

THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GOURDS AMONG THE SAMBURU OF KENYA

Dr. Ruth Nyambura, PhD

Mount Kenya University, Nakuru Campus
Coordinator, Research & Development

ABSTRACT

The gourd is used as a container throughout Africa. As the fruit of one of the continent's earliest cultivated plants, the gourd or calabash as it is commonly called has long been adopted by nomadic pastoralists. Gourds are an integral part of the Samburu culture and have so many uses and symbolic meanings. The paper focuses on decoration patterns of the Samburu guards, utility and historical significance in their ceremonies. The study was informed by cultural history theory. Cultural history focuses on the changes and practices in human agency. Culture is transmitted across generations through the memory which is a faculty of the individual mind. Data was collected by use of oral interviews, non-participant observation and photography as well as thorough the examination of secondary sources from various libraries. The data was analysed using Ex Post Facto design. One of the recommendations made was that more research and documentation about the Samburu culture should be done to preserve the rich cultural heritage.

Keywords: Guards, Samburu, Culture, Symbolism, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Culture finds expression in people's values, beliefs and rituals as well as possession. It is reflected on people's social, economic, judicial, political and value systems. The implication here is that the cultural identity of a people is based upon, and consists of, the totality of their values, norms, traditions, language and their inward and outward manifestations. All these combine and bestow upon a people or ethnic group a particular identity and niche. ¹ The bottle gourd, or calabash, was one of the first plants cultivated by humans. It was generally used as a container

¹ B.A. Ogot. "New Trends in Cultural History 'The Silence in Old Narratives'" in G.S. Were (ed.) (1992). *Journal of East Africa Research and Development*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 38-39.

for storing food and for carrying water. The gourd was used extensively among early civilizations such as ancient Egypt where they were used as pontoons for rafts. Among some pastoral communities in New Guinea, South America, and Africa gourds were used as penis sheaths. The Roman children used gourds as children's swimming aids and as birdhouses by native North Americans and more recently as motorcycle helmets in Nigeria. The Gourd is also possibly mankind's oldest musical instrument resonator.²

In many pre-colonial African communities, the calabash was product of a gourd plant. Normally, this gourd fruit had to be allowed time to mature before it was plucked hollowed out to remove the content mainly seeds. It was placed out in the sun to dry up. With time, the green colour faded as it became hard. It was ready for use at this point. According to the history of the African calabash, this item was used by many communities. The gourd was significant in their rituals and ceremonies.

The Samburu people live in Samburu County. Samburu County covers an area of roughly 21,000 km² (8,000 miles²) in northern Kenya where the Samburu community live. It stretches north from the Wuaso Ng'iro River to the south of Lake Turkana and also includes Mount Kulal which lies just east of Lake Turkana. The County has three constituencies: Samburu East, North and West. The County is predominantly rural with more than 87% of its population living in rural areas. The County's headquarters is Maralal. Other main administrative centres are Poror, Wamba, Archer's Post and Barsaloi. The County is divided into six administrative divisions: Baragoi, Kirisia, Lorroki, Nyiro, Wamba and Waso. Tourism potentials exist in the County. People travel from far and near to visit Samburu National Reserve, Buffalo Springs National Reserve, Mount Ng'iro, Ngoro Mountains, Mathews Range (Ol Doinyo Lenkiyo), Kirisia Hills, and Loroki Forest. These tourist attractions have contributed immensely to the development of the County.³

The Samburu originated from Sudan, settling north of Mount Kenya and south of Lake Turkana in Kenya's Rift Valley region. Upon their arrival in Kenya, in the about fifteenth Century, the Samburu parted ways with their Maasai cousins, who moved further south while, the Samburu moved north. This paper discusses the varied functional, ritualistic, and symbolic uses of the gourd among the Samburu. The gourd was used diversely from food and medicine containers, artefacts, and musical instruments. It is part and parcel of the culture and plays a key role during a number of their social ceremonies and rites of passage.

²L. Kistler, et.al "Transoceanic Drift and the Domestication of African Bottle Gourds in the Americas" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 111, No. 8,2014,pp.2937-2941.

³ P. Spencer, *The Samburu: A Study of Gerontocracy in a Nomadic Tribe*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature exists on the general use of gourds among cultures in the globe. The gourd was a significant item of all communities in Africa. It was used as milk container, to store local beer, food, water, medicine, tobacco, animal fat, honey, poison, blood, salt, charcoal, perfume and for barter trade. Among the traditional healers, gourds were used to store their spells and communicate with the spirits. For agricultural communities the gourd seeds were missed and planted with many different crops to suppress weed.⁴

In *World of a Slave*, Hyman focuses on the use of the gourds in West Africa. He ascertains that the word “calabash” became the generic term for the gourds among early European newcomers, who lacked the knowledge or interest to differentiate the fruit. In Much of West Africa, decorated gourds along with baskets, served as the primary containers. They ranged in size from small drinking cups to huge bowls often carried on the head, that could hold vegetables or milk. In fishing communities, West Africans used gourds as floats for their nets and everywhere gourds served as resonators for creating a wide variety of strings and percussion instruments.⁵ Though the literature covered here concerns communities residing in West Africa we are able to understand the European perceptions on African traditions especially that of the gourds.

