economy*. London: Westview Press.

coral, amazonite, silver and glass. The various kinds of beads convey various meanings. Amber safeguards against illnesses while coral and silver are good luck charms. Beading is a strong part of the Samburu heritage and it is used as a means of communication and sexuality. Beads unite the Samburu people reinforcing common understanding, handed down through generations.

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