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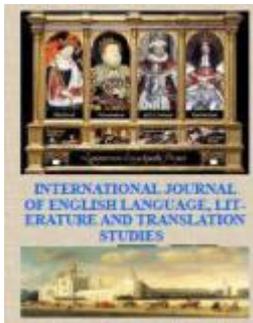
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A CASE STUDY ON PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY OF SAMBURU TRIBE IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Kenya is a multi-ethnic state in the Great Lakes region of Southeast Africa. There are about 70 different tribes in Kenya - each of these with its own unique culture. These tribes are grouped into larger sub-groups - based on their cultural and linguistic similarities. Nilotes are the second-largest group of peoples. The most prominent of these groups include the Luo, Maasai, the Samburu, the Turkana, and the Kalenjin. This paper presents the unique traditions; retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics of Samburu tribe that are distinct from those of the other tribes. The Samburu are a Nilotic people of north-central Kenya. They are independent and egalitarian people, much more traditional than the Maasai. The Samburu are a gerontocracy. This study also presents the ways taken to preserve their cultural identities, and maintenance of their separate identity and backups the moranism that promotes comradeship, self-esteem and its pride.

Keywords: Tribes, Samburu, Nilotes, Culture, ethnic, gerontocracy, egalitarian, moranism

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INTRODUCTION

Kenya is a country of great ethnic diversity. There are about 70 different tribes in Kenya - each of these with its own unique culture, but majority of them with intertwining cultural practices brought about by the close resemblance in the languages, the similar environment and physical proximity of the tribes.

*Kenya's ethnic groups can be divided into three broad linguistic groups Bantu, Nilotic and Cushite. The Bantu speaking people of the Coastal region, the Central Highlands and the Western Kenya Region, the Nilotes who are mainly found in the Great Rift Valley and the Lake Victoria Region and the Cushites who are mainly composed of pastoralists and nomads in the drier North Eastern part of the country. In East Africa, the Nilotes are often subdivided into three general groups: The Plain Nilotes; River Lake Nilotes and Highland Nilotes. The Plain Nilotes are people who speak Maa languages and include the Maasai, Samburu and Turkana.*

In this paper we study about a peculiar tribe called Samburu, a Nilotic people of north-central Kenya. They are a dignified, distinct and richly-cultured tribe that primarily inhabit the Rift Valley. This paper also comments on how this tribe preserve their cultural and maintains their identity and moranism that promotes comradeship.

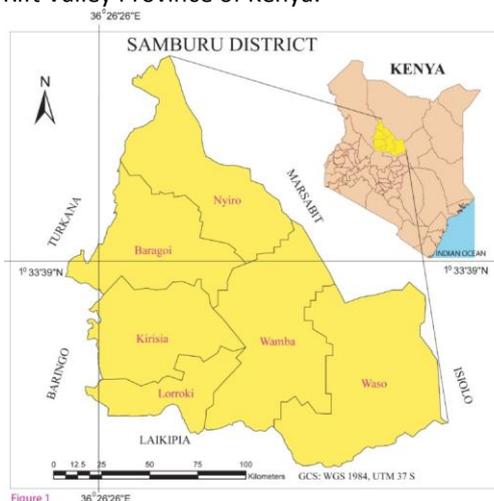
### **KENYA'S TRADITIONALLY FLAMBOYANT "BUTTERFLY DANCING TRIBE"**

Ranging across the great Northern plains and ranges south of Lake Turkana, the Samburu are a people both proud and protective of their culture and the ancestral lands to which it binds them. Although less well known than their Southerly Maasai relations, with whom they share a language, the Samburu have an equally intricate and fascinating culture.

Traditional Samburu settlements were positioned in locations of great geographic beauty, often overlooking spectacular viewpoints. The aesthetic appreciation of beauty is a major part of Samburu beliefs, and this shows itself in a great attention to physical appearance and adornment. Indeed, the name Samburu was given to them by other tribes, and directly translates as Butterflies. Until this time they knew themselves as the Loikop. The name Samburu was most likely gained in reference to the impression of delicacy created by their personal adornments.

The main thing that differentiates the Plain Nilotes of the Rift Valley from their Luo, Pokot and Kalenjin cousins is their total reliance on pastoralism, as well as their taboos against agriculture, hunting and the eating of wildlife or fish. This is indicative of their deeply-ingrained conservatism, which has helped them survive the sweeping changes of the twentieth almost intact: as a result, they are now among the most famous tribes in Africa.

