THE SAMBURU TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATIVE ORNAMENTATION:
IDENTITY AND FGM IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT
Historically linguists classify the Samburu as Plain Nilotes. The current study considers traditional ornamentation among the Samburu as part of their discourse. It is important to note here that the Samburu is a marginalized community in Kenya that is still deep rooted in its culture. Their traditional ornamentation is a complex system of communication and identity. There is no linguistic research that has been conducted to unravel the meaning and identity in this traditional complex system of communication among the Samburu. This study aims at identifying the ornaments, explaining what they mean, establishing the kind of identity and power they give to those who wear them, and find out whether they play a role in the propagation of Female Genital Mutilation, FGM. The fact that a lot of campaigns have been done to stop FGM but not much decline has been achieved motivates the current study. FGM is not only an issue in Kenya but also in East African countries neighboring Kenya, other parts of Africa, Asia, Middle East, Europe and North America. There is particularly no linguistic research that has been conducted to account for the role of the Samburu visual discourse in the propagation of FGM as a cultural ideology and human rights violation. Studies show that efforts to end FGM focus on legal initiative and on improving the status of women to make choices.
This study seeks to find out whether the visual discourse of the Samburu plays a role in motivating girls and women undergo this painful and medically dangerous practice. The study is based on four hypotheses: there are Samburu traditional ornaments, these ornaments have meaning, they give identity and power to those who wear them, and finally they play a role in propagating FGM. The study adopts the Critical Discourse Analysis theory as propagated by Fairclough 1995, 2000, Van Dijk 1985, 2001 and Leeuwen 2006. Interview using an interview schedule, observation and photography were used to collect data. The data was later analyzed qualitatively in the light of the tenets of CDA which is the theoretical framework.

**Key Words:** ornamentation, identity, communication, FGM

**Introduction**

The Samburu is a marginalized community in Kenya found in the Samburu County Rift Valley region. Their ornamentation system is complex system of communication and identity. This system is also related to FGM which is a cultural practice among the Samburu. This practice is deeply embedded in their culture and it has been hard to eliminate despite a lot of campaign. The current study intends to discuss the fact that this ornamentation plays a role in the perpetuation of FGM.

**Objectives of the Study**

1. Identify the ornaments
2. Explain the meaning of those ornament
3. Establish the identity and power the ornaments give those who wear them
4. Explain how they perpetuate FGM

**Literature Review**

According to Leeuwen (2006), like linguistic structures, visual structures point to a particular interpretation of experience and forms of social interaction. Meanings belong to cultures rather than specific semiotic modes. Things are expressed visually or culturally according to people’s history and culture. What is expressed in language through the choice between two different word classes and close structure may in visual communication be expressed through the choice of different colours or different compositional structures and this affects meaning. This research has revealed that the Samburu exploit colour and compositional structure of ornaments to express different messages and meanings. Subjects were not able to tell when this ornamentation begun so it is a long lasting traditional form language through visual design among the Samburu. Leeuwen also reports that visual communication is not universal grammar, it is culturally specific. These ornaments give identity and power to those who wear them and wearing them is ceremoniously done as per the specifications of the samburu culture. According to Cameron (2006:5), reality including power and gender relations is constructed in and through discourse.
This visual discourse among the Samburu constructs specific realities of gender and power to different people who wear them. This is the reason a father for instance makes sure that his daughters undergo FGM to give him the prestige of being put on these ornaments to gain the power to be a blessed father and a recognized elder. CDA views discourse as an instrument of power and control. In this case it is discourse that is used to construct social reality. According to CDA, when language is used by the powerful in the society it gains power otherwise it is not powerful on its own. When language becomes powerful in this manner it brings about inequalities (Fairclough 2000:49). This is important to the current study which aims at examining Samburu visual discourse in this light where language forms are used in the manipulation of power and control of the other.

According to Foucault (1980) power and knowledge are related and therefore every human relationship is a power struggle. Foucault also reports that the ever present power in the society has the ability to produce and constrain truth and that discourse is related to power because it operates on rules of exclusion. Discourse is controlled by objects that can be spoken of like rituals.

Gee (1990) reports that discursive practices involve ways of being in the world that signify specific and recognizable social identities. Lastly, the social context comprises distinct setting where discourse occurs for instance, market place, church, classroom, special meetings and occasions, etc, each with a set of conventions that determine rights and obligations i.e. what each is allowed and expected to do. Each of the ornaments is put on by a specific person on a specific person, and at a specific time in life to give certain identity power and control.

