

SHARED EXPERIENCES AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL CATEGORIES: A CASE STUDY OF COMPLEX ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG THE ARIAAL PASTORALISTS IN NORTHERN KENYA

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ABSTRACT This essay examines the dynamics of the face-to-face inter-ethnic relationship in a multi-ethnic situation among pastoralists of Northern Kenya. Segmentary descent system is a well known characteristic of East African pastoral society as a means of social interaction (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). As a characteristic of these systems, each segment (ethnic group, clan, sub-clan, lineage) according to patrilineal descent is sequenced in a highly hierarchical way, and categorizes people clearly with behavior norms (marriage, cohabitation, cooperation etc.). Clanship is especially important in every aspect of their lives. The Ariaal in the Marsabit district of northern Kenya have been reported as being a mixture of the Samburu and Rendille pastoralists as the historical result of migration and alliance between them (Spencer, 1973; Fratkin, 1991). Both the Samburu and Rendille societies have their own segmental descent system. In the Ariaal, people choose parts of both the Samburu and Rendille segmental descent systems.

The subject of this essay is the process by which people dismantle preexisting categories and reconstruct them. People have a sense of belonging to their clan, but it depends on the relationships, which are made in two ways. One way creates a sense of belonging by depending on the relationship between segments, including clans. The other way is to create a sense of belonging by depending on individual experience. People create a sense of belonging individually by sharing the experience of cooperating in herding, settling and ceremonies.

People can create a sense of belonging somehow by depending on the relationship between segments. This sense of belongingness by depending on the segments as a social category can be interpreted and manipulated in any form. Then, such a category itself would lose actual meaning. It is assumed that people will continue to believe in their descent system, but also create a new sense of belongingness based on shared personal experiences.

Key Words: Sharing experience; Face-to-face interaction; Sharing category; Clanship; Inter-ethnic relationship; East African pastoral society; Segmentary descent system.

INTRODUCTION

The area encompassing northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia is inhabited by numerous groups of nomadic pastoralists. Schlee (1989) assumed, in a historical analysis of the inter-ethnic relationship between pastoralists of this area, the presence of a Proto Rendille-Somali culture. Proto Rendille-Somali culture is a cultural community formed by the groups in this area 500 years ago. In his view, the ethnic groups currently seen in this area have been created through the interaction of people derived from Proto Rendille-Somali culture.

This paper is not concerned with the above historical processes. Instead, attempts are made to analyze the current process in which these people encounter various people and form new relationships through their nomadic life. Moreover, the process in which social categories are reorganized through “the sharing of experience” is examined. The focus is on a group called Ariaal, who inhabit the border between two pastoralist groups, Samburu and Rendille of northern Kenya. I will show how the so-called Ariaal, through the sharing of experiences such as nomadic movement, cohabitation and marriage, came to form a new village named Masula.

The Ariaal are not a clearly discernible group separate from Rendille and Samburu, neither for our analysis nor to the local people (Fratkin, 1991). Some of the reasons are that both Samburu and Rendille have their own segmentary descent systems, languages and names for self-appellation but Ariaal don't: the Ariaal borrow the segmentary descent system, language and name for self-appellation from both Samburu and Rendille.

The paper begins by describing the inter-ethnic relationship between the Samburu and Rendille. Then, it analyzes how the Ariaal people organize their group, and finally relate the discussion to the pastoral societies in Northern Kenya at large.

WHO ARE THE “ARIAAL”? : OVERVIEW OF SAMBURU, RENDILLE AND ARIAAL SOCIETY

I. Samburu and Rendille

The Samburu are pastoralists who mainly inhabit the semi-arid area of the Samburu District of mid-northern Kenya. They speak Samburu, a Maa dialect that is classified as an Eastern Nilotic language. Most Samburu are semi-nomadic pastoralists. Homesteads are relatively small; consisting of a man, his wives and children. Settlements of men belonging to the same clan tend to aggregate.

The Rendille are pastoralists who inhabit the arid area of Marsabit District of Northern Kenya. They speak Rendille, which is classified as an Eastern Cushitic language. Nowadays, Samburu speakers are increasing especially among the young generation. The Rendille live by nomadic pastoralism in an extremely arid area. The Rendille make a huge settlement that is created by men belonging to the same clan, their wives and children. The settlement is an important unit of daily interaction, cooperation, ritual, etc.