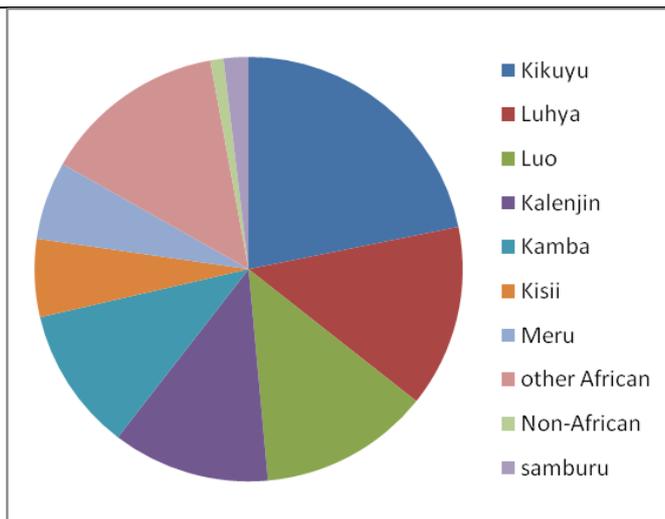
The Samburu, who are believed to have split from the Maasai a few centuries ago, occupy the more central region northwest of Mount Kenya, while their Turkana neighbours live in the more arid northwest of Kenya, bordering Sudan and Uganda. The Samburu have increasingly been experimenting with cultivation. The Samburu live just above the equator where the foothills of Mount Kenya merge into the northern desert and slightly south of Lake Turkana in the Rift Valley Province of Kenya.



### **DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE**

The district is one of the most marginalized in Kenya. It is currently ranked as the second poorest in the country with four out of five people living on less than \$1 per day. Until recently, Samburu District habitually fell beyond the reach of government development plans. There are no paved roads in the district. Less than 5% of the population has access to electricity. Improvement to livelihoods has been further confounded by frequent cycles of drought and famine.

In comparison to other African tribes, their population is relatively small, estimated around 150,000 people. However, their influence and impact on the country is immeasurable.



Kikuyu 22%, Luhya 14%, Luo 13%, Kalenjin 12%, Kamba 11%, Kisii 6%, Meru 6%, Samburu 1.9% other African 14%, non-African (Asian, European, and Arab) 1%

**SOCIO-CULTURE**

The Samburu are a rugged and pastoral community. They live a nomadic life, one that features a constant search for fresh pasture for their herds. Their society centers on their cattle because milk is the main staple of the Samburu diet. Generally, a Samburu village consists of a handful of families that live together in temporary huts. Gender roles are established and strict. Men are responsible for the protection of the village and cattle, while women manage the children and household. The Samburu language is typically referred to as Maa.

The Samburu people are semi-nomadic pastoralists who keep goats, sheep, cattle and camels. The men move livestock seasonally to fresh pastures while women and children are becoming more sedentary, living close to the few schools, clinics and development projects that have been established in the district. The Samburu now tend to remain in one community for five to ten years.

Generally between five and ten families set up encampments for five weeks and then move on to new pastures. Adult men care for the grazing cattle which are the major source of livelihood. Women are in charge of maintaining the portable huts, milking cows, obtaining water and gathering firewood. Their houses are of plastered mud or hides and grass mats stretched over a frame of poles. A fence of thorns surrounds each family's cattle yard and huts.

Their society has for long been so organized around cattle and warfare (for defense and for raiding others) that they find it hard to change to a more limited lifestyle. The purported benefits of modern life are often undesirable to the Samburu. They remain much more traditional in life and attitude than their Maasai cousins.

Duties of boys and girls are clearly delineated. Boys herd cattle and goats and learn to hunt, defending the flocks. Girls fetch water and wood and cook. Both boys and girls go through an initiation into adulthood, which involves training in adult responsibilities and circumcision for boys and clitoridectomy for girls.

The Samburu believe that God (Nkai) is the source of all protection from the hazards of their existence. But God also inflicts punishment if an elder curses a junior for some show of disrespect. The elder's anger is seen as an appeal to God, and it is God who decides if the curse is justified. Faced with misfortune and following some show of disrespect towards an older man, the victim should approach his senior and offer reparation in return for his blessing. This calms the elder's anger and restores God's protection.