**Significance of FGM among the Samburu**

“FGM in the Samburu community is mandatory” (Wanyoike 2011:197). It is seen as a rite of passage in the Samburu culture. According to (Coast 2000:7) in (Wanyoike 2011:197), ‘FGM is considered essential for correct sexual behaviour and fertility. It represents the acquisition of social adulthood and sanctions child bearing. The reproductive capacity of a woman among the Maasai is activated by cutting her clitoris (Talle 1998:96). Among the Samburu FGM is an indicator that a Samburu girl has ceased to be girl, changed her social status and she is ready for marriage and child bearing. (Wanyoike 2011:197). The same author reports that the Samburu women advocate for FGM as a way of controlling the female sexual libido. They believe that this is also one way of controlling HIV/AIDS. They also believe that if women and girls don’t undergo FGM, the children they give birth to will be cursed. (Wanyoike 2011:198). The Samburu believe that it is a bad omen for a girl not to be circumcised and such a girl will not get a man to marry her. In relation to the foregoing the significance of TFI is embedded in social and cultural values of the Samburu.
Theoretical framework

This ornamentation system is part of the Samburu culture specific visual language. According to Van Leeuwen (2006:292) critical discourse analysis has moved beyond language, taking on board that discourses are often multimodally realized as images. He actually reports that like linguistic structures visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction. These visual images have cultural historical meaning that is expressed linguistically (Van Leeuwen 2006:28). The analysis will take Fairclough’s (1995, 2000), and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) approaches of CDA.

Research Methodology

The data was collected in Samburu County Suguta Mar Mar Division. The target population in this study consisted of the native speakers of Samburu language in Samburu County. This was the only way to get a linguistically homogeneous group of subjects best suited for the study. Having been interested in female initiation discourse the researchers had to look for a community such as this, which has an elaborate female initiation culture. The sample for the study consisted of Samburu native speakers. The researchers had go to the ceremony and collect data from the participants of the ceremony. This entailed judgemental sampling of those who had the ornaments ranging from children to adults. Then 20 subjects aged between 18 years and 60 years were sampled using simple random sampling method. 10 male and 10 female for the sake of gender balance. This was an adequate number of respondents to help the research get more information concerning the ornaments.

A tape recorder was used to collect the articulated discourse for transcription, translation, and analysis. An interview schedule was also used to collect data from twenty respondents that were randomly sampled. During this time the researcher used a native interpreter as a research assistant to collect data using the interview schedule. The researcher also used observation and recorded the information in a note book. Photography was also carried out intensely especially for the ornaments. The data collected was transcribed then translated into English. The data was later analyzed using the Critical Discourse Analysis theory and the Feminist theory then conclusions and recommendations were made.

Results and Discussion

This the section discusses the results and presents them as they were collected in the field by photography. These ornaments according to the findings in field are an accepted natural form of communication and culture that has never been challenged or questioned. According to Cameron (2001:24) the main claim of CDA that is the theoretical framework in this study, the way certain realities get talked or written about especially the choices speakers and writers make are not just random but ideologically patterned. These choices do much in relation to naturalization of
particular social arrangements which serve certain specific interests so that in time they may come to seem like the only possible or rational arrangements. These ornaments, according to the study serve a strong hidden ideological agenda of propagating the practice of FGM. This is because the characters involved are obliged to make sure that at one time of their lives they wear them. For example, it is the responsibility of the father to convince the daughters to keep the culture by going through FGM so that that father can get the honour of wearing the ornaments and being blessed by the elders of the community.

Figure 1

The two rings in this old man’s ear (figure 1) are called urauri in Samburu language. They were placed on this ear by a chosen and specific elder in a ceremonial manner after his daughter had been circumcised the same morning. One of the subjects reported that it’s a great honour for a man to lead his daughter well in the way of his people until the time of circumcision and marriage. These rings are put on this man’s ear to mark him off as prestigious in this season of female initiation. According to the respondents every man would wish to have his daughter circumcised so that he can be honored in this manner and get recognition in the society as one who upholds and respects their culture.

Figure 2
There is still another ornament called *sae e nkwe* (Figure 2). This comes after putting on the rings on the ear. This small chain is also ceremoniously tied on his (the father of the girl) head to give the identity of an honourable elder in the community. It is not only an honour but also a sign that blessings are bestowed on him for keeping the cultural traditions of their community and bringing up his daughter in the right way. This man who is specifically chosen ties this chain on this man’s head chanting that the man and his family should be blessed with cows, goats, sheep all wealth and good health. It is therefore the role of the father to convince his daughters to get circumcised so that this chain can be put on his head during the circumcision ceremony and blessings announced over his life and family. The respondents also informed that *sae e nkwe* is also a sign of a father honouring his daughter since on account of her, he wears the ring throughout the day of the ceremony.

![Figure 3 (a)](image)