The Samburu and the Rendille differ in their main livestock: cattle for the Samburu and camels for the Rendille. The two types of livestock differ in their diet: cattle feed on herbs and camels feed on trees. Since the two do not compete in their grazing environment, these two ethnic groups have been noted for their intimate relationship (Spencer, 1973).

II. Age Systems and Segmentary Descent Systems

The social organization of both the Samburu and the Rendille is characterized by their age system and segmentary descent system (Fig. 1). The special feature of the Samburu and the Rendille age system is in their age-set, which is formed by groups transecting each society. Some Rendille age-sets originally shared names with generation-sets of other pastoralists such as Borana and Gabbra (Schlee, 1989). However, those of the Samburu have replaced these original age-set names of the Rendille recently. This allows the Samburu and the Rendille to have a sense of solidarity by belonging to same age-sets that transcend their ethnic boundary.

The Samburu and the Rendille both have their own unique descent systems. Both societies are divided into patrilineal moieties followed by a stratified segmentary structure. Both the Samburu and the Rendille people are divided into moieties, which are sub-divided into clans that are further divided into sub-clans.

For the Samburu, the clan is basically the unit of exogamy, and the unit of regional groups with face-to-face interaction (Spencer, 1965). As for the Rendille, the clan is the unit of exogamy. The clan also serves as the unit of labor and rituals (Sato, 1980). Generally the clan is the basic and most important unit of both Samburu and Rendille social life.

Ethnic group	Moiety	Clan	Subclan		Ethnic group	Moiety	Clan	Subclan
Samburu	B	Dubsahai	Wambile		Rendille	N	Masula	Parsipia
	e		Bulyarre			g		Soltoi
	i		Dokhole			i		Mosiat
	e		Gudere			s		Leligani
	s		Furguba			h		Parasoro
	i		Melgichan			u		Luwara
	B	Nahagan	Machan			N	Pisikishu	Ltoiyio
	a		Duroro			a		Lkerna
	h		Gaalgorowle			r		Loisilale
	a		Matarba			o		Sitat
	h		Gaalgiidele			k		Males
	a		Feecha					Raiguria
	h	Rongumo	Ongon					Lanat
	a		Batarr					Parsinkir
	i		Uiyam					Songe
	B		Basele					Ltarpasia
	e		Gaalhaile					Soloitare
	i							Lowogoso
	e	Saale	Nebei					Parakeno
	s		Gooborre					Lmogotille
	i		Goobanai					Makalilit
	B		Gabaniyio					Parsile
	e		Gaaloroyo					Paldepe
	r		Elegella					Teruk
	r	Wolwen	Jalle					
	i		Ogom					
	B		Tirtiri					
	e		Elemo					
	r		Gaalguden					
	i		Matacho					
	B	Gaaldeilan	Orbora					
	e		Dele					

Fig. 1. Samburu and Rendille Segmentary Descent Systems

Inter-segmentary ties have been reported between segments both within and between descent systems among the ethnic groups of this area (Spencer, 1965, 1973; Schlee, 1989). Inter-segmentary ties are numerous within Rendille clan systems, Samburu descent systems and between Rendille and Samburu descent systems. They are seen not only between segments at the same level of stratification but also between different levels.

The descent systems of the ethnic groups of this area have a system of intricate networks connected through inter-segmentary ties. The Ariaal people live within a community marked by the positive mutual relationship and inter-segmentary ties between the Samburu and the Rendille.

III. Appellations

The Samburu refer to themselves as *Lokop*, and Rendille as *Rantillei*. The people who share descent with the Rendille and stay in Samburu are referred to using the name of their Samburu clan, while those who do not stay in Samburu are simply called *Rantillei*. Some Samburu, who recognize the existence of Samburu speakers who share descent with the Rendille occasionally refer to them as the *Massagera* (Fig. 2). The word *Massagera* means “those who follow the Maasai” in Samburu language (Fratkin, 1991).

