



UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

The Samburu In Kenya – A Changing Picture: Interim Report

Natasha Chamberlain



Expedition Details

- Locations:** Phase 1: Mugie Ranch, Laikipia District, Kenya
(Base camp: 0 42.136 N, 36 35.212 E)
- Phases 2 and 3: Samburu District, Rift Valley Province, Kenya
(Maralal: 1 05.389 N, 36 42.412 E)
- Project dates:** 12th July – 15th September 2005
- Team members:** Natasha Chamberlain
Jozef Doran
George Gandham
Adamson Lanyasunya
Alan Melotte
Josef Myszka
- Communications:** Natasha Chamberlain (Expedition Leader)
XXXXXX
XXXXXX
XXXXXX
XXXXXX
- XXXXXX
Natasha.chamberlain@gmail.com

Introduction

The Samburu of northern Kenya, a Maa-speaking group closely related to the Maasai, are one of the last tribes in East Africa to have managed to maintain their rich cultural traditions and associated rituals in the face of growing influence from the Western world. However, very little of this had ever been documented, and as a result little was known academically about many aspects of the Samburu way of life. This expedition was undertaken in order to research and document a number of cultural practises associated with pastoralism and the role of the *Morani* (tribal warriors), and to investigate how these traditions are evolving over time.

The Samburu inhabit the highland regions of northern Kenya, and unlike areas further south, such as those belonging to the Maasai, their land was never strongly influenced by colonial settlers. Their remote location on the northern frontier, entry into which required a special travel document until several years after independence, meant that they remained largely isolated from western influence, and even today many parts of the region are not affected by the mass tourism that has spread across the rest of East Africa.

Traditionally semi-nomadic pastoralists, the Samburu survive by herding cattle and smallstock in communal lands or 'group-ranches' in the wet season, and migrating with

them to better pasture in the drier months. Their livestock is fundamental to the Samburu way of life, and serves not only as their livelihood, but also their material wealth, food, and their demonstration of status. The raiding of cattle from neighbouring tribes, particularly the Turkana, remains a prominent part of Samburu life, as the tribe traditionally believes that they alone have the right to own livestock. Young men become a Moran and join an age-set after a mass initiation ceremony, which occurs approximately every fifteen years. From this time they and their age-set are responsible for the safety of the community and livestock from war or raiding parties, and spend much of their time living in the bush as traditionally it is not culturally acceptable for them to eat in the home in front of women, or to marry until their period of moranship has been completed. The Morani are the only members of the community allowed to paint themselves in red ochre, and each age-set's ochre has a particular shade and consistency unique to them, which can therefore be recognised and dated to a period of within fifteen years by some members of the community.

Early colonial explorers noted that the Samburu branded their cattle, in similar elaborate styles to those known of the Maasai, but it was unknown as to the extent to which this practice continued today. Gramly (1975) identified Maasai rock paintings in meat-feasting sites south of Nairobi, which were thought to represent cattle brand designs, although no similar research had been undertaken with the Samburu in an attempt to discover if they also paint in shelters used for meat-feasting, and if so, whether cattle brand marks were among the depictions created.

The Project

Aim:

To conduct a three-phase project in Laikipia and Samburu Districts, Kenya, in order to locate and record previously undocumented archaeological sites, and to research areas of Samburu culture associated with pastoralism and the role of the Moran.

Objectives:

- To undertake foot surveys in specific areas of Mugie Ranch, Laikipia, and southwest Samburu District, Kenya, in order to locate and record rock art and other archaeological sites
- To conduct ethnographic documentation of Samburu cultural traditions associated with pastoralism and the role of the Moran, with particular reference to cattle branding, the use of rock shelters, and changing roles within society
- To obtain GPS positions for all rock art sites and surface archaeology found, in order to produce GIS maps showing distributions of sites within their landscape context
- To work as an international team in order to achieve these aims

Background:

The project was suggested to the team by Dr Paul Lane, Director of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, who has long-running fieldwork projects in the Laikipia Plateau on pastoral landscape use and its impact on the environment. Mugie Ranch, on which he was planning excavations for the summer of 2005, had not been surveyed for rock paintings, although sites were known to exist on other ranches in the area. As well as this, a rock art survey and ethnographic study on the Samburu further north would provide contemporary evidence to complement that gathered through archaeological investigation, and would provide an opportunity to gain a more in-depth understanding of the Samburu way of life. Dr Lane was also interested in discovering whether or not it is possible to link cave paintings of cattle brands to particular family groups or clans, and if so what information this could provide on land use by pastoralist groups.

Study Areas:

The project was conducted in two different regions of Kenya, the first of which was situated within Mugie Ranch, on the Laikipia Plateau in the northern part of Kenya's central highlands. The ranch forms part of the Laikipia Wildlife Forum, which was created in 1991 in order to allow ranch owners, local pastoralists and other concerned bodies to help with wildlife conservation in the region. The plateau was originally inhabited by the Laikipiak tribe of Maasai, but they were wiped out in the early 1900's in a war with the Samburu and other neighbouring tribes. Mugie Ranch consists mainly of flat scrubland, with some occasional hills and rocky outcrops, over half of which has been set aside as a rhino sanctuary. The ranch contains large numbers of big game, and is used by Samburu for herding cattle.

