

Global COE Program In Search of Sustainable Humanosphere in Asia and Africa  
2007 Junior researchers research initiatives

1. Research title, research area, researchers

Research title: Construction of Self and Others in the East African Pastoralists' Societies: Flexibility and Plurality of Identities

Research area: Samburu District, Marsabit District in Kenya

Researchers: Kyoko NAKAMURA, Naoki NAITO (ASAFAS)

2. Research Purpose

While East African pastoralists are often said to be warlike people who are always making cattle raids between the ethnic groups, they are also well known for their flexibility in identities. Researchers have pointed out that the specific characteristics of pastoral management serve as the background to this flexible identity, this includes the regular moving of their living bases according to circumstance and the making use of wide ranges of ecological resources, and the practice of sometimes dividing the groups in case of draught, animal epidemic or conflicts between ethnic groups (Schlee 1989). Many of these societies have age systems as the main social system, and the similarities in system between the societies provide common cultural identity and sometimes unite the people, and at other times could provide the military framework to exercise violent action (Krimoto and Simonse 1998).

The purpose of this study is to clarify the process of the construction of flexibility and plurality of identities by examining representation or interpretation of the cultural differences inside one ethnic group and between ethnic groups. Generally construction of self identity and construction of others are two sides of the same coin, and they thus proceed at the same time. In this study to clarify the logic people are using when they construct identities two main points are focused upon. The first is the roles of the age system as a foundation of identity construction (by Nakamura), and the other is the process of identity reconstruction at the time of election of the member of national parliament (by Naito). The research was conducted among the pastoral Samburu who live in Samburu District and the pastoral Ariaal who inhabit border regions between the Samburu and Rendille in the Marsabit District in northern Kenya.

3. Major Findings

- (1) Nakamura examined the cultural and social practices related to the age system among the Samburu people mainly focusing on the "moranhoo" which is the age grade of unmarried male (moron) sometimes translated as "warriors." The recent trends indicate that the general

view of moranhood has become diversified and some people consider moranhood a waste of time and spend much shorter time as a moran. A regional difference between the “developed” highland and the conservative lowland has become conspicuous. The lowland people still follow “tradition” more strictly and the lowland moran despise the highland moran, arguing that they have discarded the pride of being moran, while the highlanders view the lowlanders as behind the times. This difference makes both highlanders and lowlanders conscious of what they chose, and their identities as moran are defined differently.

- (2) Naito focuses on the elections of members to the national parliament held in 2006 and 2007. Before the elections the Ariaal had been rather a loose cultural group which existed “somewhere between the Samburu and the Rendille”, but through the speech of one powerful candidate and a huge election fund which was provided to each constituency by the central government, three conspicuous changes had occurred. (a) The vague ethnic outline of the Ariaal changed into a newly created ethnic identity of “Massagala”, which is the Ariaal in the Samburu language, with a clear outline. (b) It also promoted by the registration of the National Identity Card which is necessary to vote. (c) The acquisition of local autonomy of newly established Laisamis District by the Ariaal people.

The first clarifies the process of the construction of the different identities inside the ethnic group, and the second clarifies the process of the essentialization of the ethnic group over the political resources. In short, it is a process of reorganizing a group, within which many minute differences are contained, which becomes a monolithic and monotonous group.



**Picture 1. The Samburu moran (unmarried male)**



**Picture 2. The Ariaal People who gathered at a polling station**

#### References

- Kurimoto, Eisei and Simon Simonse (eds), 1998. *Conflict, Age & Power in North East Africa: Age System in Transition*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Schlee, Gunther, 1989. *Identity on the Move: Clanship and Pastoralism in Northern Kenya*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

#### 4. Publication

(Oral Presentation)

- NAITO, Naoki. 2008. "Emergence of New Ethnic Identity 'Massagala': Election and Circumcision Experienced by Ariaal Pastoralist of Northern Kenya." (The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of Japan Association for Nilo-Ethiopian Studies, Hirosaki Univ. April 19 – 20th 2008.)
- NAKAMURA, Kyoko. 2008. "'Being Moran' and 'Stop Being Moran': Recent Transformation of the Age System of the Samburu in Kenya." (The 45<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of Japan Association for African Studies, Ryukoku Univ. May 24 – 25th 2008.)