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Belonging in ethno-erotic economies:

Adultery, alterity, and ritual in postcolonial Kenya

ABSTRACT

In Samburu District, northern Kenya, men and women crafted collective belonging through and around colonial stereotypes of their ethnic sexuality. If administrators, missionaries, development workers, and journalists long invoked promiscuity and adultery to describe them as radical Others, rural Samburu turned to ritual to transform the implications of such stereotypes. In ceremonies called *lopiro*, they sought to end everyday adultery within particular generations and reimagine moral forms of collective belonging to age sets, clans, the state, and a world beyond Kenya. These ceremonies synthesized contradictions between the concrete socioeconomic and political struggles of rural Samburu families and the haunting colonial paradigms of their sexual alterity. *Lopiro* ceremonies demonstrate the central role of sexuality to autochthonous and ethnic forms of belonging in the postcolonial world. [*sexuality, ethnicity, belonging, kinship, Samburu, Kenya*]

Katika wilaya ya Samburu Kaskazini mwa Kenya, wanawake na wanaume wamejijengea utambulisho mpya wa jamii yao kupitia mgongo wa dhana potofu zilizo zushwa na wakoloni juu ya mahusiano ya kimapenzi baina ya wanajamii wa jamii hiyo. Kwa muda mrefu, maafisa wa serikali, wamisionari, wafanyakazi katika miradi ya maendeleo, na waandishi wa habari wamekuwa wakutumia dhana ya “uzinzi” na “uasherati” wa watu wa Samburu kama kigezo cha kusisitiza tofauti kubwa ya kimaadili kati ya jamii ya Wasamburu na jamii zingine nchini Kenya. Kufuatia haya, Wasamburu walizigeukia mila zao na kuzitumia kama chombo cha ukombozi ili kuharamisha uzushi huo. Katika sherehe zao zinazoitwa *lopiro*, Wasamburu waliazimia kuharamisha na kufuta kila chembe ya uasherati iliyokuwemo miongoni mwa vizazi vyao na hivyo kudiriki kujitengezea mfumo mpya wa maadili ya jamii nzima kwa ajili ya rika zote, koo zote, taifa la Kenya, na dunia nzima kwa ujumla. Sherehe hizi zilipelekea kuwepo na ukinzani mkali baina ya hali duni, iliyokithiri, ya kiuchumi, kijamii na kisiasa miongoni mwa familia za Samburu vijijini na jinamizi la dhana potofu za kikoloni juu ya mahusiano ya kimapenzi ya watu wa Samburu. Sherehe za *lopiro* zinaonesha kinagaubaga dhima ya mahusiano ya kimapenzi kama mhimili wa namna ambavyo jamii za kiasili zilivyojitambulisha na kuhusiana baada ya ukoloni. [*mahusiano ya kijamii, kabila, udugu, Samburu, Kenya*]

Im Samburu Gebiet im Norden Kenias stellten sich Männer und Frauen ihre kollektive Zugehörigkeit im Verhältnis zu kolonialen Klischees ihrer ethnischen Sexualität vor. Administratoren, Missionare, Entwicklungsarbeiter und Journalisten hatten die Samburu schon lange mit Promiskuität und außerehelichen Sex in Verbindung gebracht, um sie als kulturelle “Andere” zu beschreiben. Während der Kolonialherrschaft benutzten die Samburu Rituale, um die sozialen Folgen dieser Klischees abzuwandeln. In sogenannten “*lopiro*” Zeremonien versuchten die Samburu außerehelichen Sex zwischen bestimmten Generationen zu beenden und neue moralische Beziehungen zu Altersklassen, Clans, dem Staat und einer Welt jenseits von Kenia zu knüpfen. Diese Zeremonien stellten Widersprüche zwischen den konkreten sozioökonomischen und politischen Problemen der ländlichen Samburu Familien und einer kolonialen Weltanschauung ihrer sexuellen Alterität dar. *Lopiro* Zeremonien zeigen uns die wichtige Rolle der Sexualität im Bezug auf autochthone und ethnische Zugehörigkeit in der postkolonialen Welt. [*Sexualität, Ethnizität, Zugehörigkeit, Verwandtschaft, Samburu, Kenia*]

One evening, in December 2010, the Kenyan television channel Citizen announced that people of the Samburu ethnic group, in northern Kenya, had begun organizing ceremonies called *lopiro*. In the previous weeks, I had attended two such ceremonies as part of my ethnographic research in Samburu District, an administrative territorial unit inhabited primarily by Samburu. I had learned that every 14 to 18 years, clan groups from different regions within the district held *lopiro* ceremonies within a few weeks or months of one another. During *lopiro*, married men and women danced, ate, and exchanged gifts. At the center of *lopiro* was a particular form of “adultery”—or what Samburu called *loloito*—that involved younger men and the wives of more senior men. Through these ceremonies, these men and women promised to put an end to their relationships and retire to respectable elderhood.

According to the Citizen report, *lopiro* was a “dancing competition,” an opportunity to build “clan unity,” a way to “bring the rains,” and a “Samburu way of celebrating Christmas.” The report mockingly asked, “Why is it that people who live primitively have not yet grasped the precise meanings of Christmas?” This othering rhetoric was not new to me, given how often Samburu people served as prototypical examples of radical otherness in the national media. But what surprised me, at that time, was that the report did not mention adultery, despite the central role it plays in *lopiro*. Kenyan journalists have long been fascinated with what they see as the oddities of “Samburu sexuality.” Newspapers and magazines often feature young Samburu men with many lovers, old men who married “underage” girls, or sensationalist accounts of how “cultural backwardness” and “promiscuity” were responsible for the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections among Samburu. Why, then, did the Citizen journalists not mention adultery? Had they missed it in their conversations with locals? Or did their interviewees purposefully withhold such information, knowing how it would be used?