The Rendille, on the other hand, refer to themselves as *Rendille* and Samburu as *Koro*. The people who share descent with the Samburu and who stay in Rendille are called after the villages where they live and those staying elsewhere are simply called *Koro*. The Rendille, who share descent with the Samburu are also called the *Ariaal*. The word *Ariaal* is originally from Borana language and it means “mobile livestock camp (arjara)” (Fratkin, 1991).

IV. The “Ariaal”

We have seen that there are holders of situation-dependent and fluid identity within the Samburu and the Rendille joint society. I tentatively call these people as the “Ariaal”.

These people mainly inhabit the district border between Samburu north and Marsabit south. However, there are still more than a few who live in Samburu and Rendille settlements.

Both Samburu and Rendille speakers exist, and bilingual speakers are common. However, many of the younger generation, use Samburu for daily purposes.

The lifestyle of the Ariaal differs from place to place. Generally they live a highly nomadic pastoral life similar to the Rendille. The ratio of livestock actually kept varies depending on the environment and personal decision.

In the rest of this presentation I will show how these people living in the Samburu-Rendille community form the sense of belonging to their own group.

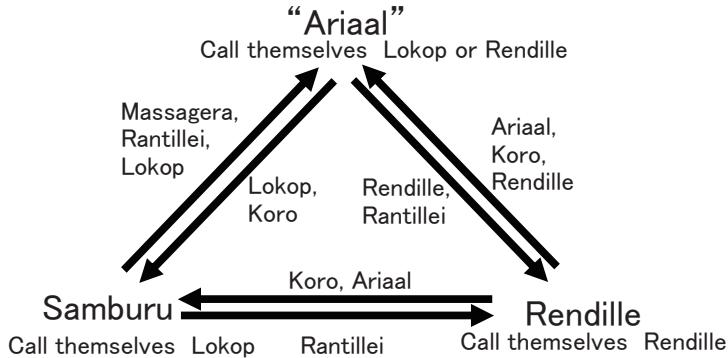


Fig. 2. Appellation among The Samburu and Rendille

THE CREATION OF THE SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION

I. Masula Village

Masula Village is located near the border between Marsabit and Samburu districts. Masula village consists of six settlement groups. Each settlement is considered as a village. To avoid confusion I will use the term village when referring to all six-settlement together. Each settlement will be referred to as a settlement.

The configuration of these settlements composing the village is similar to the settlements of the Rendille. The huts of each household are organized in a circular form, according to the seniority of descent between segments and the seniority within the family.

The name of the village comes from the name of the family of highest seniority within the village, or the name of the clan or phratry of that family. The village name “*Masula*” comes from the Samburu phratry name of the founding family of the village. Each of the six settlements in Masula village also has a name.

Each box in Fig. 3 denotes a single family, arranged in a clockwise manner according to seniority of descent within the circular settlement. The family is a unit consisting of a married man and his wife, his unmarried children, widowed mother, unmarried siblings and other kin. Thus, each settlement has an independent structure wherein the families are organized in a clockwise order.

Thus, each settlement has an independent structure wherein the families are organized in a clockwise order in the direction indicated by the arrow. The distance between settlements is several hundred meters. The alignment of the settlements indicated in this figure has nothing to do with those of the actual settlements.

The letters following the family name indicates the kinship relation between males central to each family. In settlement F, for instance, Lengema AAA and AAB are sons of Lengema AA (deceased and not in the figure). Lengema AB and AC are brothers of Lengema AA. Therefore, the relationship between Lengema AAA or AAB, and Lengema AB or AC, is nephew and uncle.

Settlement A, the largest settlement and home to the Nankaia family that is one of the founders of this village, is also called the main settlement. Settlement B is called the Choure settlement, following the name of the family that comprises the settlement. Settlement C is called the wives' settlement. This name derives from the following incident: at one time the elders of the current settlement had been away in their satellite camps. Lengema family of the current settlement F tried to force the settlement to move, but the wives did not comply, and as a result the village split up. Settlement D is called the Sidaimurut of the Samburu elder's settlement. Sidaimurut AB, the brother of Sidaimurut AA, moved from the Samburu District to the current location. Settlement E is called California, after the American state. Settlement F is called "let us curse," for the people of this settlement attribute every trivial incident to somebody's curse, verbally abusing and cursing back the suspect.

