



SAMBURU PEOPLE OF KENYA

• Introduction

- Like many countries in Africa, Kenya is a multi-lingual country comprised of over 60 native languages spoken by various ethnic groups. However, the official languages are English which is a colonial language that was adopted from the British, and Kiswahili an East African language that originated from the coast of Kenya and Zanzibar, and spread inland along trade routes in the early 19th century. The two official languages are used in varying degrees of fluency for communication among the populations. English is widely spoken to high standard in tourist industry, commerce, schooling and government. Peri-urban and rural dwellers are less multilingual, with many in rural areas speaking only their native languages and Kiswahili.
- Many languages spoken locally belong to three broad language families: The Bantu speakers, Nilotic speakers and the Cushitic speakers; as well as the Arab and Hindustani minorities.
- The Samburu people belong to the Nilotic speakers, who are people believed to be indigenous to the Nile valley of East Africa, (as their name suggests) and who speak Nilotic languages. In Kenya, the Nilotic speaking tribes comprise the Luo, Maasai, Samburu, Turkana and Pokot, as well as many of the subgroups which constitute the Kalenjin.
- The Maasai , Turkana, the Samburu are cattle-herding communities with similarities in their culture and traditions.

THE SAMBURU PEOPLE: KENYA'S TRADITIONALLY “BUTTERFLY DANCING TRIBE”

The Samburu are a proud warrior-race of cattle-owning pastoralists, a section of the Maa-speaking people amongst whom the Maasai are known. Their difference with the Maasai is their dialect, which is spoken in a more rapid manner than that of the Maasai, but include many words that are common to both. The name “samburu” was given to them by other tribes, which directly translates as “butterfly”, most likely due to their personal adornments. The name ‘Samburu’ also is of Maasai origin ‘Samburr’ being the traditional leather bag specific to them which is used for carrying meat and honey on their backs. But until today, the Samburu people refer to themselves as “Loikop” (the land owners).



They dwell in the remote and much more arid areas of northern Kenya.

Proud of their culture and traditions, the Samburu people 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 warriors: their main task is to protect the community from enemies (mostly, rival tribes), and wild animals.



THEIR WAY OF LIFE

Fiercely pastoral, the Samburu people are totally committed to their livestock, almost to exclusion of everything else. Their cattle are their life; their wealth; their livelihood and symbol of status and success within the tribe. Like the Maasai, they believe that all cattle rightfully belong to them, cattle raiding of other tribes has always been a major preoccupation of the warriors. They also keep sheep, goats, camels and donkeys.

Their diet comprises mostly of meat, milk and occasionally blood from their cows, which is accrued by slightly cutting the jugular of the cow, and draining the blood and the wound is then promptly sealed with hot ash. Meat is also served on special occasions and rituals. The diet is also supplemented with vegetables, roots and tubers that are made into soup, and today also with maize flour.



SAMBURU ELDERS



Samburu woman and girls

CULTURE

- The Samburu are gerontocracy, the elders rule the tribe. It is the elders who decide when ceremonies will occur, such as weddings and circumcisions and other rituals.
- Although in recent decades missionaries have had success in converting more Samburu to predominantly Catholic, and also protestant forms of Christianity, Nevertheless, the majority of Samburu continue to observe most traditional ritual practices. Their religion traditionally focuses on multi-faceted divinity (Nkai), with ritual diviners called “Loibonok”.
- Traditionally, men look after their cattle and they are responsible for the overall safety of the tribe.
- Samburu women are responsible for caring for the children, collecting water and firewood, vegetables and building of the homestead. Girls usually help their mothers with domestic chores so as to train for motherhood at an early age. It is the women who are entirely responsible for homes.



SAMBURU GIRL/WOMAN



SAMBURU MORAN/WARRIOR

RIGHTS OF PASSAGE

Entry into manhood and womanhood is marked with a circumcision ceremony. Men and women are only able to get married once they have been circumcised, as prior to that they are still considered as children.

Once a boy has been circumcised he is now considered a Moran (a warrior). The men are placed into age-sets with each generation given a specific age-set name, and as a group they move from one social position to another; from child to moran, then to junior elder (where they are now allowed to marry) and finally to elder. Men pass through three stages; boyhood - from birth to adolescence, then Moranhood - from circumcision to junior elders and marriage, when they are still warriors; and finally Elder-hood. In all these social positions there are rituals and ceremonies that accompany.

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. Girls on the other hand do not have age-set groupings, instead they pass through two stages of life; namely girlhood and womanhood after circumcision. (although female genital mutilation is illegal in Kenya, this indigenous tribes continue to practice it.)

The samburu people also have close and deep relationship with wild Elephants. They believe that God (Nkai), created man and Elephants as brothers, and that Elephants have special powers. Whenever they come across an elephant carcass, they'll place pieces of grass or greenery on the skull of the animal as a sign of respect. And that if anyone is caught poaching elephants in the samburu community, they are banned from taking part in certain rituals, such as the great honour of being best man at someone's wedding, because they are deemed 'unclean' (sadly, some have been lured by the prospect of money). They however, revere elephants so much that after marriage, the happy couple will light their first fire together using elephant dung.



A warrior jump dance



Moran and girls in dance movement patterns

SONGS AND DANCE

With no written language; songs, dance and storytelling forms part of their life. And songs are dedicated to God, their cattle, the bravery of warriors and tales of the tribal warfare and victories.

They do not use any musical instruments in their song, only their vocal hum melodies and clapping, with various pattern of movements and jumping. The music is entirely a capella voices and rhythmic clapping. And women flinging their beaded necklaces forward and back in rhythm with the songs movements.

The morans are rarely empty handed, as they understand their tasks as protectors of the community and so they will be seen with walking sticks, spears and or with long swords on their waists. (and recently possession of illegal fire arms; guns has become the norm).



Girls dancing



CONCLUSION

With the relentless tidal wave of modernity, the Samburu way of life remains strong. Though slowly, some aspects of traditions like female circumcision and child marriages are being discouraged, hopefully the positive aspects of the traditions will live on.

Thanks;

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