Certainly, the suppression of explicit references to sex was very important in *lopiro*. When I attended my first *lopiro* ceremony, I had been visiting Samburu for over five years, researching questions of sexuality, ethnicity, and tourism. Although at that time I did not encounter any references to *lopiro*, either in the field or in the literature on the region, I had learned that matters of sexual intimacy were not readily discussed among members of

different age and gender groups. One encounter during a lopirop ceremony helped me understand some of the implications of sexual secrecy.

I was talking to four women I had known for several months. They were senior wives who had organized the ceremony. I asked them about the links between lopirop and “adultery.” “You know, lopirop is very much about that kind of relationship,” Mama Lmarai said, prompting her age-mates to laugh with embarrassment.¹ I asked the women if everybody who participated in lopirop knew about these relationships. “Everybody knows,” Mama Lmarai explained. “That is something that Samburu know.” She later added, “That is something that continues with every generation.” Meanwhile, another woman arrived—Mama Mbenesi. She had not met me before. Upon hearing what the women were talking to me about, she opened her eyes wide in shock. “You stupid women!” she started scolding them. “Why do you tell the white man [M: *musunku*] our secrets? Have you any idea where he will take these things?” With a dismissive wave of hand, she turned her back on us and left.

Veiling sex in secrecy or revealing it through speech had at least two important implications for negotiating belonging, both locally and to the world outside Samburu District. First, in lopirop, knowledge about sexual intimacies was embedded in symbols and sensibilities that did not need to be verbalized—at least not for those who belonged to the scene of the ritual as such. For them, concealing sex was an important task. In everyday life, loloito was a central reason for conflicts between husbands and wives, juniors and seniors, the rich and the poor. Speaking openly about adultery could refuel these conflicts. Moreover, to speak of sex was a highly erotic act. People understood desire and speech as material extensions of persons that “touched” the bodies of others, thus mimicking the act of sex. When junior men and more senior married women spoke to each other of sex, speech dangerously rehearsed adulterous acts. Even among themselves, women rarely mentioned the word “adultery,” speaking rather in hushed voices of lopirop’s “secrets” (M or S: *siri*).²

Second, if knowledge of adultery was for the participants implicit in the ritual itself, these matters remained largely concealed from the foreigners—tourists, NGO workers, and journalists—who attended the ceremonies. Revealing such secrets to foreigners, as Mama Mbenesi suggested, was problematic. Samburu were well aware that foreigners were fascinated with their culture, bodies, and sex lives. Postcards and coffee-table books depicting Samburu men and women in traditional attires have long made global commodities (Kasfir 2007). So, too, has Samburu sexuality. Since the 1980s, young Samburu men have migrated seasonally to coastal tourist resorts, where they performed traditional dances, sold souvenirs, and engaged in transactional sex with women from western Europe. Many of these women were drawn by the exotic appeal of the

“primitive” Maasai and Samburu “warriors” and supported their partners financially. In Samburu, stories abounded of books authored by foreign women about their intimate relationships with local warriors and of movies based on such books (Meiu 2011, 103–4). Many locals felt that such productions embarrassed them both in Kenya and internationally. Unsurprisingly, some participants in lopirop were worried about revealing sexual matters to foreigners.

In lopirop, sexual secrecy had to do both with moral expectations of sexual propriety and with concerns over perpetuating ethnic sexual stereotypes. For Mama Mbenesi, the fact that senior wives had spoken explicitly to me, a younger man, about these secrets reenacted the very intimacies the ceremony sought to end. But my being a *white* man also prompted Mama Mbenesi to worry that her age-mates might further fuel the Western fascination with Samburu sex lives. Many rural Samburu shared Mama Mbenesi’s concern. Amid economic uncertainty, they worried that such stereotypes might jeopardize their opportunities to build a future, as they tried to access material resources by crafting durable relations to one another, to townships, the state administration, and powerful countries abroad. Conscious of the dangers of reproducing ethnic sexual imaginaries, I wish to interrogate precisely how sexuality came to figure in Samburu politics of ethnic belonging. Notwithstanding Mama Mbenesi’s concern, reflecting on matters of sexuality is crucial to rethinking the possibilities of belonging in contemporary Samburu.

Participants in lopirop dealt in various ways with the contradictions between, on the one hand, contemporary moral dilemmas and, on the other, stereotypes of their sexual otherness that circulated widely in Kenya and on the global market. In showing how lopirop synthesized these contradictions into new visions of collective belonging, I bridge postcolonial critiques of representations that posit sexual otherness, in Africa and elsewhere, with anthropological studies of autochthonous or ethnic belonging in the new global order. I offer the term *ethno-erotic economies* to theorize processes whereby postcolonial subjects have come to imagine collective belonging through and around imperial paradigms of sexuality. The term refers to wide networks of desire and material exchange premised on the commodification and consumption of ethnic sexuality.

Sexuality, alterity, and belonging: Conceptual conundrums

Writing about lopirop poses important theoretical and ethical dilemmas. A ceremony so centrally focused on sexual intimacies can be easily read in manners that fuel primitivist erotic fantasies and metropolitan voyeurism. Indeed, when, as anthropologists, we reveal intimacies that our interlocutors try to conceal, we risk using our relative privilege to reinforce notions of otherness that have long served

to marginalize particular categories of people. How can we study sexuality in the postcolonial world without rearticulating otherwise oppressive notions of racial, ethnic, and cultural difference? Can ethnographic revelations of sexual intimacies and ritual secrets do anything other than discursively reiterate alterity? And, if so, what kind of critical work can an ethnographic study of *lopiro* perform when it is conducted in a place where assumptions of racial, ethnic, and sexual otherness have long been at work?

