



The Samburu beads of Death

By Wanjala Wafula

It's a luminous and gusty Sunday afternoon in Maralal town, one of the main towns in the hinterland of the Samburu people who are illustrious warriors. The Samburu are the dreaded conquerors whose land acquisition atrocities in the past are narrated with profound fright. Their men are tall and strong. They revere traditional clamor and style which they display through their flashy regalia and custom-made beads. According to Kanoinok, "God speaks to the Samburu first before other tribes on earth".



The Samburu people live where the slopes of Mount Kenya unite into the northern desert in Kenya. They are a cattle-herding community that is estimated to have reached their current destination about five hundred years ago. Their dependence on cattle dictates that they constantly move to find food and water for their animals. Their society has depended on pastoralism and warfare for so long that they find it hard to transform to a more conventional lifestyle. They are a people both proud and defensive of their culture and the ancestral lands to which it binds them. They are a people

admired for their great attention to physical appearance and adornment.

As the sunsets on Maralal town, I start to notice tens of underage girls roaming the streets. Occasionally, they converge in one corner of the street then disperse to different directions of the dusty town. It's Cleophas Irilom, the club attendant who realizes my perpetual stare at the girls and decides to come to my rescue. "Good afternoon Sir", he affirms as he pulls a seat. "I have noticed that you seem disturbed by the girls moving around here", he asks as I answer to the affirmative. "The girls you see are child prostitutes because they have nowhere to go. They were expelled from their families and communities because they became pregnant after being beaded by warriors. In our culture, a girl is not supposed to

get pregnant after being beaded because it's an abomination", he concludes to my utmost bewilderment.

I slowly walk toward the girls and it's the agile Agnes Lepar that approaches me. "Good evening sir", she says with a broad smile. "I know you are a visitor in this town because we know most of the people here. I am here doing business and If you don't like me I could get you one of the girls standing there", she points at about ten young shy girls standing at a corner nearby. "All the girls you see here were disowned by their families and communities. We were all beaded by the warriors and became pregnant by mistake. My mother together with other women took me to the nearby bush and stepped on my stomach until my child came out then they threw the child to the hyenas. Seven days after that they contacted an expulsion ceremony and I was expelled from the community. So we are here scavenging for food, shelter and security because many girls have been followed here and killed by their family members. You decide quickly because I have not had a meal since yesterday. There are no customers these days because of the constant arrests by County police officers". I invite Lepar and four of her friends to a meal and the stories that follow are horrific to narrate in this column.

Beads are a part of Samburu life since time in memorial but the beading practice is having a devastating effect on Samburu girls some who are as young as ten. The practice is normally initiated by parents around puberty, but possibly earlier but exploited by Morans (warriors) who use the practice to cause numerous vulnerabilities to girls. The practice of beading allows Moran's to qualify as "legal" boyfriends accepted by the community, sadly with the consent of the family and facilitated by mothers. The Morans (warriors) engage in criminal activities including cattle rustling from other communities including the Turkana, Pokot and Borana. After the raids, Morans sell the cattle so as they can be able to buy very expensive beads for the girls and gifts for the girl's mothers. Once the relationship is agreed, the girl's mother builds a hut for the "couple" where the Moran will have access to the girl for sex anytime he feels like. The girl is treated almost as a wife though the Moran is not supposed to marry her because in almost all the cases, she is from his clan and it would be a taboo to be married. It is a taboo for girls to get pregnant because they are from the same clan. The word contraceptive use does not exist in their world.



All beaded Samburu girls **MUST** undergo Female genital Mutilation and marriage for a bride price at any age decided by the parents especially the father and uncles. When the girl gets pregnant, her mother and fellow clan women conduct crude abortions. The women press the girl's abdomen with their elbows until the fetus dies. The young mothers to be almost always die, or they get life threatening complications like excessive bleeding, sepsis, and fistula. Others never conceive again. When they carry the pregnancy to term and give

birth, the child is killed using a concoction of tobacco and the girls almost always get expelled from their families and the community.

What worries me is that beading is encouraged by mothers and supported by communities. It's a vice that exposes girls to life threatening experiences right at their homes where they are meant to experience comfort and protection. The vice sets up girls for destruction yet sanctioned and supervised by parents and families. I have urged over the years that the understanding around culture is interpreted to the advantage of the perpetrator but to the sustained detriment of the survivors. I have constantly stood firm to the reality that "culture" is wrongly perceived by communities across the African continent and forced onto generations through diverse socialization processes that sustain and use it as a tool to deny women and girls an opportunity to progress at all levels in society.



I implore anyone to condemn me if I insisted that existing legislation lacks accurate instruments for application and execution especially in matters relating to profoundly settled cultural practices and traditions. In my stay in Samburu, I met over five legislators who amenablely told me off when I brought up the beading subject matter for discussion. "This is our tradition and no one will take it away from us. You see I am a politician and I have to balance the realities on the ground. I speak the city language when in the city and come home to dance and eat meat with my

people and it's them that voted me into parliament", reveals one legislator that I spoke to. I plead to all in this third rate column that Beading violates girls' and women's human rights, denying them their physical and mental integrity, their right to freedom from violence, discrimination and in the most extreme cases, their lives.

In my view, beading represents society's control over girls and women. Beading perpetuates normative gender roles that are unequal and harm girls and women. It violates the rights to health, security and physical integrity of the person, the right to be free from torture and cruelty, inhuman or degrading treatment. It is evident that the role of men and boys in the eradication of beading in Samburu County has to be mainstreamed and prioritized. It's apparent that men and boys hold sway to leveraging social dynamics towards the abandonment of the practice among the Samburu people

The writer is a Founder / CEO of The Coexist Initiative, a not for profit synergy of men and boys organizations committed to eliminating all forms of Gender based violence in Kenya.

**Visit www.coexistkenya.com or email Wafula@coexistkenya.com- facebook-wanjala Wafula-
skype: coexist.initiative. Tel: +254712653322**