II. Development of Masula Village

According to oral sources, the current Masula Village was founded around 1985, when the Nankaia and Lengema families moved to this area from another village of the Masula phratry, located on higher land. Led by the UNESCO Integrated Project in Arid Lands, they have come to this current lower land more suitable for camel keeping.

The Nankaia family belongs to the Masula phratry while the Lengema family belongs not to the Masula phratry but to the Ituria. Lengema A, grandfather of Lengema AAA, AAB and AAC, moved to the village of the Masula phratry on higher land.

In this village of the Masula phratry on higher land, Lengema AB, AC and AD underwent circumcision as Kichiri and Kololo age-sets (Fig. 4). The Lengema family, at this stage, moved to the current Masula village together with the Nankaia family in 1985. Subsequently, Lengema AAA, AAB, AAC underwent circumcision in Masula Village as Moli age-set. Thus, Lengema AA and his relocated family could be said to have been in the process of incorporation into the Masula phratry.

Later on, various families joined Masula Village. The joining of many families developed Masula Village from a single settlement of only two families to a group of six settlements including 65 households of various descents, with a total population of 413. As Masula Village expanded, it fissioned into 6 settlements.

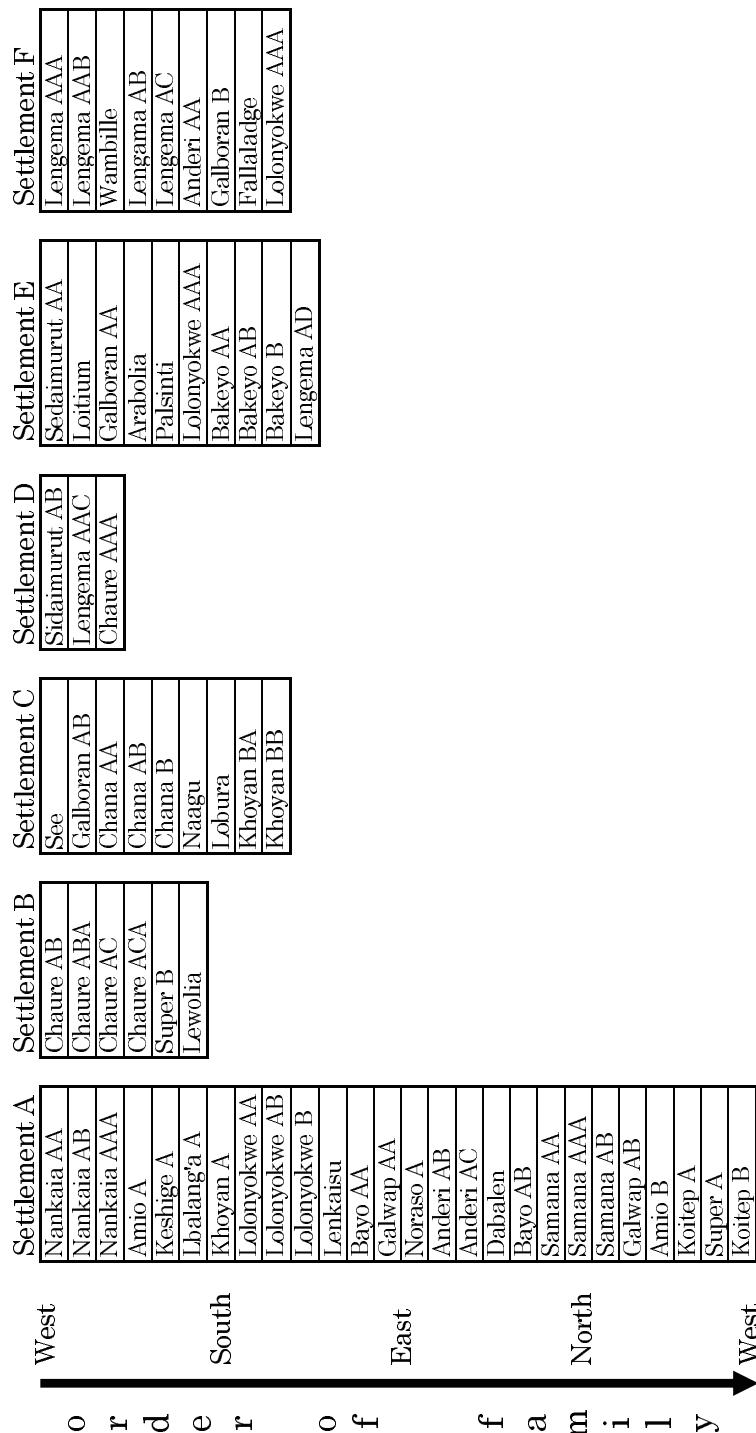


Fig. 3. Structure of Each Settlements in Masula Village
The alphabet following the family name indicates the kinship relation between males central to each family.
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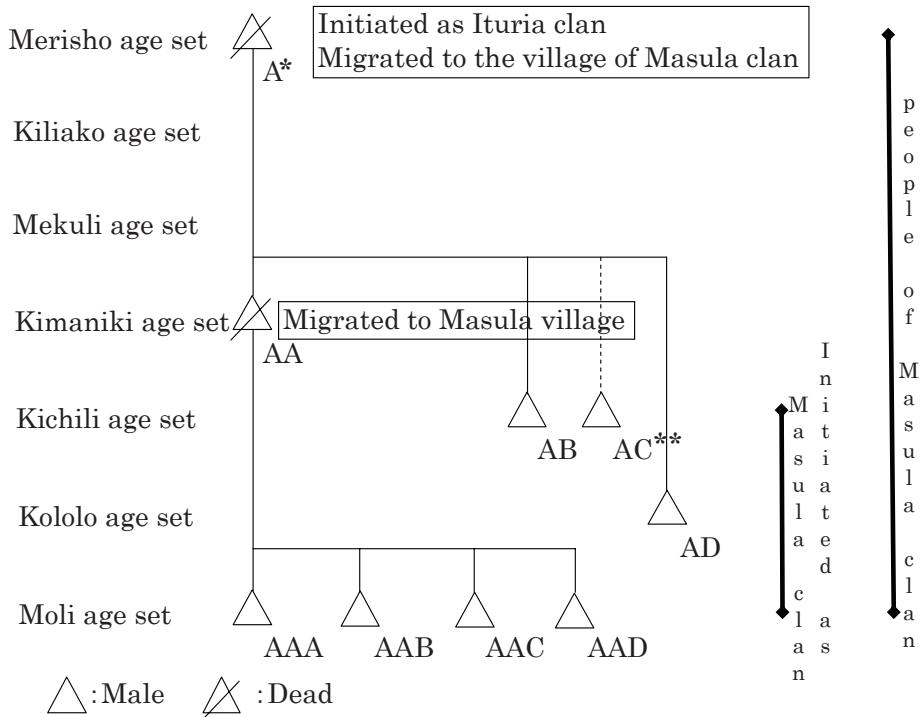


Fig. 4. Migration History of Lengema Family

This figure does not show females or young males before initiation

* The age set of Lengema A is estimated based on literature (Spencer 1965).

**Lengema AC was born in the Turkana, and adopted by Lengema A.

III. Heterogeneous Descent