Africanist anthropologists and historians have recently struggled to dismantle paradigms of sexual alterity that have compromised conceptualizations of intimacy in African contexts. Doing so has meant confronting the representations and practices of colonial modernity that invested Africa with radical otherness, turning the continent into an imagined hub of promiscuity and perversion. As Desiree Lewis argues, “to explore African sexualities carefully means first exploring how they have been thought about; it requires what Kwame Appiah describes as a ‘discursive space-clearing,’ a way of both acknowledging and analyzing how others have historically been imagined” (2011, 200). In this vein, Africanist scholars have extensively criticized essentialist invocations of sexuality in Africa and provided deep empirical evidence to counter paradigms of sexual alterity (e.g., Arnfred 2004; Epprecht 2007; Murray and Roscoe 2001).

Yet this is not enough. Representations of what Joane Nagel (2003) called “ethnosexuality,” that is, racialized and ethnicized sexuality—far from being simple *misrepresentations*—must also be interrogated as mechanism of surveillance and subjection, commodification and consumption (see also Hoad 2007; Stoler 2002). We must also ask how such representations shape the lived worlds of those they claim to represent. In that sense, it is important to move beyond a simple critique of sexual alterity, to examine also how ethnosexuality figures in the concrete processes through which people craft collective belonging in the present.

In the global economy of the late 20th century, fantasies of ethnosexuality came to more intensively define the exchange value of sexual labor, pornography, tourist destinations, and popular culture (Jacobs 2010; Nagel 2003). Such fantasies, in turn, also shape postcolonial subjects’ various forms of belonging, their claims to recognition, rights, and resources (Partridge 2012; Sheller 2012). I use “belonging” to refer to representations and practices through which various social actors construct and contest their positions in a world that is largely not of their own making. In this sense, belonging—like citizenship—is a “dual process” of “self-making” and “being made” by power (Ong 1996). Sexual alterity has come to play a crucial role both in how racial, ethnic, or cultural subjects are being made and in how they make themselves in larger fields of inequality and power. “Systems of oppressive power,” Tom Boellstorff

argues, “do not always obliterate difference; they also work through producing difference” (2005, 27).

As the state has been decentralized and retracted, markets liberalized, and ideologies of entrepreneurialism and speculation propagated, we witness in Africa and elsewhere not only an intensification of transnational flows of people, things, and ideas but also a salient “return” to “the local”—to myriad forms of autochthonous or ethnic belonging as central terrains for political mobilization and economic speculation (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Geschiere 2009). In this context, it is of critical importance to use ethnography to explore how representations of ethnosexuality shape collective belonging.

What can *lopiro* tell us about how ritual actors position themselves in relation to globally circulating discourses of their sexual alterity? And how do the actions of participants in *lopiro* mediate their relations to their ethnic group, their region, the Kenyan state, and the global market? To answer these questions, I first offer some background to ritual and the politics of belonging in Samburu. I then introduce the moral dilemmas associated with adultery by describing the main drama of *lopiro* ceremonies and by contextualizing its meanings in relation to contemporary dynamics of sexual intimacy. Understanding my informants’ concerns with sex, commodities, and HIV/AIDS is particularly important if we are to grasp how colonial histories of ethnosexuality complicated their struggles for producing belonging. I then turn to colonial legacies of sexual alterity and show how they affected ethnic belonging in the present. Finally, I return to *lopiro* to show how participants tried to shape collective belonging by ritually reworking people’s desires for sex and commodities.

Studying ritual and belonging in Samburu

When I began doing research in Kenya, I chose to work in Samburu District because I wanted to explore how a people long venerated and vilified for their presumed ethnic, cultural, and sexual alterity made livelihoods through and around stereotypes of otherness. British colonial administrators and Europeans settlers, traders, travelers, photographers, and filmmakers depicted Samburu as radical opponents of modernity—primitive and underdeveloped, yet exotic and pristine. Such representations legitimized the political and economic marginalization of many Samburu. Until the 1960s, for example, Samburu District was a closed native reserve with little access to state welfare. After Kenya’s independence in 1963, politicians continued to use ethnic stereotypes as ideological alibis for refusing to build infrastructure and “develop” the region. Many Samburu articulated their perceived exclusion from the state by suggesting that “Kenya” lay elsewhere, south of their district, in the capital city of Nairobi and its environs (Holtzman 2004, 64–65).

At the same time, however, representations of ethnic, cultural, and sexual alterity also offered some Samburu new avenues for producing ties to the state and the market. In the first half of the 20th century, young men began drawing on their image as “fearless warriors” to enter the colonial labor market as soldiers and policemen or to play in Hollywood movies (Kasfir 2007, ch. 9). The image of the young moran as a tall, slim, graceful man, covered only with a red cloth, became a brand for East Africa as a tourist destination. Young men who migrated seasonally to the tourist beach resorts of the Indian Ocean performed this image to meet European women. By the 1990s, some of the richest men in the district were the so-called young big men, married to or in long-term relationships with women from Europe.

Through 26 months of field research in Kenya, from 2005 to 2015, I explored how these men’s wealth produced new conflicts in ritual and everyday life, giving rise to new configurations of gender, age, generation, and kinship (Meiu 2009, 2015). I lived and worked, at different times, in two villages and a township and commuted regularly between several other locations throughout the district. I built long-term relations of trust and care with several individuals and their families and, at their invitations, attended numerous weddings, funerals, initiation ceremonies, collective blessings, and other ritual events.