Similarly, Helser discusses in his book that, to the early people, the gourd was the universal womb. He asserts that gourds originated from Africa and adds that its survival in other places depended on human intervention. That is, gourds could have been carried from one area to another as rattles and then after being accidentally broken they would be relegated to the dump heap where more gourds would spring up from the seeds.⁶ The source is informative and has contributed to the understanding of the origin of the gourd and uses by early man. However, the sources have their own limitations in regard to the historical accounts of the use of gourds among the Samburu.

Hodder conducted an ethnoarchaeological investigation among the Pokot, Tugen and Ilchamus in the Lake Baringo region of Western Kenya. He studied material culture such as calabashes, wooden honey pots, eating bowls, milking jugs, ceramic and basketries. His objective was to study material culture as symbols and role in farming and giving meaning to social behaviour among the communities. He found out that gourds were used to store milk, herbs and local brew

⁴ J. A. Osborn, *Cattle, Co-wives, Children and Calabashes: Material Context for Symbolism among the Ilchamus of West Kenya*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1996.

⁵ M.B. Katz-Hyman & K.S. Rice, *World of a Slave: Encyclopaedia of the Material Life of Slaves in the United States*, Chicago: ABC-CLIO, 2010.

⁶ C. Helser, *The Gourd Book*, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

and each family decorated their gourd in a specific way.⁷ This study was key in the understanding the significance of gourds among some pastoral communities in traditional Kenya's communities.

Lim discusses the gourd, known by the Akamba. The gourd was known as *kitete*. He states that gourds have been used as containers for food, seeds and other local specialities such as beer and honey. The *kitete* was used to store ornaments. Similarly the Akamba sorcerers used it for divination and anointing initiates and marriage couples. The *kitete* has long been an integral part of the traditional culture of the Akamba but it was almost facing extinction due to the introduction of glass and plastics as storage containers.⁸ Somjee analyses the use of the gourds among some communities in Kenya. Among the Marakwet of Kerio Valley a gourd referred to as *loo*, was used a vessel for mixing honey with traditional liquor. The Bajun of the Islands of Siyu and Pate used *bori ya samuli* to make butter. Among the Pokot, an infant's feeding bottle was made from a gourd referred to as *soto*.⁹ The two author credits interviews which make the studies original and interesting. Lim sheds light to the impact of westernism on the Akamba gourd though he does mention the Samburu.

Olupona gives an interesting review on divination among the Samburu. He states that divination involved casting of objects from a gourd called *nkidong* divination. The ritual required the diviner shaking a gourd filled with numerous objects such as hyena teeth, marbles, cowries, leather knots, animal horns and beads, each of which had a symbolic meaning and evolved the divine energy needed to accomplish the diviner's task.¹⁰ This book does not give the origin of the Samburu gourd and why a gourd was used for divination but it helps us appreciate the spiritual significance of the gourd among the Samburu.

Grillo has made the most significant contribution towards our understanding of the Samburu material culture. The author examined the importance of pottery to Samburu survival particularly for the preparation of bone soups, herbs and other foods during drought and food insecure seasons.¹¹ This research help us understand how the material culture particularly pottery influenced the origin and development of Samburu culture through modification of their pottery though it does not explicitly describe use of gourds in Samburu rites of passage.

⁷ I, Hodder, "The decoration of Containers: An Ethnographic and Historical Study" in *Ceramic Ethno-Archeology*, pp. 71-94, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999.

⁸ T.K. Lim, *Edible Medicine and Non-Medicinal Plants (Vol.2)*, London: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012.

⁹ S. Somjee, *Material Culture of Kenya*, Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1993.

¹⁰ J. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹¹ K. Grillo, "Pastoralism and Pottery Use: An Ethnoarchaeological Study in Samburu Culture", *African Archaeological Review*, Vol 3, No.2, pp.105-130, 2014.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After data collection and analysis there was no data ascertaining the specific year when the Samburu started using the gourd. It was only prudent to conclude that the gourd has been in use since the evolution of the community. The gourd however, is not a just a storage container but an item has symbolic meaning in the Samburu rites of passage as discussed below.

To be childless was the worst fate for a Samburu woman. If one was discovered barren, the family sought the advice of a medicine man, *laibon*, who identified the cause. A mother gave birth at home whenever possible. A cleansing ceremony was held immediately after birth. A kid was slaughtered at the house's entrance and the blood was put in a small gourd for the mother to drink in bits. This was a symbolic replacement of blood she lost during birth. Friends and relatives visited in numbers and food was served in plenty.¹² A gourd referred to as *Lkantir* was used to store milk for the visitors. See the illustration below:



**Figure 1: Illustration of *Lkantir* which was used to store milk for visitors.
Personal gallery, 2 April 2017, Kisima.**

¹² Leyelen Lekume, O.I April 2017.