Samburu religion traditionally focuses on their multi-faceted divinity God. It is not uncommon for children and young people, especially women, to report visions of Nkai. Samburu have ritual diviners called 'loibonok' who divine the causes of individual illnesses and misfortune, and guide warriors. Although ritual life focuses especially on cattle, other livestock such as goats, sheep, camels, and even donkeys figure into

Samburu ceremonies. In recent decades missionaries had converted Samburu to predominantly catholic but majority of Samburu continue to observe most traditional ritual practices.

#### THE IDENTITY: ENIGMATIC SAMBURU OF KENYA

Like the Masai, the Samburu have held on to their traditions, from their food (maizemeal, fermented milk, meat and blood), to their homes (mud huts called manyattas) to their clothing. Men wear a cloth which is often pink or black and is wrapped around their waist in a manner, they adorn themselves with necklaces, bracelets and anklets, like the Maasai. Women wear two pieces of blue or purple cloth, one piece wrapped around the waist, the second wrapped over the chest. Women keep their hair shaved and wear numerous necklaces and bracelets.

As Europeans introduced Western style clothing it was initially shunned by Samburu. As recently as the 1990s, wearing pants was considered by most to be a rather unmanly abandonment of cultural traditions, which would be done only when travel outside of home areas or some official business (e.g. with government offices) made it appropriate. However, as Western style education has increased, and interaction with non-Samburu has become increasingly common, it no longer bears the same stigma, although clothing deemed "traditional" by Samburu is still the norm, and would be expected to be worn in many everyday and ceremonial contexts.

The Samburu tribe speaks the Maa language, as do the Maasai. However, although they share a vocabulary, the Samburu speak more rapidly than the Maasai. Together with the Maasai and Turkana tribes, the Samburu are among the few African tribes who have remained culturally authentic by clinging to their traditional way of life.

The Samburu dress is so similar to the Maasai that it is hard to distinguish between the two tribes. Both Samburu men and women dress in brightly colored traditional *shukas*, which they wrap loosely around their bodies. Samburu men also dye their hair with red ochre, while the women adorn themselves in beautiful, multi-beaded necklaces and other traditional jewelry. Samburu warriors, or morans, keep their long hair in braids and dress in more colorful attire than other members of the tribe.

Circumcision for both boys and girls is one of the most important rituals among the Samburu. For boys, circumcision marks the initiation into moran (warrior) life; for girls, it signifies becoming a woman. Once circumcised, a girl/woman can be given away in an arranged marriage to start her own family. Sadly, this practice has seen girls as young as 12 years old get married to men old enough to be their grandfathers.

In recent times, however, concerted efforts by the Kenyan government and non-governmental organizations have remarkably reduced the number of cases where Samburu and Pokot females are circumcised and forced into an early marriage. This has enabled many girls to attain an education.

#### TRADITIONS

Traditionally, the Samburu believed in one supreme god - *Nkai* or *Ngai* - who was thought to reside in the mountains. Diviners often acted as intermediaries between other mortals and *Nkai*. Today, while many Samburu people still adhere to their traditional religion, some have adopted the Christian or Islamic faith.

#### MORANISM

The Samburu are a proud warrior-race of cattle-owning pastoralists. To protect the tradition and culture every male child is circumcised. As soon as a male of tribe has been circumcised, he joins an age-set comprised of all the young men so initiated within a period of about fourteen years and he will maintain a close affinity with these peers until death. Girls do not have any age-set grouping, passing instead through two stages of life, namely girlhood and womanhood. The men on the other hand pass through three, boyhood from birth to adolescence before entering an age-set, moranhood, from circumcision to marriage when they are warriors and elder-hood, from marriage until death. Samburu society is polygamous.

The family lives and shares the same manyatta and it is the women who are entirely responsible for the home. The most significant event in a boy's life is his elevation from childhood to manhood as a result of circumcision. This takes place when he is between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five. Each generation of age-sets lasts on average fourteen years.

Indeed, the moran ethos is meant to inculcate the values of *nkanyit* in young men. Myth has it that the first man Samburu descended from heaven at Malalua, a perennial spring located in the Leroki plateau in what is now known as Kisima sub-location (Mote 2004). The life of the Samburu people, like other nomadic pastoralist communities, revolves around cattle keeping. The society demands that morans not only protect their cattle, but also bring many more from the neighbouring communities through armed raids. According to

the Samburu, other communities should not own cattle since all cattle were given to them by god. For this and other socio-economic reasons, raiding other communities is not associated with guilt. Raiding successfully is an economic activity and an act of heroism for which morans are kept, pampered and decorated. Although they present a linguistic and cultural unity, there are noticeable dialectic and cultural differences between the Samburu and Maasai (Kipury 1983).