I will describe the clans and phratries of the people living in Masula village. If this settlement group is organized according to the same principles as those of the Rendille, most members should belong to the Masula phratry as the name indicates. However, only 14 families actually belong to the Masula phratry, which comprises a mere 21% (Table 1). Nevertheless, the people of Masula Village shared a common sense of belonging to the Masula phratry.

With the above point in mind, I will now describe the process in which the people of Masula Village formed a common sense of belonging, and analyze its implications.

The Masula Village is composed of people of heterogeneous origin, yet its residents share a common sense of belonging as brothers in the Masula phratry. How is this possible?

This question can be divided into two further questions. First, how do people form a sense of solidarity? Second, why do people express their sense of solidarity in terms of a sense of belonging, such as a common segment of descent?

Table 1. Structure of Masula Village

Name of clan		No. of families	Effectives (%)
Samburu			
	Masula	14	22
	Lokumai	10	15
	Ongeri	1	2
	Lologushu	1	2
Rendille			
	Dupshai	13	20
	Rongumo	13	20
	Galdullen	1	2
	Tobcha	2	3
A clan not belonging to any segmentary descent system			
	Ituria	10	15
Total		65	100

I will now illustrate these two points through a description of intra-village marriages.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF PREEXISTING CATEGORIES THROUGH FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION

I. Intra-village Marriage

Fig. 5 indicates marriage bonds between families currently living in Masula Village. The arrows indicate the direction of female transfer. By January 2003, 35 marriage bonds had been formed within Masula Village. Twenty one marriages occurred between settlements and 14 occurred within a single settlement.

