

# The Impact of Samburu Culture on the Development of Western Education in Samburu Community during The Colonial Period In Kenya.

<sup>1</sup>Naomi Keeru Kithure,<sup>2</sup>Eric Mwenda E.G,<sup>3</sup>Martha Wanjiru Muraya <sup>4</sup>Job Mulati

<sup>1</sup>Department of Arts and Humanities, Chuka University, Kenya

<sup>2</sup>Department of Education, Chuka University, Kenya

<sup>3</sup>Department of Arts and Humanities, Chuka University, Kenya

<sup>4</sup>Department of Arts and Humanities, Chuka University, Kenya

[naomi.kithure@gmail.com](mailto:naomi.kithure@gmail.com).Chuka University, P.O Box 109-60400, Chuka Kenya.

## ABSTRACT

The introduction of western education in colonial Kenya did not take a uniform pattern of development. This variation was due to social, economic, political and environmental factors that prevailed at the time. These differences were distinct between predominantly pastoral and agricultural communities. It is evident from the existing literature that there are no historical studies on the development of education among the pastoralists of northern Kenya in general and the Samburu in particular. The study examined how the Samburu perceived western education and how those perceptions influenced their attitudes towards it. The study was informed by three theoretical perspectives namely; Articulation of modes of production which demonstrates capitalism's ability to re-shape other modes of production to suit its needs through the process of 'conservation', 'dissolution' and 'transformation' of the pre-capitalist mode of production. The cultural theory was used to explain the behavior of the people under study through culture and how they dealt with change. The third theory was structural functionalism which was employed to explain the reasons behind resistance to change on some elements that a community considers alien and disruptive to its own. The study was premised on the basis that the colonial government attempted to develop western education among the Samburu amid challenges. Methodology for this study involved data collection from secondary sources and mostly archives and field research for primary data were extensively utilized. Data analysis was done along the lines of articulation of modes of production theory. The findings of the study will be useful to scholars in diversifying research in related communities and enabling the policy makers to come up with suitable educational strategies for the pastoral communities.

**Key Terms:** Culture, Western Education, Colonial Period

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In Kenya, there has been a huge gap in terms of access to education between the predominantly pastoral communities like the Samburu, Somali, and Maasai, Rendille and Turkana and agriculturalists for instance the Kikuyu, Luhya and Meru among others in the country. This disparity is reflected in the paucity of historical studies on western education in these pastoral communities. Saverio Kratli has poignantly argued that:

Educationally, pastoralists appear to be a paradox. From the point of view of official education, that of schools and statistics, they are a complete failure: in terms of enrolment, attendance, class room performance, achievement, continuity to higher education, and gender balance they regularly score at the bottom of the ladder. Educational campaigns may raise some interest at the beginning but are soon deserted. Even the rare literacy achievements are often lost within a few years.<sup>6</sup>

Commenting on the Samburu response to western education, Paul Spencer observed that, school education could hardly be said to have been a major facet of Samburu life. For example, the number of children attending school in 1961 only represented about 1.2 % of all those who were eligible for attending school in the district.<sup>7</sup> According to the 1990s statistics, the situation had not shown much improvement since Samburu District had the least enrollment rates of primary school students in the whole of Rift-Valley Province (hereinafter, RVP) as shown in the table below comparing the primary school enrolment in Samburu District with other Districts in RVP during the period 1995-1999.

<sup>6</sup> Saverio Kratli, (2000) *Education Provision to Nomadic Pastoralists*, Washington D.C, Oxford University Press, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> P. Spencer, (1973) *Nomads in Alliance*, London, Oxford University Press, p.261.

**Table 1: Primary School Enrolment in the RVP, 1995-1999**

District	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Samburu	15,569	15,981	14,733	16,679	17,200
Turkana	34,190	30,973	30,691	30,604	32,159
Narok	43,078	45,449	50,102	53,143	53,146
Laikipia	63,704	71,361	71,369	70,431	69,016

Source: Statistical Abstract 2001, p. 212

The study endeavored to ascertain the factors that made it difficult to promote western education among the Samburu and why pastoralists responded differently to education opportunities as compared to other communities. Specifically, the study explored the impact of Samburu culture on the development of western education in the district.

The Samburu's pastoralist lifestyle ensured that, at least some members of a Samburu family would move with the main herd from pasture to pasture at different times of the year. Indeed, a typical Samburu settlement consisted of five to ten families. Depending on conditions, such as lack of water and pastures for the herds, it moved on the average every five weeks.<sup>8</sup> In view of this kind of lifestyle and mode of production, this study made a case in understanding how this system of settlement influenced the development of western education among the Samburu.