The Samburu community defines a moran based on age group and rite of passage. The morans 'are the young unmarried men who would at one time have been the warriors of the tribe' (Spencer 1965).

Young men graduate into morans after being circumcised. The hallmark of moranism is solidarity. The institution instills in young men a bond of comradeship. They are supposed to stay together, eat in a group, raid in a group and also suffer together. It ensures unquestionable loyalty to the group. Newly circumcised Samburu morans, like their

Maasai counterparts must stick together. 'Through close association with, and imitation of the elders, the warriors learn and acquire additional skills such as the use of proverbs and the art of oratory. They also learn the meaning of cooperation, unity and sharing from their peers' (Kipury 1983). Morans are not allowed to eat food cooked by women for eleven years, they must be good in humming and dancing and must spend most of their time in the forest together braiding and painting their hair with red ochre. After serving five years as junior morans, the group goes through a naming ceremony and graduates into senior morans in which they stay for six years. After eleven years of seclusion, the senior morans are free to marry and join the class of married men known as junior elders.

The Samburu morans are often tall, athletic and are flamboyantly dressed. The most captivating sight in Samburu is the red ochre-plaited hairstyle of the morans, bravado, springsteps and heroic dance style of jumping high up amid intense heroic humming, known as Ngukori. Based on their appearance and behaviour, morans are often seen as symbols of valour and elegance, valued by women, community members and visitors. This is vividly described by Spencer:

Peter Wasamba says that Moranism still remains the foundation on which the pride of the Samburu community is grounded. Young boys look forward to the day they will join the prestigious club of morans. Their dressing, courage and solidarity earn them respect in the eyes of the society and make them attractive to girls. The new moran is a delicate blend of the relevant aspects of traditional moranism with the demands of the cosmopolitan dispensation.(Wasamba, 2009)

The moran are flamboyant in their dress and very vain, frequently applying abstract designs in orange to their faces and red ochre to their heads, necks, and shoulders and spending hours braiding each others' long ochred hair. There is little doubt that moranhood is considered the best period of man's life. Fearless and arrogant, he is in his prime during this period, free to do largely exactly as he likes.

Girls train for motherhood at an early age by heaping with the household chores, and caring for their siblings. When adolescent girls attend dances organized by the moran of their clan they are acutely aware of the importance of looking their best at such gatherings.

They paste ochre onto their shaven heads, darken their eyebrows with charcoal, and paint intricate designs on their faces. She is then likely to earn praise from a moran, probably becoming mistress to him and enjoying his protection. This relationship is forged by mutual physical and sexual attraction, although each knows that their relationship has no future. Since both come from the same clan, marriage is forbidden.

Over the years the moran will heap beads upon his lover or bead girl as a symbol of his love and whilst the girls may feel passionately about a certain man, they are taught from an early age that these feelings are irrelevant, for they will never be able to wed someone of their own choosing. Girls are taught that the marriage bond is not based on physical attraction or emotion, but instead, that it is a long term sound investment forged by her family.

The Samburu Morani decorate their faces and upper bodies with intricate patterns, emphasize their eyelines and arrange their hair into elaborate plaits with a distinctive "visor" over their forehead. They also wear their Shukkas wrapped around their waist with a distinctive white sash.(Nyambura, et al, 2013)

## CONCLUSION

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Despite the powerful forces of modernity, the Samburu take pride in their culture and keeping their rich tradition alive. The Samburu are a proud warrior-race of cattle-owning pastoralists. Their dialects is spoken in a more rapid manner than that of the Maasai, but includes many words that are common to both. Proud of their culture and tradition, the Samburu still cherish and retain the customs and ceremonies of their forbears, unlike most other tribes in Kenya who have been influenced by Western civilization.

Samburu people are totally committed to their stock, almost to the virtual exclusion of everything else. Their cattle are their life; their wealth; their livelihood and the symbol of status and success within the tribe. They believe that all cattle rightfully belong to them; a cattle raiding of other tribes has always been a major preoccupation of the warriors. This delicacy and beauty is a deceptive contrast to their fearsome reputation for hunting and fighting prowess. Warriorhood and initiation is the backbone of the Samburu society. Age-sets of youths initiated together maintain lifelong bonds. Through a custom known as Olpiroi (firestick) one generation of morans becomes responsible for the moral and cultural education of the next. Thus a firestick is literally handed down through the ages, setting up a system of age -hierarchy and respect for tradition that bolsters the entire society.

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