Boys generally spent time hunting birds, guinea fowls, butterflies and fancied themselves as great warriors in future as they went out armed in bows and arrows. The most significant event in a boy's life was circumcision rite which took intervals of seven years. The circumcision ceremony involves large settlements built for the occasion called *lolora*.¹³ After the exercise the patrons escorted each boy to his mother's hut. A light brown ox, *sorua* was slaughtered through suffocation with a sheep's skin as it stood on its feet. The newly circumcised rested on a bed made by the mother where she feed him for he was not supposed to touch the food with his bare hands as they were considered dirty and infectious nor was he supposed to shower for one month but smear himself with fat. Droppings from sheep were tied above the boy's bed believed to ease pain. Milk was stored in a special guard called *Naitu*. This gourd was used for the circumcised boys only.¹⁴ *Naitu* was also used by the uncircumcised boy's sponsor in the morning of the ritual. A mixture of milk and water in the *naitu* was poured over his shaven head as a blessing.¹⁵



Figure 2: Illustration of *naitu* which was used to store milk for newly circumcised boys only. Personal gallery, 3 April 2017, Kisima.

¹³ T. Magor, *African Warriors: The Samburu*, London: Harry N. Abrams, 1994.

¹⁴ Lepishau Leleula, O.I April 2017.

¹⁵ Musa Lekamario, O.I. April 2017.

The *Murran* 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.¹⁶ Cole collaborates with this statement by stating that after circumcision and transition, the *murran* 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 *murran*, is to be carefully and artistically dressed, coiffed and painted.¹⁷ This is also displayed in the gourds used. The gourd is referred to as *Igooroshi*. Its capacity goes up to 5 liters. It is Made from a local tree found in the lower parts of Samburu land.¹⁸ In addition, *Igooroshi* was adorned with a green bead, *saen nanyore* to symbolize the presence of a *murran* in the household. No other member of the family or relatives can use the gourd except the *murran*.¹⁹ See the below illustrations.



**Figure 3: Illustration of *Igooroshi* which was used to store milk for the *Murran* only.
Personal gallery, 11 April 2017, Maralal.**

¹⁶ N. Pavitt. *Samburu*, London: Kyle Cathie Ltd, 2006.

¹⁷ H. Cole. “Living Art among the Samburu” in J. Cordwell. (ed.) et.al, *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, London: Mounton Publishers, 1979, pp.87-103.

¹⁸ Lpesan Lekamario, O.I April 2017.

¹⁹ Lekamario Sidai, O.I April 2017.

The Samburu women were in charge of gathering roots and vegetables, tending to children and collecting water. They are also in charge of maintaining their homes. Samburu girls generally help their mothers with their domestic chores. Entry into womanhood is also marked with a circumcision ceremony. After this ceremony, the girl is ready for marriage. After identifying a girl, the man-old enough to be the father, may present his wish to the girl's parents through the uncles. Once agreements are made bride price is agreed and all other rituals follows suit. On the wedding day, the groom led the bride away to his own village and elders stood in two rows to bless the couple. On her back the bride carried three gourds; a small one known as *lboliboli* containing animal fat. She was to cook and smear herself once she settled in her new home as a good omen for children in future. The other two known as *ngilip e ngoliyon* contained milk. The bride was to give milk to the children in her new homestead on arrival. The groom and his bride proceeded with the journey but posed severally and the groom served the bride with some milk to symbolize that she was in safe hands. On arrival the groom's mother welcomed the couple and poured milk on them to wish them a prosperous married.²⁰



Figure 4: Illustration of the groom serving milk to the bride from *ngilip e ngoliyon*. The bride is holding the other is *ngilip*. Personal gallery, 12 April 2017, Maralal.

²⁰ Leloto Lenaiya O.I April 2017.



Figure 5: A bride carrying a gourd, *Iboliboli* on her back containing animal fat she is carrying *Iboliboli*. Personal gallery, 12 April 2017, Maralal.

The elders are the major decision makers in the community. 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. If the elder curses the junior for no good reason, then the junior's spirit would still provide protection and the cursor's spirit would be powerless to inflict harm. However, if the elder has good reason to curse, then the junior would suffer the predicament.²¹ You would mostly find the elders seated under a tree discussing important matters of the community. Milk was served to them from a gourd referred to as *nkirau*. See illustration below:

²¹ B. Straight, *Miracles and Extraordinary Experience in Northern Kenya*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.



Figure 6: Illustration of *nkirau* used by elders only. Personal gallery, 14 April 2017, Maralal.

CONCLUSION

The gourd among the Samburu was a marker of culture. It was a significant indicator of age, gender, idea, avenue of artistic expression and mastery. This paper offers the pride of African identity in post-independence Africa through the symbolism of gourds among the Samburu.

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