

**HAIR: A SAMBURU IDENTITY STATEMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

Hair is inherently inscribed with meaning as a manifestation of personal preference or imposed rules of conduct. Hair among the Samburu culture is more than simply statement of personal state and style. It is a marker of cultural identity, age, gender, idea; avenue of artistic expression and mastery. This paper discusses hair as a mirror of identity in the Samburu culture. Despite westernism and Christianity the Samburu cultural practices especially adornment has persisted. The study was grounded in the cultural theory of history. The method applied in the study was largely qualitative research. This was done through library search, interview schedules and observation and field photography. This study provides literature to historians, artists, ethnographers, anthropologists and the general public as a body of knowledge and reference material in studying cultural history of other communities.

**KEYWORDS:** Samburu, Hair, Symbolism

**INTRODUCTION**

The remarkable head hair of human has gained an important significance in nearly all present societies as well as any given historical period throughout the world. Hair reacts to our state of well being. This includes our physical, spiritual and emotional bodies. Emotionally, if we are in balance, our hair grows and looks beautiful as personification of our inner self. Under stress many people have hair loss or the hair loses its texture and sheen.<sup>1</sup>

Hair styles in pre-colonial Africa had cultural significance attached to them. The bad spirits could only be driven out of the individual by cutting their hair, thus various fashions of hair cutting were practiced by different tribes making the barber the most important man in the community. In fact, the barbers in these tribal days arranged marriages and baptized all children.<sup>2</sup>

For example, in ancient Egypt, hairstyles changed through time, although deities and occasionally kings and queens were shown with archaic coiffures. Hair was worn at varying

lengths and in various styles reflecting changes in fashion as well as differences in sex, age, and social status.<sup>3</sup>

The History and culture of the Samburu people offer a rich insight into the history and communities of Kenya. The Samburu community is a nomadic community that 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, Illchamus and Maasai.<sup>4</sup> These herders are nearly identical in personal adornment, which could be explained by a shared place of origin and their interactions, which shaped their technology and adornment practices.<sup>5</sup> Among the most significance form of adornment is the hair. Samburu community is organized into specific age and gender and is differentiated by hair styles.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

The study adopted Qualitative Research method. Particularly Ex Post Facto design. The design deals with the past and tries to reconstruct that past. Occurring events are analysed and figured out. After the fact what caused something to happen. As Shama observes, this approach eliminates the possibility that participants will be influenced by awareness that they are being tested. The treatment is not manipulated as it has already occurred.<sup>6</sup> The design was used to describe significance of hair among the Samburu rites of passage and ceremonies.

#### **Data Collection**

Secondary and primary sources were used. Secondary data was collected from published works on the social, political and economic organisation of Samburu. These included published and unpublished works on the Samburu such as books, journals articles, seminar, conference papers as well as theses and dissertations. Field research involved an interview schedule to knowledgeable elders in the community, warriors, painters and other experts, chiefs and teachers. Informants of both genders were interviewed.

A digital camera was employed for taking photographs during the observation to illustrate the different forms of adornments. A notebook was used to record the summaries and observations during the research.

Beside interviews at individual levels, Focus group discussions (FGDs) were employed. FGDs consisted of members of same age and gender. English, Kiswahili and Samburu (with the assistance of a translator) languages was used in the interviews as would be appropriate to the respondents.

### **Sampling**

A minimum of fifty informants from the Samburu community were interviewed. The informants were selected from Mararal town which is the capital of the County. The informants from both genders were identified based on their knowledge and experience of the diverse hairstyles in the community. While the structured form was underway, the unstructured form made it possible to explore statements that came out during the course of the interview to extract more information from the interviewee/informant.

### **Results and Discussion**

To be childless is the worst fate for a Samburu woman. If one is discovered barren, the family seeks the advice of a medicine man laibon, who identifies the cause. For example, if a woman argues with an elder he will pick out a lock of her hair or piece of clothing without her knowledge, and deposit them to a river or under a big stone in the riverbed. As the water cannot cease flowing so also, runs the superstition, the girl though married cannot cease to have monthly courses, nor would she have children until these stolen tokens have been withdrawn from the river and returned to her.<sup>7</sup>

When the woman's time arrives to give birth, no sacrifice is made unless the birth is delayed. The husband quickly put on a black gown made from animal skins, a goat or sheep called lkupoket is slaughtered outside his manyatta and let the blood drip down. It is believed that the spirits will swallow the blood and allow the woman deliver safely. The meat is eaten by the females except the baby's mother. Males never eat the meat.<sup>8</sup> If shortly after this ceremony a child dies, the father may sire another child but not allow the shaving of the hair until the child grows up enough to be weaned. The child's hair is kept long and uncombed and it is known as lmasin.<sup>9</sup>