Ritual in Samburu has represented an important mode of competing over power and authority, autochthony and ethnic belonging. Through ritual, people established and contested membership in their ethnic group. For many, clans and age sets have been primary markers of ethnic identity. A clan (M: *lmarei*, pl. *lmareita*) is a named category of descent, which is patrilineal and mostly exogamous. Although clans are not territorial units, each has higher concentrations in certain regions. An age set (M: *ntowuo* or *laji*) is a named cohort of age-mates who progress collectively through the different stages of life. Every 14 years or so, young men from the ages of 15 to 25 constitute a new, named age set and become morans (Kenyan English for “warriors”; from M: *lmurrani*, pl. *lmurran*). Morans are not allowed to marry for another 14 years. Then they become “junior elders” and build their own families. One age set above the “junior elders” are the so-called fire-stick elders, followed by the senior elders. Fire-stick elders (M: *mpiroi*) are the morans’ ritual patrons. They kindle a ritual fire that symbolically brings the new age set into being (Spencer 1965, 149–53). Although women are not initiated as part of an age set as such, as girls they take the name of the morans’ age set with whom they dance and, once married, the names of their husbands’ age sets (Straight 2007, 31–32, 74–75). In the lopiro ceremonies I attended, fire-stick elders’ wives also acted as a named age set.

Through ritual, locals also negotiated belonging to the state and to actors of a global market. Collective rituals

attracted members of Parliament and regional councillors, who sought to build an electoral base by attending and sponsoring such events. As locals became aware that foreigners were fascinated with their “culture,” they allowed them to attend, photograph, and film their rituals in exchange for gifts of cash or ongoing individual or communal sponsorships. In these ways, Samburu men and women used ritual to create relations of clientage with wealthier and more powerful figures outside their district.

I attended my first lopiro ceremony at the invitation of my Maa-language tutor. Later, I attended two more ceremonies and gathered extensive information about a fourth. Because these ceremonies attracted large numbers of participants, people did not always know each other, although they belonged to the same clans. People I had not met previously—like Mama Mbenesi—might have imagined that I was a traveler, a development worker, or someone’s sponsor. But when I talked with them and they sensed that I shared some of their knowledge about ritual and local issues, they often opened up to me and engaged me in long, in-depth conversations about the stakes and meanings of lopiro. In the months following the ceremonies, I carried out short interviews with some 20 men and women who organized lopiro for different clans, as well as daylong interviews with five ritual specialists (M: *kursai*). In addition, my thinking about lopiro developed during long hours of conversation with my research assistants and my friend Elly Loldepe, a Samburu anthropologist.

The drama of adultery in Lopiro ceremonies

To understand what role sexual intimacy played in imagining and crafting collective belonging in Samburu, it is important to examine how people performed lopiro ceremonies and explore the moral dilemmas at their core. A lopiro lasted four days. On the first day, participants planted a flag in front of the homestead where the ceremony was held. Throughout the following three days and nights, they ate and danced around that flag. On the fourth day, they exchanged expensive gifts. The ceremony involved two sets of ritual actors: male junior elders and the wives of a preceding, more senior set of elders—the fire-stick elders. Informants pointed out to me that some members of these two age-gender cohorts might have had sexual relations, beginning when the men were morans and the women young wives.

Lopiro began with a ritual reversion of time, as the participants attempted to inhabit the time when their adulterous relationships had begun. During the ceremony, the junior elders dressed with the clothes, beads, and head decorations specific to morans. They also applied red ocher (M: *lkaria*) to their necks and heads like the morans. Because the junior elders had given up this attire several years prior, in 2005, when they had graduated from moranhood,

the sight of them dressed as morans provoked laughter and amusement among participants. One woman pointed out to me that “all the Lmooli [age set of junior elders] have gone back to being morans.” For the time of the ceremony, junior elders were also expected to observe culinary and spatial prohibitions otherwise associated with the morans. For example, they were prohibited from consuming food seen or touched by women (a prohibition known as M: *lminong*) and from eating inside the homestead or unaccompanied by age-mates. In this sense, junior elders, most of whom were married and had children, figured in ritual as unattached morans of the “bush,” that is, young men who had to spend most of their time outside the homestead. In *lopiro*, as my interlocutors put it, junior elders “went back” (M: *kechukunie*) to being morans, a temporal reversion that many of them cherished with nostalgic enthusiasm.

Similarly, the wives of fire-stick elders smeared red ocher on their necks and wore feathers in their headdresses, both of which are signs of youthfulness. They also wore more strings of beads around their necks than usual. Although most of these women had been married for over 20 years, during the ceremony people addressed them as *nkaibartak* (young brides who had just moved into their husbands’ homestead). In this way, my interlocutors said, women also “went back” to an earlier stage of their married lives. Therefore, *lopiro* turned back time—or brought the past forward—by one or two decades, when men were young morans and women newly wedded wives, to engage with unsettling histories of intimacy. Thus ritual time-traveling was a way of repairing the past and revitalizing the present.

The wives of fire-stick elders told me that they had begun planning the *lopiro* in secrecy. First, they chose two women from among themselves to represent them in the ritual roles of Mama *Lopiro* (M: *ngoto lopiro*) and her maid of honor (M: *nchapukera*). Then they secretly chose two younger men to represent the age set of the junior elders in the ritual roles of Mister *Lopiro* (M: *lpayian lolopiro*, S: *bwana lopiro*) and his Best Man (M: *lchapukera*). The men and women chosen to play these roles had to be known for their exemplary moral conduct. Together, these four ritual actors reflected ideals of reciprocity and commensality as well as complex ideas about propitious, life-generating numbers (Rainy 1989, 810–11).