Phases two and three were carried out in Samburu District, north of Laikipia, in Kenya's Rift Valley Province. The team was based in Maralal, the district capital situated in the southwest, which allowed access to surrounding areas including Sakuta Marmar, Baawa, Poro, Loosuk, Lodojek and Kirimon. This is a highland region forming the edge of the Great Rift Valley, and consisting of flat semi-arid plains dropping off into steep escarpments and often covered with the thick vegetation cover of the equatorial forests. Often situated on these rocky or forested slopes were rock shelters or caves, in remote and inaccessible locations far from human habitation, but close to fresh reliable water sources. These shelters are used by the Samburu warriors as bush homes and stop off points on migrations to dry-season herding areas. The highland areas are scattered with Samburu *manyattas*, with the land divided into 'group-ranches' – communal land on which herders can roam freely.

Methodology

Phase One: Foot Surveys – Mugie Ranch

The team spent the first week of fieldwork undertaking a number of foot surveys throughout Mugie Ranch. The initial days were spent assisting Dr Lane with his quadrant surveys, in order to locate high-density archaeological surface scatters, which provided an

opportunity to practice techniques which we would be using during our own fieldwork. In conjunction with this, we undertook rock art surveys of the outcrops to the west of the ranch. As a result of interviews with local herders and rangers, an area just outside of the ranch boundaries was identified to us as containing a number of shelters with paintings, and consequently the team's survey work was moved to this area for the rest of the phase.

Phase Two: Foot Surveys – The Rift Valley

Phase two of the project involved spending a month in the southwest region of Samburu District, undertaking foot surveys of Rift Valley escarpments in search of rock shelters containing paintings. Potential sites were identified on the first day through interviews with herders and Morans arriving in the district capital from outlying areas, and those sites which sounded most likely to contain paintings were investigated through the course of the project. This method allowed the team to choose sites in advance, and therefore cover a wider part of the district, whilst sampling a larger variety of different landscapes. Along with a guide, the team would trek into the Rift Valley, locate the shelter, and record any art found through photography, written descriptions and GPS coordinates. A survey of one site would frequently take an entire day, due to the inaccessibility and isolation of those shelters used by the Morani for meat-feasting and concealment after cattle raiding, and therefore those most likely to contain rock paintings.

Phase Three: Ethnography – The Samburu

For the last two weeks of the project, the team conducted a number of ethnographic interviews simultaneously to undertaking the rock art survey, with the team dividing into two groups in order to obtain the maximum amount of data possible. Thirty interviews were carried out with a wide selection of members from the Samburu community, of both genders and a mixture of ages in all of the areas surveyed for rock art. Questions asked included the following: information on the role and lifestyle of the Moran within society; whether they believed these were changing, and if so why; the uses of caves and rock shelters; motives behind the painting of rock art; the meaning of particular rock art motifs, if any; other common means of artistic expression; the documentation of cattle brand marks; the history and significance of cattle branding, and the tracing of specific brand mark designs to particular families or clans. Two members of the team were given the opportunity to witness the circumcision ceremonies associated with initiation into the Moran age-set. These mass circumcision ceremonies only occur approximately once every fifteen years, and mark the end of one warrior age-set, and the beginning of the next. The team were also invited to attend a meat-feast with several Morani, in one of the shelters in which rock paintings had been recorded. This provided an amazing opportunity to experience first-hand the Moran lifestyle that had been studied throughout the project.

Results

During Dr Lane's transect surveys of Mugie Ranch, the team found a number of possible archaeological sites, identifiable through surface scatterings of obsidian tools and pottery sherds. The rock art survey revealed the location of several rock shelters, although upon further investigation none were found to contain any art. However, the surveys undertaken

outside the boundaries of the ranch were much more successful, with several rock shelters, all containing paintings, being identified along the slopes of Naiborkeju Hill. As well as this, the area was found to be rich in archaeological evidence, with sites identified through high-density surface scatters of obsidian tools, pottery sherds, iron slag and bone.

Twenty-one rock art sites were recorded in total, in the locations of Sakuta Marmar, Baawa, Kirimon, Loosuk, Poro, Lodokejuk, Maralal and Kisima. All but one site was a rock shelter or cave, used either currently or in the past as a place for meat-feasting by Morans. The number of images at each site varied considerably, from one painting to several dozen, often with superimposition or recopying of motifs evident. The paintings were drawn in one of three materials: red ochre, white pigment (animal fat), or charcoal, and the motifs depicted varied greatly. These included geometric designs, finger strokes, circles, multiple line images, ladders, animals, humans 'stick' figures, representations of Morans or Samburu women, and cattle brand marks. On several occasions our guides commented that they could identify the age-set that had drawn the motifs through the type of red ochre that had been used, as each age-set has a shade and consistency unique to them (older forms of ochre are more soil-based and appear a duller red in colour, whilst the current age-set by comparison uses a type which is thinner and much brighter red).