The Samburu indigenous education system mainly focused on such elements as pasture, water for their livestock and themselves. Children were brought up to become useful members of the family, clan and society. Education was essentially seen as helping man in exploiting nature for the satisfaction of his needs and those of his society. According to Gideon Were, 'whatever else a Samburu might learn cannot easily compare with his knowledge of livestock. The child and adult alike are told riddles, myths, proverbs and stories pertinent to livestock rearing'.<sup>9</sup> In general, the introduction of schooling and its influence posed difficulties to the Africans, the greatest challenge being the need for the colonial administration to establish an educational system suited to its own needs. Unfortunately, neither the missionaries nor the colonial administration made any real attempt to link indigenous education to Africans' needs and to their cultural heritage. The result was resistance to western education in some communities, hence slowing down its development and this was more particularly witnessed among the pastoral communities.

### 1.2 Area of Study

The Samburu, who are the subject of this study mainly inhabit a district in the Rift Valley Province in the Republic of Kenya. Samburu District is situated in the Central Northern, RVP and borders five districts in the Rift Valley and Eastern Provinces. To the northwest is Turkana District; while to southwest is Baringo District. Marsabit District is to the northeast, Isiolo District to the east and Laikipia District to the south. It lies within semi arid area of the country where "pastoralism is the most prominent land use in the district occupying more than 90% of the Samburu peoples' economic activity."<sup>10</sup>

The Samburu culture is closely related to the pastoral Maasai.<sup>11</sup> Linguistic sources identify the Samburu as plain Nilotes, who, like the Maasai, speak a dialect called *Ol-Maa*. The linguistic sources have therefore made a knot around the two communities with the Samburu being depicted as speaking a northern dialect of *Ol-Maa* while the Maasai speak a southern one. According to Waweru, the end result of this linguistic connection has been to see the history of the two communities as one. In fact, considering them as a sub-clan of the Maasai, the *Isampur*<sup>12</sup>, they are historically believed to have separated from the Maasai but there are no adequate explanations on when the actual separation took place. Spencer has noted that the Samburu are the most northern group of nomadic pastoralists within the *Maa* speaking cluster. He thus regarded them as distant cousins of the Maasai proper, sharing traditions of a common ancestry.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

There exist disparities in studies carried out on the development of western education among the agricultural and pastoral communities. In fact, there is none wholly devoted to the pastoral communities of Northern Kenya and this situation has remained historically unexplained. Therefore, this study analyzed the impact of Samburu

<sup>8</sup> Irving Kaplan, et al (1976) *Area Handbook for Kenya*, Washington, Foreign Area Studies, p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> Gideon S. Were and J.W. Ssennyong, (1986) (Eds.) "Samburu District Socio-Cultural Profile", Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Planning and National Development. Nairobi, p.42.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>11</sup> Were and Ssennyong, p.42.

<sup>12</sup> P. Waweru. "Ecology Control and the Development of Pastoralism among the Samburu of the North-Central Kenya, 1750-1909" (M.A Thesis, Kenyatta University, 1992), p. 74.

culture on the development of western education among the Samburu. Specifically, the study addressed the following question: how did the Samburu culture influence educational development in Samburu District?

#### 1.4 Objective

The broad objective of this study was to examine the development of western education among the Samburu during the colonial period.

The specific objective was:

- (i) To assess the impact of Samburu culture on the development of western education in the community during the colonial period.

#### 1.5 Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by three theoretical perspectives namely; Articulation of modes of production which demonstrates capitalism's ability to re-shape other modes of production to suit its needs through the process of 'conservation', 'dissolution' and 'transformation' of the pre-capitalist mode of production. The cultural theory was used to explain the behavior of the people under study through culture and how they dealt with change. The third theory was structural functionalism which was employed to explain the reasons behind resistance to change on some elements that a community considers alien and disruptive to its own.

#### 1.6 Methodology

This was a historical study focusing on the colonial period. It utilized the historical method of analysis which investigates analyses and interprets past events in order to understand the present. Being a historical research, the design for this study was *ex post facto*.

The sample size of the study consisted of a population of thirty six informants. The size was through purposive sampling based on two major reasons, namely: the location of the five premier academic institutions extant during the colonial period in Samburu District namely; Maralal Boys Intermediate School, Maralal Boys Primary school, Wamba Primary school, Sirata Oirobi Girls Primary School and Maralal Rural Training School and the individuals who attended these schools.

The informants comprised educators, church representatives, students who went through colonial education under the period of study and members of the society. The target group was drawn from elders whose age-sets were constituted between 1921 and 1976 namely: *Lkileku* (1921–1936), *Lmekuri* (1936–1948), *Lkimaniki* (1948–1960) and *Lkishili* (1960–1976).<sup>13</sup> However, with strict observance of cultural tradition which barred women from going to school during the colonial period [and presently]; the author was only able to get one woman who went through the education in the late nineteen forties amid profound resistance from her paternal uncles. The woman was mentioned by several male informants as having traversed 'gender barriers' and the elders viewed her as an outcast, 'a hater of culture'.