The most crucial stage of a girl is from the onset of puberty through to the early years of marriage. The girl starts attending the moran dances the mother makes her a small button chain with a beaded head bead and a cross shaped aluminum called nchilii. It is similar to what the married woman wear only that for the girl is brightly coloured in red, blue and yellow colours while for the married woman is blue.<sup>10</sup> The design for unmarried woman has two chains called nkaiweli which crisscrosses the upper part of the ears passing between the lower lip.<sup>11</sup> On the forehead, above the eyebrows is a beaded or metallic band, mingii around the head connected to the saen e ngwe. The two are removed after marriage. Saen e ngwe looks like a crown and is worn by both unmarried girls and married women.<sup>12</sup> It is a head

bead made of leather with a button or ribbon at the centre of the forehead. The button is known as lmerregeli. Two thin chains called nkaiweli, pass from the upper ears, between the chins and lower lip and connect to bead known as mbole.<sup>13</sup>

A mass of neck or shoulder beads, lchatata made from wired beads are worn. They are made by the girls, given by their married sisters or mothers. For the unmarried girls, red is dominant but married women mix red with black, white or blue. The beads are worn close to the neck, that they form neck rings to make the neck look longer and attractive. The neckrings are not flat like for the Maasai rather they form single loop neck rings that formed three to five bundles. It is from the field that the interviewed girls confessed to have worn lchatata as heavy as ten kilogrammes, and confessed to even sleep with them.<sup>14</sup> The hair is painted with red ochre or clean shaved to show off a massive of necklaces and earrings. The eyebrows are darkened with charcoal. A small compact mirror is important for the girl to keep painting her hair and face.<sup>15</sup> On the upper arm plastic bangles, lodii or metal bangles, lpankiii of different colours are worn for beauty. A girl may decide to wear a wired ring, lpete on all fingers or one or not.<sup>16</sup> See photograph below:



← Head clean shaved and painted with ochre

Generally a married woman shave her hair clean or wear a round hat and shave roundly to make a circular hairline that pass from the forehead to above the ears and at the back of the neck. The style is known as kub .This style is to ensure the saen e ngwe is placed firmly on the hairline and to attract the husband's attention.<sup>17</sup> See more illustrations below



Circumcision ceremony for boys starts with the mothers shaving the boys' heads except a tuft on the very top of the head, Imanjeu to symbolize end of boyhood and initiation to warriorhood.<sup>18</sup> The hair is not supposed to fall on the ground and is collected in one place and burnt to avoid curses or illnesses befalling the boys. A circumcised boy will participate in five Imugit ceremonies to adulthood. One of the stages is murranhoo<sup>19</sup>. See illustration of Imanjeu below:



The Morans are the most striking members of the Samburu community. They enjoy a convivial and relatively undemanding life with permissive sex for about fourteen years. They appear like glorious rainbows as shoulder to shoulder they straighten to their full length and choreographed slow movement.<sup>20</sup> Cole collaborates with this statement by stating that after circumcision and transition, the moran are held in a state of 'social suspense' for upto fourteen years. They are confined to a state of prolonged adolescence and in the arena of competition for women. The arena provides a widely admired display of masculinity, assertiveness ranging from spectacular dances to spiritual possession, pride and adornment. He continues to state that to be a Samburu moran, is to be carefully and artistically dressed, coiffed and painted.<sup>21</sup> Straight states that moran stage is considered the best period of a

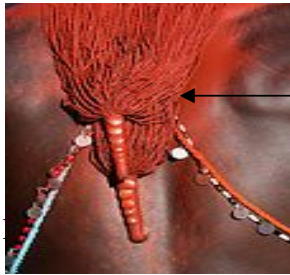
Samburu man's life.<sup>22</sup> While Victoria observed that "morans are free to do as exactly as they wishes"<sup>23</sup>

Hair remains the most important, prestigious symbol of moran status and symbolizes manhood.<sup>24</sup> Moran sees hair as a source of strength, courage and masculinity.<sup>25</sup> Many hours are spent by warriors braiding each others' hair. The diverse hair styles are designated only for warriors' personal pride.<sup>26</sup> They colour their hair red with clay and red ochre, Ikaria which is a pigment found in natural form in volcanic regions.<sup>27</sup> The red ochre is mixed with sheep or cow fat and applied on the head and body. Sometimes it is applied on the shoulders, chest, back and on the legs. A style known as naitulu, applied from the chin to the neck, eyebrows and eyelids.<sup>28</sup>