The ethnographic interviews were extremely successful, both in terms of the data collected and the enthusiasm of participants in being involved with recording aspects of their community's heritage. In general women and children tended to know relatively little about the activities which are undertaken at caves and rock shelters, and about the paintings which decorate their walls. They were, however, much more aware of the history and processes involved with cattle branding, which occurs within the manyatta, and were able to give fuller answers relating to this. The Samburu have extremely strong traditions of oral history, with stories being carried down from generation to generation, and as a result most people interviewed were able to answer questions about their family's traditions relating back to when 'the Samburu first began'.

The interviews provided the local community with a means to express their opinions on how the Samburu culture is evolving as a result of greater influence from other areas of Kenya as well as the West, and there was frequently a major divergence of opinion between younger and older generations. Children and adolescence appeared eager to receive an education and find a career in a town, and on the whole tended to believe that many of the older traditions were unnecessary in the present day. The opposing view was held by the majority of older people, who claimed that economic pressures and the compulsory education of children, as a result of increased governmental influence, would eventually lead to the end of the Samburu way of life, as after their generation had passed on none of their descendents would be eager to uphold it.

In terms of the data gathered during the interviews, we were able to gain a greater understanding of the art that we had located in caves, even on occasion identifying the artists of paintings we had already recorded. This enabled us to collate information on when motifs were drawn, why they were created, and what they meant. Some of the more common motifs of circle-based designs, which we had been unable to decipher ourselves, were explained to us as being representations of Morans and Samburu women, through depictions of their style of headdresses. As these designs have also evolved over the generations, it allows another potential avenue for gaining approximate dates for some of the sites. The team was also able to document over forty different brand marks, either still

used by families and sub-clan units, or were until recently, as well as gather information on the history and significance of the tradition, and what was believed to be its future. Whilst undertaking the ethnographic documentation with individuals, the team would also hold meetings with members of the community, in order to explain why the research was being undertaken, and what the benefits would be to the Samburu as a whole.

The team recorded the GPS locations of all rock shelters and archaeological sites, in order to combine these with satellite data taken from the University of Maryland's Global Land Cover Facility website. To create a base image, 30M/pixel bands from the NASA Landsat 7, ETM + Sensor were compiled to give a real colour scene. Using a donated copy of OziExplorer, the GPS data was then overlaid to produce a map showing site distributions within their landscape contexts. OziExplorer3D was also used to view a 3D rendering of this information.

Host-Country Participation

The five UK team members from Newcastle University worked alongside Adamson Lanyasunya, a Samburu from Maralal who had graduated from Nairobi University, and was interested in studying and writing the history of the Samburu. He not only proved invaluable as a translator and local guide, but the project also enabled him to pursue his own research interests in Samburu culture. The team was also able to provide employment to several herders at each rock art site, who acted as guides to the shelters and rangers for protection against the local wildlife. On completion of the project the team donated any spare equipment and appropriate medical supplies to Njaaga Child Hope Orphanage at Nakuru, for children who have been orphaned through HIV and AIDS.

Project Outcomes

The intended outcomes of the project will be as follows:

- To produce a detailed record and photographic catalogue of all the project's results, which will be widely distributed, as well as available to interested parties from Newcastle University, the British Institute in Eastern Africa and local organisations within Samburu District, as well as from team members and online.
- To assist Samburu District's Christian Children's Fund (CCF) with developing their cultural research centre, by providing clear and accessible means of accessing the expedition's findings through the provision of pamphlets and informative booklets, and by raising awareness of the importance of preserving the region's cultural heritage
- To contribute to Dr Lane's research on pastoralist land use in northern Kenya
- To produce an expedition website, which will provide easy on-line access to the project report and photographic catalogue

- To create a GIS map of the archaeological and rock art sites recorded, showing their spatial relationships to each other, and their locations within their landscape context
- A photographic exhibition at the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the summer of 2006
- A public lecture at Newcastle University in November 2005
- Possible journal article for *Azania* on the project's findings

Acknowledgements

The team would like to thank the following people for their help and support, without which this expedition would not have been possible:

Dr Paul Lane – For invaluable assistance in organising the expedition, and for providing us with the opportunity to work in Kenya

Dr Bilinda Straight – Western Michigan University, for assistance with logistics, and identifying possible site locations

Trust for African Rock Art (TARA) – For advice on rock art research

Dr Aron Mazel - For advice on possible projects, and on field techniques

Dr Peter Garson – For advice on expedition planning

Dr Andrew Reid – University College London, for assistance on possible projects and locations

Dr Joel Burden – Alumni Development Officer, for help with locating host-country contacts

The people of Samburu District – For their warm welcome, and their interest in and cooperation with the project

Bibliography

Gramly, Richard M. 1975, 'Meat-feasting Sites and Cattle Brands: Patterns of Rock-shelter Utilization in East Africa'. *Azania*. 10:107-121.