Women announced their intentions to organize *lopiro* several months before the actual ceremony. They did so by ritually “stealing” a personal belonging from the junior elder they had designated to be Mister *Lopiro*. This ritual took place during another ceremonial occasion that brought together the local clan group. Then, as men and women danced together, Mama *Lopiro* snatched a personal belonging of Mister *Lopiro* and ran off with it. In the past, this used to be a decorative feather from the man’s headdress. In the

Maa language, *lopiro* (pl. *lopir*) means “feather.” From there comes the name of the ceremony. But, more recently, this belonging could also be a walking stick, a hat, or a wrist-watch. Once the women took this object—now generically referred to as a “feather”—they began singing a song to inform everyone that, through this gesture, they had initiated a *lopiro* ceremony. After this ritual, word went around the district that, in a certain clan, “the women have taken the feather.”

The ritual act of “taking the feather” from a junior elder had strong erotic connotations. In a mundane context, taking a person’s belonging and holding on to it expressed one’s affective attachment to that person. People believed that personal belongings were imbued with one’s bodily substance—smell, sweat, or dirt (all known as M: *latukuny*)—and thus were extensions of one’s embodied personhood (Straight 2007, ch. 4). Holding on to someone’s belonging was similar to holding on to that person. The ritual of “taking the feather” expressed women’s desires for their lovers. But it also indexed an everyday convention by which women could “steal” (M: *a-purr*) a personal belonging from a secret lover as a way to invite him “to pick it up later,” thus creating a context for intimacy. In Maa, the verb *a-purr* can be used interchangeably for “steal” and “seduce” (Spencer 1965, 148), suggesting how appropriating a personal belonging can both express affection and invite intimacy. Together with the junior elders, the women now persuaded clan members to donate money to buy large quantities of food and gifts.

On the morning of the ceremony’s first day, hundreds of junior elders walked together to the house of Mama *Lopiro*. They carried a flag (M or S: *bendera*) made out of one or two pieces of fabric and a wooden pole. Upon arriving, the men planted the flag outside Mama *Lopiro*’s compound, where it remained for the four days of the ceremony. Once the flag was erected, the wives of fire-stick elders took it in their possession, surrounded it, and defended it, day and night, for the duration of the ceremony (see Figure 1). The women explained that the junior elders now intended to “steal” the flag and run off with it. Whenever men walked by the flag, women hit them with their walking sticks to everyone’s amusement. On the last day of the ceremony, in the early afternoon, all junior elders gathered and walked toward the flag to “steal” it from the women. A big ritual fight emerged between the junior elders and all the wives of fire-stick elders, now gathered around the flag to defend it. The women hit the men with their sticks and pushed them away from the flag, while other clan members and their guests watched, entertained. After a while, the women had to “lose” the fight and allow the men to uproot the flag and, eventually, walk away with it.

The flag, in its own ways, also spoke of the secrets of adultery. On some level, the flag indexed the “feather” that the women had stolen from the junior elders. Like



Figure 1. During a *lopiro* ceremony, women defend a flag among the Lorokushu clan in Samburu District, Kenya, December 2010.

the feather, the flag belonged to the junior elders, but the women held and defended it. A woman suggested to me that “the flag represents the relationship [S: *uhusiano*] between the mamas and these elders.” In some clans, participants made the flag from two pieces of cloth (see Figure 2), explaining that one piece represented the junior elders and the other the wives of the fire-stick elders. Participants also inscribed on the flag the names given by their clan to the respective age sets of these men and women. In this sense, the flag tacitly publicized the “secret” of adultery. A ritual specialist told me that the flag “is borrowed culture from colonialism.” Indeed, the colonial administration had used flags to designate the sites of its political rallies and to make these events “official.” Since the 1950s, following the administration’s lead, morans have used flags to mark the sites of their dances. In *lopiro* the flag marked the location of the ceremony and also “officialized” its public secrets, if only to those in the know.

The ritual fight between junior elders and the women on the last day of *lopiro* had other important connotations. When asked why the women fought the men for the flag, a woman explained, “The mamas don’t want these relationships to end. They love these young men and don’t want it to be over.” In light of this logic, by fighting to obtain the flag, the men actually tried to snatch a bodily extension of themselves from the hands of the women, thus withdrawing themselves from these relationships. In daily life,

for example, a man’s snatching his personal belonging from a mistress—whether beads or a cell phone—indicates his wish to terminate their relationship.

The ritual trajectories of the feather and the flag marked at once a temporal reversion and a fusion of the social categories of “morans” and the “young wives.” By “taking the feather,” women invited junior elders to follow them back in time, when their relationships had started, at the quintessential place of adultery, in the bushes beyond a wife’s compound. When junior elders arrived at Mama *Lopiro*’s house and planted the flag outside her homestead, they expressed their desire for intimacy. They acted as seducers of wives, sneaking through the bushes onto an elder’s homestead, thus overturning boundaries of moral order. Junior elders erected the flag in the bush just like, in everyday life, morans would plant spears in the ground on the site of a sexual encounter, to warn others to stay away. In *lopiro*, wives of fire-stick elders danced along with men who—at least for the purposes of the ceremony—figured as their secret lovers. They held these men’s hands and, to everyone’s amusement, sang verses that satirized their husbands:

Mayieu nanu iyie; nayieue ake lpayian obaiye lkaria!

I don’t want you [my husband]; I only want a man who [recently] left the red ocher [i.e., a younger man who has recently been a moran]!



Figure 2. Members of the Longeli clan make the flag for *lopiro* from two pieces of cloth: one representing junior elders, the other representing the wives of more senior elders. Samburu District, Kenya, December 2010.

Mayieu nanu ... Lkuroroi chapu ong'ou nkaji muna abake etuo apa.

I don't want ... a dirty Lkuroro [husband's age-set name] whose house smells like alcohol long after he left.