Data collection for this study proceeded in three major phases: First, the secondary sources were explored in libraries, Secondly; archival documents were collected from the Kenya National Archives and Documentation services, Nairobi to provide primary evidence from the colonial period. Thirdly, an exploration into oral sources was carried out in all the six administrative divisions of Samburu District

Data analysis was done in the form of content analysis along the articulation of modes of production theory. The theory informed this study as a synthesis between the two conflicting cultures of the indigenous and western education. The collected information being descriptive in nature the study largely employed qualitative analysis of the data.

#### 1.70 Challenges to Formal Education among the Samburu

Whereas early efforts at western education were resisted tenuously among most African societies, among the Samburu it was not actual resistance, but the cultural activities among them circumcision, both male and female and the subsequent ceremonies, *moranhoo* and the general antipathy displayed towards it that hindered its development. Parents viewed western education as disruptive to their way of life. The European settlement and the implementation of the closed district ordinance that treated it as a closed area and required special passes for entering it did serve as a barrier to opening of the district to the outside world, missionaries included.<sup>14</sup> The controversy over Lorroki and the subsequent implementation of the notorious grazing schemes led to disruption

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on age sets see Waweru, "Ecology Control and Development..." appendix, p. 222. See also Spencer, (2004) *The Samburu: A Study of gerontocracy*, Michael Lolwerikoi, (1990) "A Comparative Study of Sacrifice in Samburu Culture and Christian Biblical Witness", unpublished BA in Divinity Dissertation, St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91.

of the community's way of life. Preoccupation with these twin issues which touched on the economic backbone of the community led to stagnation in social and economic development in the district.

### **1.71 Post Circumcision Ceremonies: *Launok* and *Laigwenak***

The ceremonies following circumcision were elaborate and pervasive that every initiate had to participate in. After circumcision, the *laioni* still wearing their black robes, make small bows and arrows. They tip the arrows with lumps of the *silali* and wander in bands shooting small birds. The gum tipped arrows kill the birds without injuring the feathers. The birds are skinned, stuffed and hung on the band around their foreheads, amongst the ostrich feathers. They wander around in this way for about month. They then go through a further ceremony known as *aitarangwe*. This means throwing away the feathers. This is celebrated for the fact that they have been circumcised, have healed and are now warriors. Many bullocks are slaughtered and there is much feasting and dancing. The initiates take off their bird skins and their black robes and put on red moran *shuka* and red ochre for the first time. They take out the beads and grass which they have worn in their earlobes and put on circular rings made of wood and ivory. Ivory is most prized.

### **1.72 *Il Muget***

The next ceremony was the *Il muget lolwatandwa*. This took place one month after the *aitarangwe*. At this ceremony, it was customary for each *moran* to slaughter two bulls symbolizing growth to manhood. The meaning of this ceremony is that the young men are confirmed as warriors and sent off to live in the forest away from their families.

### **1.73 Moranhood**

The attachment to the traditional ways of life remained powerful among the pastoralists. Hence, it has been widely argued that it served as impediment to mission and state education. Moranhood as an age grade began immediately after one was circumcised until the period the initiate was ready to join the ranks of junior elders and eventual marriage. The activities practised by *morans* were pervasive and pleasurable. This was quickly succeeded with an incoming group to take over. On the other hand, the girls shortly after their initiation got married and merged into their husband's age-sets.

As observed above, moranhood was a stage in which all male initiates entered immediately after circumcision. Among the Samburu, the boys are circumcised every 10-15 year over the previous age-set and when the elders consider the time is ripe for a new age grade to take over the functions of the *moran*. All boys aged about 14 years and above are circumcised and in one course become warriors (*morans*), the preceding age grade retiring and becoming elders.

Moranhood had far reaching impacts on the development of education among the Samburu. The activities involved in the practice were time consuming and could not allow one to settle at school. They almost covered the period which one would have spent at school. Prior to circumcision, the boys are grouped together in preparation for circumcision. This stage takes about four months. After circumcision, they are taken care of by their parents for one month in order to heal therefore, those enrolled in schools were forced to quit while others flatly refused to go back even after healing because the society considered them as adults. They cannot take advise from anyone let alone teachers. mischief.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the celebratory events accompanying the circumcision ceremonies that we have dealt with in detail in chapter two, did not allow boys to stay in school. Though the ceremonies played an extremely important role in instilling loyalty to "tribal" traditions among young persons of school-going age, they interfered with receptivity to education. The boys who were due for circumcision derived pleasure that forgoing the events to attend school was unimaginable to most of them.