A wooden, ivory or plastic pin nchata e lpapit is used to twist the hair, stretch it in different hairstyles and scratch especially when it is applied red ochre. Accompanying it is a comb, ngisilet made of wood or plastic and a mirror. Virgin hair is greased and since it is short and can be twisted into tiny plaits which are plaited and divided by a parting across the middle of the skull. This style is known as Sakara Oirena. The hair grows longer and can now be plaited to hang loose on the neck and this is known as Sakara Olaa. Ilmasi Wala is where the hair falls halfway down the back and the front section is twisted into pigtails over the forehead. If this hair grows to reach the hip, it is referred to as sorrow. It can be clipped with a pin made from ivory or wood known as nchidai lpapit. Equally another version of the same style is achieved by letting the front hair fall evenly distributed across the forehead over an ochre dyed piece of cloth used as padding. A cap that looks like a cravat, kub is sometimes worn. The hair can still be tied to two pigtails of considerable length called Ilmasi Opiaya. Where the hairstyle need elaborate care and in order to protect the long plaits they tie them in a bun at the neck called Ilmasi Wochiko.<sup>29</sup>

A white band with a red line at the center can be used to part the hair into two as a style. This white band is known as nankan e oroto. It has thin strips at the corner that are tied under the chin and at the back of the neck. Lmasi oitikito involves tied hair into two to five bunches. The top bunch is the shortest and the next layer while the longest is the last. Below are illustrations of some of the hairstyles:





*Lmasi*



*kub*



*Ilmasi wala*



*Sakara Oirena*



*Sakara Olaa*



*nankan e oroto*

*Saen nkomom*

Morans spend time in the bush decorating themselves with feather head adornments, nkopiro, which can be taken from a fowl, or a wild bird like an eagle, lapidipidi. It is stuck on the hair at the centre of the head for beauty purpose and makes one stand out.<sup>30</sup> See below



*nkopiro*

After the Lmugit Lelaingoni ceremony the long murren hair has to be cut in preparation for marriage in a ceremony known as lodi. This is done by the mother inside her hut. The event is witnessed by the father's companion who blesses him with a little milk before the shaving starts. The shaving marks a transition from a care free lifestyle to that of a full responsible man and elder.<sup>31</sup> The hair is not supposed to fall on the ground to avoid a spell by one possessed by evil eye. Rather the son accompanies the mother to the nearest flowing river and casts it there.<sup>32</sup> It is an emotional ceremony for the man, who has not eaten in his mother's hut or in the presence of women for all his duration in warriorhood. The loss of the long braids makes most of them cry, but elders must be less flamboyant as decision makers.<sup>33</sup>

Elders are usually in their forties and fifties, two age-sets senior to the moran. These are referred to as 'firestick patrons.' Often under a tree, naapo designated as a 'council' meeting site. Women may sit in an outer circle and usually will not speak directly in the open council, but may convey a comment or concern through a male relative.<sup>34</sup> Spencer defines an elder as one who does what a moran does not do.<sup>35</sup> Elders are believed to possess spirits that directly implicate blessing or curse. When an elder blesses a junior, then his spirit would add his protection. Their other responsibility is that of holding the moran in this state and drawing them up slowly to elderhood.<sup>36</sup>

Spencer affirms that death is an event without any notable ceremony. Death rarely happens in the house. Soonest one has his last breath he or she is dragged to the forest. The oldest woman in the family shaves the hair to break all bonds of relationship and friendship.<sup>37</sup> Animal fat is then smeared on the corpse to symbolize "dead and done" situation. A black cloak, Ichoni is put on the corpse and his whole clan is shaved especially if it was an elder. When a family head dies, all his wives, children, brothers, sisters and parents excluding moran have to shave their hair.<sup>38</sup> If a moran dies, all members of his ageset shaves their hair in respect of his death.<sup>39</sup> A visitor who dies in the village, villagers and the household where he died must be vacated or freed from his spell by a gift of sheep or goat to gods. When a barren woman dies, she is dragged to the forest to rot there by uncircumcised boys.<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Hair among the Samburu culture is more than simply statement of personal state and style. It is a marker of culture, age, gender, idea, avenue of artistic expression and mastery. This is seen clearly among the Samburu warriors who ochre and style their hair to hip length all through the muranism. Changes through hairstyles are noted gradually from one stage of life to another.



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