Fire-stick elders reacted angrily at their wives' decision to organize *lopiro*. One elder described these ceremonies as “idiocies of the women.” I also heard that, after women of different clans “took the feather,” their husbands carried out long debates, wondering, “Why have the stupid women started these old idiocies again?” The wives of fire-stick elders usually anticipated that their husbands would be angry, so they waited to organize *lopiro* until their husbands had aged enough and “did not have [impulsive] hearts” (M: “meata ninche ltauja”). It quickly became clear to me that, by initiating *lopiro*, women acknowledged that at least some among them had had intimate relationships with these younger men and also invited these men to enact their everyday relationships in *lopiro*.

At first sight, the drama of *lopiro* is an example of what Max Gluckman (1954) called “rituals of rebellion,” which seemingly overturn social order while, in fact, reproducing a status quo. *Lopiro* worked ideologically to reinforce patrilineal values by concluding adultery. To achieve this, the drama of adultery was first enacted in public view. However, *pace* Gluckman, *lopiro* did not merely reinforce a social order but generated a space and time in which participants

could imagine and contest multiple possible futures. Participants in *lopiro* engaged with the historical dynamics of intimacy and desire as a way to reenvision and revitalize their relations with one another and an outside world. To understand this, it is important to examine what “adultery” meant and what role it played in people's everyday lives.

What makes adultery? Intimacies, commodities, and life force

Samburu referred to “adultery” as *loloito*, a noun that derives from the gerund of the Maa verb *a-lo*, “to go” (*a-loito*, “going”), and connotes a perpetual state of movement. From the point of view of male elders, *loloito* presupposed the uncontrolled (often invisible) sexual mobility of wives, morans, and other male elders, as they snuck into each other's compounds or secretly ran off to meet in the “bushes.” These intimate mobilities subverted “healthy separations” (Straight 2005, 93–94) between the homestead and the bush, juniors and seniors, the lineage and its outsiders and thus often also challenged the respectability of male elders, who were responsible—individually or as a group—for controlling the boundaries of sexual propriety. Not all extramarital intimacies, however, counted as *loloito*. For example, relationships between men and concubines, widows, and runaway wives or, until quite recently, those between a woman and her husband's “best man” at the wedding were not *loloito*. Nor, for that matter, were all

forms of adultery equally problematic. Adultery between a man and his age-mates' wives was less contentious, for example, than adultery between morans and elders' wives.

Following research in Samburu between 1958 and 1960, Paul Spencer (1965) came to see adultery between morans and young wives as an outcome of the structural contradictions inherent in the "gerontocratic system." While elders did not allow morans to marry, girls their age were married to junior elders or as second or third wives to more senior elders (1965, 137, 137n1). Under these circumstances, through adultery, morans continued relationships with women of their own age while challenging elders' authority and impressing age-mates with their courage (146). For women, relationships with morans contained an element of rebellion against husbands whose authority often seemed unjust (227–28; see also Ott 2004, 137; Straight 2005, 96–97, 99). While everyone knew that this form of adultery existed with every generation, conflicts often emerged when elders discovered particular instances of adultery involving their wives. In this sense, what counted as a most salient form of adultery were those intimacies that threatened the hegemony of senior men and their seeming rights in women's sexuality (cf. Llewelyn-Davies 1981, 348; see also Goody 1956).

British colonial administrators formalized the power of senior men to control "adultery" and thus, to some extent, "subsumed women's voices to male domination in matters of domestic discord and resolution" (Kanogo 2005, 53). Male labor migrants, for example, began turning to native courts and the local police as a way of dealing with the adultery between morans and their wives. Meanwhile, Christian notions of shame and sexual propriety also resignified, if only partially, the meanings of *loloito*. In some contexts, *loloito* came to be translated with excessive adultery or prostitution (Wanyoike 2011, 191).

More than a simple rebellion against senior men, *loloito* was also about love and the pleasures of secrecy. As one woman explained to me, "When you are married, the husband no longer treats you in a special way. So you keep something on the side, for your own heart." Part of the pleasures of adultery derived from its being a secret. Adultery was a way "to cheat" (M: *a-sap*) or "steal" (M: *a-purr*); it was something one had to "cover" (M: *a-iyop*; among the Maasai, the derivative *enkyiopo* also refers to "adultery"). Secret lovers (M: *sintani*, pl. *sintan*) were not just sexual partners but also conversation partners—people with whom one felt comfortable. When a Samburu tells you that "you stretch your legs like in a lover's house" (M: "iche nkeju anaa lotii nkaji e sintan"), it means you are perhaps too comfortable in a particular situation (Da Ros, Pante, and Pedenzini 2000, 26).

In the past four decades, adultery intensified an older convergence between sex and commodities. Secret lovers have long exchanged gifts of milk, meat, beads, and money.

These were important material tokens of love, affection, and attachment, part of what Mark Hunter called "the everyday materiality of sex" (2010, 179–80). Growing inequalities and the proliferation of cash and commodities in rural, domestic economies fueled new patterns of adultery (Holtzman 2009, 171, 206). With the strong decline of cattle economies, rural elders found it more difficult to access cash and sometimes did not meet their family's daily needs for food, tea, or soap, or their wives' desires for perfume, telephone credit, shoes, or clothes. At the same time, men employed as soldiers, police, teachers, councillors, traders, or NGO workers, or men married to European women, could access such commodities more easily. In this context, sexual intimacies played out more and more through the logic of commodity consumption. Wives could deny their husbands sex if they did not remit money to feed their children, and long-term mistresses claimed cash remittances from their male partners. Like elsewhere in Kenya, school-educated Samburu women began referring to their secret lovers as "side plans" (S: *mpango wa kando*), a phrase that suggests the importance of material support in addition to—or as part of—erotic pleasure and love.