Moranhood was (and is) viewed as part and parcel of the Samburu culture but it is quietly dying as many people get educated. Informants were quick to point out the experience they went through during their moranhood. According to Leteende Lekaso a member of the *Lkimaniki*, moranhood was a period of pleasure. He aptly put it that,

When I became a *moran*, I gave a girl [he did not mention the name] gifts of beads to show her that she was my lover. Such engagement did not mean she will marry me, but she will be my consort until the elders allowed us to get married. I went to the forest for two years where we ate meat, and drank blood and milk. Meat and blood were the preferred staples for the moran consumption. This could not allow

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

me go to school and anyway a few people were going to school. How could I go to school when I was in the forest?<sup>16</sup>

These experiences were told over and over by the informants. Moranhood was viewed as superior to anything else including education and provision of labour to the government. It involved such activities as plaiting the hair beautifully, and maintaining it with red ochre and other natural substances, not intermingling with other people or even eating food prepared by women. It was an abomination for a *moran* to be seen by a woman while eating.<sup>17</sup> As such, *morans* would not go to school as they were bound to meet with women whom they treated with disdain. Moranhood was a highly praised engagement that one would drop out of school to engage in it. For instance, Soipin Lekoolol observed that on being ranked as ‘*moran* number one,’ and songs sung in his praise by pubic girls, he could not comprehend how going to school could help him. He dropped out of school while in the fourth standard to engage in moranhood.<sup>18</sup> Another informant pointed out that he stayed in Marsabit for two years looking after his father’s herd of cattle. He never went to school as he was preoccupied with his father’s herd. At night, other *morans* and him would go singing and dancing with uncircumcised girls. The girls composed songs that they sung for *morans* and as an expression of love, they were showered with beads as gifts.<sup>19</sup>

Most *morans* spent their time going to ceremonies to sing and dance. The night ceremonies were popular with the *morans* as there were usually unmarried young women with whom they engaged in restricted sexual activities. They spent most of their time in the forests and were shy of women and girls. They could not go to school because they were bound to meet women and girls. The marriage came when the next age grade is about to be inaugurated. The *morans* thus resisted any kind of efforts to take them to school.<sup>20</sup> According to Lemwita Lenalpisho, “we saw no reason of going to school when our fathers were rich in livestock. Our every need was met and besides, *moran* were respected in the society then. School was for the poor especially the Turkana.”<sup>21</sup> This attitude played a major role to impede growth of education among the Samburu.

#### 1.74 The Controversy over Female Circumcision

One of the challenges faced by the Christian missions engaged in education in Samburu was female circumcision which was practiced to the detriment of the girl child education. The girls were circumcised individually before marriage but she could not be circumcised before her elder brother(s) were circumcised. Thus knowing the importance of circumcision, she would rather get it done and get married. They could not stay long without husbands as the girls were few. Women therefore suffered double tragedies; culturally, they were to be married immediately after initiation [for the case of the Samburu], and the missionaries were bound not to accept circumcised women in their institutions. This spoke directly to the situation of girl child education among the Samburu.

#### 1.8 Conclusion

There were numerous challenges that inhibited establishment of western education among the Samburu. Evidence has been adduced to the multiplicity of factors that led the slow adoption of social change among the Samburu. The community viewed anything alien as disruptive to their way of life hence they exhibited extreme apathy towards its adoption. Cultural activities were a major barrier to western education. Among them was circumcision both male and female, the pervasive *moran* activities as well as the nomadic way of life. Circumcision for the boys ushered them into moranhood and then junior elders. The junior elders then could not start schooling or proceed because it was a widely held view that, they were adults. Besides this, they could not withstand the presence of elderly women and the taunts of uncircumcised girls who incited them to engage in raiding and spear blooding at the expense of schooling. The girls on the other hand, after circumcision were due for marriage. Circumcised girls were highly valued unlike their uncircumcised counterparts. Each girl strove to undergo circumcision than be regarded as an outcast in the community. The colonial government’s lack of a quick resolution on the tenureship of Lorroki, which was resolved to the advantage of the Samburu after the resolution by KLC and the subsequent promulgation of the grazing controls in 1936 up to 1961, preoccupied the community. As such, there was no much social change as the twin issues infringed on the community’s social and economic well being.

<sup>16</sup> O.I April 2007.

<sup>17</sup> O.I April 2007.

<sup>18</sup> O.I May 2007.

<sup>19</sup> O.I May 2007, Leyangawe Lolpokopey.

<sup>20</sup> O.I May 2007 Leteele Lemuya, Lekuye Leitikitik, Leyangwe Lelpokopey.

<sup>21</sup> O.I May 2007.

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