Between families within Masula Village, the social categories formed through marriage bonds are not restricted to the families of the married couple. For instance, in the case of the marriage between Lengema AAB and the daughter of Nankaia AB, the marriage negotiation, the bride wealth, and the provision of labor in preparation of the wedding, involved not only the families of Lengema AAB and Nankaia AB, but also their patrilineal kin, namely, one brother, an uncle, a sub-clan member, and a widowed sister. Therefore, intra-village marriages in the current Masula Village bind together nearly all its constituent families in one way or another.

II. Re-interpreting the Sense of Solidarity into a Sense of Belonging

Social bonds formed through intra-village marriage in Masula Village are accompanied by other common experiences based on face-to-face interaction

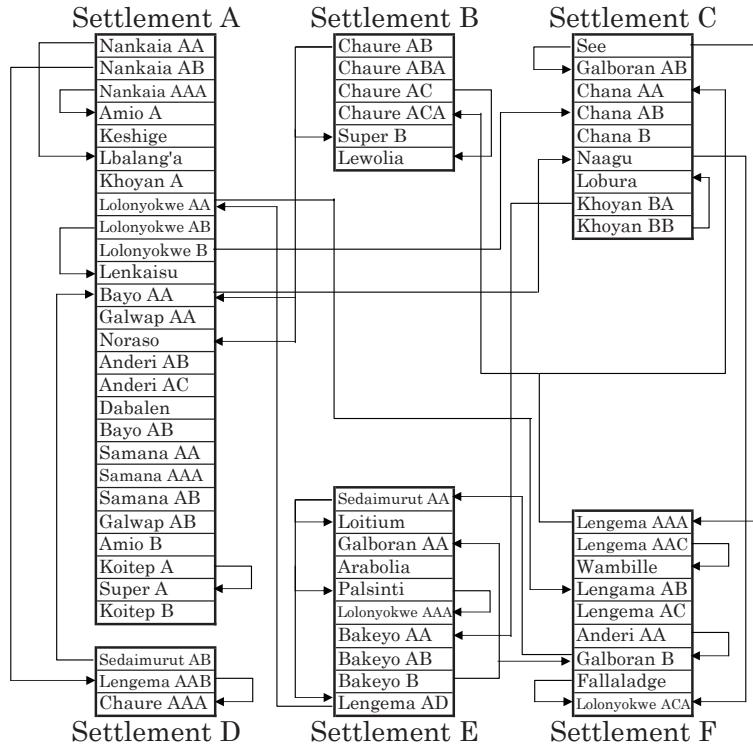


Fig. 5. Marital Relationship in Masula

An arrow indicates the direction of female transfer.

such as cohabitation, cooperative work, or ritual. Sharing a sense of solidarity is based on such common experiences including marriage.

However, this does not explain why people express their sense of solidarity in terms of a common sense of belonging to a shared clan or phratry. In Samburu and Rendille societies, phratries and clans are basically units of exogamy, and its members cannot marry one another. In other words, if people of Masula Village adhere to clan and phratry concepts of the Samburu and the Rendille, and still wish to assert their common sense of belonging, they should practice exogamy. In this aspect, the act of re-interpreting the sense of solidarity based on common experience, is a deviancy from Samburu and Rendille concepts of segmentary descent system. Finally, I will discuss the reason why people engage in such self-contradictory acts.

III. How Do People Express their Sense of Belonging?

Let us see how people in Masula village express their sense of belonging as a re-interpretation of their sense of solidarity. Here is an example to illustrate this point. This conversation is part of a greeting exchanged between Lengema

AAA and a stranger he met at the cattle camp:

Stranger: Which phratry (or clan) do you belong to?

Lengema AAA: Masula.

Stranger: Which Masula? What family are you from?

Lengema AAA: The Lengema family.

Stranger: Lengema?