If sex was generally held to propitiate fertility, health, and well-being, and mothers often encouraged their married daughters to seek lovers as a way of "mixing the herd" (Straight 2005, 97) or giving birth to diverse children, Samburu also believed that adultery was "unpropitious" (M: *ketolo*). Adultery "mixed the blood" of different households and risked affecting the life force and well-being of those involved (Straight 2005, 97). It could harm a woman's pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation (2005, 99) or, if the female partner came from an unpropitious lineage, lead to the impoverishment or death of a woman's lover or husband (Ott 2004, 136). Thus, another, much less common word for adultery I encountered in Samburu was *nkirengenyicho*—a noun derived from the verb *a-irenge*, "to give or mix blood." Furthermore, the unpropitious qualities of adultery also passed through objects exchanged for sex. Money received as a gift in exchange for sex was "money of a wrongdoing" (M: *shilingini e ng'ok*). Using such money to feed one's family was like inviting the family to partake in the sexual acts in which that money originated—a quintessential act of "incest" (M: *surupon*). Such mixings of blood, sex, and commodities depleted life force, making people and things "un-alive" (M: *meishu*), that is, placing them in a state of perpetual self-depletion.

HIV infections, which have been rising in Samburu since the 1990s, only cemented people's perceptions that moral, reproductive sexuality was eroding.³ Many of my informants were convinced that AIDS is a form of self-depletion prompted by the unpropitious mixing of blood, sex, and commodities in the recent past. Rural men and women perceived AIDS as a "foreign" illness originating in the uncontrolled mobilities of labor migration, prostitution,

and everyday adultery. They associated it with the gradual depletion of life force, visible through the loss of bodily weight. Thus, the most common Maa term designating AIDS is *mbiita*, a derivation from the Maa verb *a-biita*, “to be slowly finished off” (Wanyoike 2011, 156). By 2010–11, AIDS signaled that something was going awfully wrong with sex and commodities in the present, lending urgency to the organization of *lopiro*. “There was something bad the elders were seeing,” Mama Nabulo explained. “If people were to continue with this story [of adultery], something bad would happen.”

But here is an interesting twist to the story: women without children or who had not given birth in a while believed that sex with junior elders during the ritual time of *lopiro* would restore their fertility. If *lopiro* ceremonies responded to anxieties over collective life, they also produced new anxieties by calling on people to reenact the very intimacies that worried locals. “You saw that *lopiro* of ours?” Mama Nabulo asked me. “The [fire-stick] elders hated it that we have ‘taken the feather.’ They started worrying about it.” She later added, “You know, now there is that ‘thing that makes the body fear’” (M: “*ntoki natureyeki sesen*”). She meant AIDS. But *lopiro* was not only a site for engaging contemporary anxieties over sexual moral dilemmas. For those anxieties were also haunted by colonial histories of sexual othering.

Adultery as sexual alterity in colonial Samburu

As ritual actors publicly engaged unsettling aspects of their intimate lives, they also had to position themselves in relation to long-standing colonial discourses of their sexual alterity. These were discourses that have long shaped their terms of belonging to the colonial and postcolonial state. Throughout Africa, colonials used discourses on sexuality to depict nomadic, pastoralist peoples as radical Others (Bollig and Heinemann 2002; Sobania 2002). Since the first half of the 20th century, colonial administrators and missionaries have reported at great length about what they saw as Samburu practices of “free love.” The Anglican missionaries of the Bible Churchmen’s Missionary Society held that “free love amongst young people is a recognized part of Samburu tribal life” (BCMS 1951, 3). Similarly, at different times, British district commissioners argued that morans and women’s practices of “free love” were a source of political unrest. Colonials reasoned that morans raided cattle because they wanted to impress girls and young wives to have sex with them. District commissioner Charles Chenevix Trench, for example, saw the morans as “the pampered heroes of their people,” because they were “entitled to the best of the meat, most of the milk, and all the girls they [could] manage” (1964, 155). Colonials also saw girls and young wives as instigators of violence, because they enticed morans into “heroic deeds.” In 1936, the “courting”

practices of the Samburu made headlines in the *New York Times*. Said the article: “The taunts of native girls, who tell their admirers to get blood on their spears before courting, have been responsible for fifty murders in the Samburu district in recent months” (*New York Times* 1936).

Adultery figured centrally in how colonials imagined Samburu “free love” and also informed colonial strategies of control and reform. Spencer argues that “when the tribe came properly under British protection and inter-tribal fighting was no longer necessary for survival,” the conflicts between male elders and morans were amplified, in part, because of adultery: “The Kiliako [age set initiated in 1921] were ... the first age-set to devise songs which were unintelligible to the [male] elders,” through which they planned sexual encounters with the elders’ wives (1965, 148). Meanwhile, Spencer suggests, “the Kimaniki [age set initiated in 1948] have been troublesome, committing adultery as never before” (148). Responding to a perceived rise of adultery, male elders collaborated with administrators to devise new ways to curb such intimacies (Simpson 1998; cf. Tignor 1976, ch. 4). Chenevix Trench noted that although “the African Court Elders were all illiterate” and “ignorant of the laws of evidence,” they were “terrific experts on adultery” (1964, 144). In 1956, for example, elders received the support of the administration to ban a song called “Ntoo,” through which they thought morans arranged meetings with their wives, using secret sexual idioms (Spencer 1965, 147). In this way, adultery became a key marker of sexual alterity and a central site for inscribing colonial disciplinary and regulatory power.