The two ornaments above are followed by another one called *munken* (Figure 3 (a) above and (b) below). This is a kind of rope like decoration made of skin. It is tied around the leg of the father whose daughter has been circumcised. This is only tied on the father when it has been confirmed that the girl is pure, especially that she is not pregnant at the time of circumcision. This is some kind of a congratulation symbol for the father to appreciate the fact that he is a good father who brought up the girl well. The respondents also said that if the girl is pregnant before circumcision it’s a bad omen in their culture and that the girl must be circumcised before she gives birth. In this case of pregnancy the father misses the honour of this ornament being tied on his leg during the circumcision of the pregnant daughter. In case the girl gives birth before being circumcised the baby is considered an outcast and should be killed through suffocation using tobacco. The initiate is also honoured and respected by others and the whole community when this ornament is tied on the father’s leg because it shows that she did not misbehave, rather she is a respectable young woman of good character. It also shows that there is no curse upon her because the pregnancy of uncircumcised girl is a curse according to the Samburu culture.
There is then the application of oil to seal the blessings upon the father and his family. This is a kind of special semisolid oil extracted from milk over a long period of time by the mother of the girl to be circumcised with the help of her friends in preparation for the initiation ceremony. It is called *ng’orrno* (Figure 4). This oil is kept in a special container made specifically for the storage of initiation ceremony oil. The container is referred to as *nkodoos*. As the oil is smeared on the head any curse upon the family is declared lifted and the man is termed a liberated elder.
The above (Figure 5) is a female ornament accumulated over time. One is put on top of another as the girl grows into a woman. The whole of it is called *lkiripan*. When a woman puts on this collection she is identified as a respectable lady in the community who was once circumcised and got married honourably. One respondent said that such a woman has the power to lead others in the right way according to their Samburu culture. It is therefore the desire of every girl to put on this collection of chains in order to win the respect of the community. One sure way is of putting on these ornaments is circumcision; an uncircumcised girl cannot put on this ornaments.

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 6**

This chain is worn by a young mother. It is called *sae e lgoss* (Figure 6). It shows that she is newly married with a kid or two. It is upon this chain that others are added until she gets *lkiripan* (Figure 5). This is also an indicator that this young woman was circumcised at one time. Its an honour by the community to put on the chain.

![Figure 6](image)

**Figure 7**

This chain is divided into two parts. The lower part before the ark of the Kenyan flag is referred to as *nkomeshai* while the upper part of the chain that goes up to the neck is called *nkeliai*. When one gets married after circumcision the other women in the matrimonial home make this chain for the married woman to welcome her as one of them and to honour her for the fact that she got married honourably in the right manner after circumcision.
Figure 8

The long silver chain hanging on the ear is referred to as nkaiwueli (figure 8). Both these are given to a circumcised girl by the man who marries her to show that she is officially and legally married to him. It marks her off as a woman bought by a lot of wealth by her husband and belonging to him. One of the respondents informed that it was a curse to wear this chain without being circumcised and being officially married.

Figure 9

This little girl is about five years and is already having a chain. It is possible to imagine that this is just a chain. However, this chain sends a strong message that the parents of this girl would like the girl to grow up in a cultural way and after a few years get circumcised and traditionally married. One of the respondents said that “Ukiona hiyo ushanga ujue hiyo ni wa shanga si wa shule” meaning that this chain says something about the education of this girl, that she might not go far in education but will follow their culture: get circumcised and then marry.
Figure 10

This is a chain won by a girl before circumcision. This chain marks her off as a child *ndito* awaiting circumcision and subsequent marriage. After circumcision, other chains are added to her. These other chains that are added to her neck mark her off as ready for marriage and child bearing. Each girl would like to graduate from this chain.

Figure 11 (a)

Figure 11 (b)
This is a special ornament for the mother who has circumcised a boy. However when her daughter is circumcised there is nothing to mark her off. This ornament is called *siririmi*. This chain is the pride of a mother who has circumcised a pure son who has not impregnated a girl before circumcision, which is considered a curse. Such a child borne of uncircumcised boy is a bad omen, a curse and should be killed through suffocation using tobacco. This implies that though female circumcision is an important cultural practice, the circumcision of a boy makes a mother receive more honour than that of a girl. There is however a type of skin that is given to a mother when a girl is circumcised.

![Figure 12 (a)](image)

**Figure 12 (a)**

These two figures (12 a & b) illustrate a well organized and long awaited dance that occurs once a year. It is clear from the figures that a lot of ornaments are won by the men *morans* and the girls. These ornaments are ceremonial and they are worn for the evening dance after the process of FGM. This is actually the last stage of FGM. It is heroic for each participant to come out unique for the dance. The participants wear different but related ornaments and hope to receive
the honour of being the most decorated participant. So each one of them prepare throughout the year for this day

Conclusions

The objectives of the current study were confirmed through the findings of the study. The visual discourse in form of traditional cultural ornaments were found to include, siririmi, sae e lgoss, munken, ikiripan, sae e nkwe, nkaiwueli among others. These ornaments gave various kinds of identity and power to those who wore them. They are ceremoniously put on by a specific person and convey a strong meaning concerning the person to the whole community. Due to the foregoing the study also concluded from the findings that these visual discourse plays a role in the propagation of FGM. The study concluded that they have ahiden agenda that has lived on for a long time and has now been naturalized as the only acceptable way of doing things. Cameron (2001:124). This also leads to the fact that FGM is an ideological issue that is deep rooted in the Samburu culture and has been constructed among these people in a complex way: even that which can hardly be imagined as the simple ornaments that they wear.

Recommendations

1. The fact that FGM has been burnt in 28 African countries where it is practiced, requires a different intervention and a realization that it is not only a cultural practice but also an ideology that has been constructed over the years.
2. According to Cameron (2001:123) reality is understood as it is constructed, so for this practice to come to an end the existing reality in the current discourse needs to be deconstructed and anew reality constructed.
3. Strategies should be put in place to phase out these ornaments because they operate on the principle of exclusion which puts pressure on people to want to be included even against their wish as long as they can be accepted by the society.

References