Lengema AAA: The Lengema of Masula.

Stranger: Oh! Lengema of Masula Village around Lolkinoi

First, Lengema's answer to the question concerning his clan was Masula instead of Ituria, his clan of descent. However, the inquirer does not recognize Lengema and goes on to question which among the numerous Masula phratry villages, and which family. The reply "Lengema" does not convince him, as most Ituria members including the Lengema family live around Merille or Laisamis in south of Marsabit. Lengema further stresses that he is the Lengema of Masula. The inquirer remembers for the first time that the person whom he is speaking to is a member of *that* particular Lengema family that moved to Masula Village.

The Samburu and the Rendille descent system is an indispensable concept for the identification of an individual. However, a relationship cannot be determined automatically by identifying a particular individual by his or her segment and comparing it to his or her own.

If that was the case, then the above conversation should have ended when Lengema described his belonging as Masula, or when he stated his family name. The inquirer was able to identify his partner only after he obtained personal information such as the history of migration.

After the migration of Lengema AA, the members of Lengema family were circumcised as Masula phratry at a Masula-phratry village, together with other Masula groups. In this aspect, the Lengema family of Masula village was indeed becoming Masula.

However, this did not mean that their original descent would be erased. In all intra-village marriages in Masula Village, there was not even one case within the original segment.

The acquisition of belonging to a new segment by a family as a result of migration could be seen as the practice of applying an a posteriori explanation to social relationships acquired through personal experiences, thereby adapting it to Samburu and Rendille descent systems.

IV. Sharing Categories and Experiences

Intra-marriage within the Masula Village is different from the practice of adapting personal experience into a preexisting descent system. This is because basically people belonging to the same clan or phratry cannot marry each other.

For instance, marriage between the Lengema family, who were becoming Masula, and the Nankaia family would prove that the segment of the Lengema

family “is not Masula”.

Inherent in the behavior of intra-marriage is a contradiction that radically negates their assertion of common descent. Why would people still narrate their shared sense of belonging as follows: “we are Masula phratry that inhabit the present-day Masula Village”?

People form a sense of solidarity through personal experiences such as marriage, migration and cohabitation, and then adapt this sense of solidarity to pre-existing descent systems. Through such practices they seem to attach importance to “shared categories” such as segments.

Considering intra-village marriage within Masula Village, however, it may be assumed that it was never the “sharing of category”, but the “sharing of experiences” created through face-to-face interaction, that people deemed important.

Such being the case, I assume that the category “Masula phratry” narrated by the Masula villagers, was from the outset employed as a convenient explanation of an actual sense of solidarity based on “shared experiences” within the framework of Samburu and Rendille descent systems.

CONCLUSION

Here, let us summarize how the residents of Masula Village created a new category, “Masula Village”.

The residents have nurtured a sense of solidarity based on “shared experiences” such as cohabitation and marriage. This, in turn, was adapted into “shared categories” – a sense of belonging based on membership of the same clan or phratry. Such an adaptation was done through the utilization of preexisting segmentary descent systems.

However, preexisting Samburu and Rendille categories were retained within the Masula Village, which were salient in the avoidance of marriage between people who shared a common descent.

Moreover, one could define his or her ethnic category depending on the situation, without constraint from Samburu or Rendille descent systems. This was made possible through the existence of inter-segmentary ties, which bound both descent systems into a network of segments. This situation is common among all pastoralist societies located between northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia.

People respect “shared categories” such as ethnic groups, clans and lineages. On the other hand, “shared experiences” that arise from face-to-face interactions between people modify not only the categories to be shared but the system itself.

Schee (1989) interpreted this situation as the superiority of the clan over the ethnic group in the classification system. The category of greatest importance in people’s lives is the clan. Thus, the ethnic group is better understood as a sub-classification of the clan.

However, even the clan itself has also in the end become an extremely fluid category. This can be seen in the existence of inter-segmentary ties between

Samburu and Rendille descent systems, and the incorporation of the Lengema family into Masula in the presented case.

In short, the practices of the people may be dismantling preexisting categories to reconstruct new categories, as a *bricolage* (Levi-Strauss, 1966). To consider the inter-ethnic relationships of this area, it is important to describe micro practices based on face-to-face interaction.

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