Lacking written sources on *lopiro*’s history and with only a few vague oral recollections recorded during my research, I find it difficult to assess how the colonial politics of adultery shaped the ceremony. The younger men and women I interviewed told me *lopiro* had been around since “time immemorial.” Meanwhile, some of my elderly interlocutors suggested that *lopiro* emerged only toward the end of colonial rule. Even if the latter were right, however, *lopiro* in its current, postcolonial form must have emerged out of older ritual events that were brought together in new ways. Numerous ritual elements I encountered in *lopiro* have existed in Samburu in the past and also among other Maa-speaking ethnic groups.⁴ Furthermore, unlike other clan ceremonies, such as initiations, *lopiro* was not mandatory for every generation. Hence, it could be that some of my interlocutors had not encountered it in their youth.

Be that as it may, there is some historical evidence that the colonial politics of adultery in the middle of the 20th century shaped some aspects of *lopiro*. For example, some elders suggested that *lopiro*, in its current form, emerged out of what had been in the first part of the 20th century various ceremonies that brought together two or more clans.⁵ At that time, reproducing solidarities between clans had been much more important, for it allowed different clans

to collaborate in mobilizing militarily against more powerful, neighboring ethnic groups. In the late-colonial context, as the colonial state took over matters of security, clans started competing with each other over the political favors of state administrators. Colonials used clans as categories of control, appointed chiefs for each clan, and favored individual clans according to their elders' ability to control their women and morans. The colonial emphasis on clans generated new kinds of competition between different clans and intensified elders' commitment to emphasizing clan solidarity. This played an important role in transforming what had once been older inter-clan ceremonies into the intra-clan ceremony of *lopiro*. But more evidence is necessary to prove this with certainty.

Through the discourses of Samburu "free love," "court-ing," and "adultery," reformists not only posited a certain Samburu ethnosexuality but also shaped the strategies of control and the terms of recognition through which administrators, Samburu elders, women, and morans claimed and contested belonging to the polity. In this sense, *lopiro* synthesized the old and the new, rituals of belonging, and colonial discourses of adultery. This dialectical relationship between ethnosexuality and belonging also shaped how Samburu men and women eventually came to craft collective belonging in contemporary Kenya. In the present, discourses of Samburu sexual alterity proliferate in the practices and representations of development work and HIV/AIDS prevention, making issues of adultery even more contentious for rural men and women. As rural Samburu sought to reimagine their relations to the state and the market, discourses of sexual alterity continued to shape their possibilities of belonging.

Clan, county, corporation: Crafting belonging in neoliberal Kenya

The *lopiro* ceremonies I attended coincided with the writing and promulgation of a new constitution of Kenya in 2010. Pursuing economic liberalization reforms, Kenyan legislators drafted a constitution that decentralized state administration and distributed political power to regional governments. This reform, they thought, would stimulate local forms of economic production and attract foreign donors. In the former administrative order, the government appointed the leaders of provinces and districts. In the new order, the residents of the "county" would elect their own leaders.

The Samburu District had been administrated first by British colonials, and later by members of more dominant ethnic groups in Kenya. The new order offered Samburu the possibility of taking more active control of their politico-economic affairs. Locals thought that capitalizing on Samburu ethnic identity and cultural heritage and on the "exotic" savannah landscape of their territory would help them develop tourism as a main source of revenue. Not

incidentally, Samburu businessmen eventually used video footage from the *lopiro* ceremonies of 2010 on DVDs meant to advertise their county to investors in Europe. But if the future Samburu County was to become an "ethnic corporation" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), how, in the new order, could resources be made to circulate more widely—and also encompass rural communities—instead of fueling existing inequalities?

As people began competing over the emerging possibilities of the new order, rural elders quickly turned to their respective clans. Members of larger clans hoped to use their demographic advantage to elect one of their own in the position of the county governor. Smaller clans sought to forge alliances with each other and with larger clans to also gain seats in the County Assembly. In preparation for the elections of March 2013 (when the district would officially become a county), the leaders of different clans summoned all male elders of their clan in secret meetings. To coerce clan mates to pursue their decisions, elders used the traditional curse (M: *ldekēt*) to impose their authority (cf. Spencer 1965, 184–209). They threatened to curse to death any member of the clan who would not comply with their decision to elect a particular candidate. Youth in towns, businessmen, and others viewed this emerging clan politics with great skepticism. In face of emerging contestations of clan politics, rural male elders soon realized that, if their political strategies were to be effective, then re-creating identification with and devotion to the clan was an urgent imperative.

Lopiro ceremonies constituted ritual occasions to regenerate affective ties among clan members. As inequality, adultery, and disease undermined claims to political recognition and as clans began competing with each other for political alliances and economic connections to the state, *lopiro* ceremonies emerged as sites where leaders mobilized clan membership to achieve new goals. Samburu who were members of Parliament, councillors, and others also turned to *lopiro* as a platform for political mobilization, hoping to gain the support of particular clans for their upcoming campaigns over positions in the county administration. They sponsored and attended these ceremonies and gave speeches that they hoped would build electoral support. But could Samburu elders really come together as what they called "one flock" (M: *mboo obo*) when conflicts over adultery not only divided them but also fueled ethnosexual stereotypes? The rituals of *lopiro* intervened in sex and commodities to set in order the moral foundations of collective life. I will return now to these rituals to show how this dilemma played out in the participants' actions.

Ritual interventions on sex and commodities in *lopiro*

The most spectacular part of *lopiro* was the ritual exchange of commodities on the fourth day of the ceremony. After the junior elders uprooted the flag, all participants entered



Figure 3. Wives of a more senior age set of elders (“fire-stick” elders) display the gifts they received from junior elders as part of the *lopiro* ceremony. Samburu District, Kenya, December 2010.

the homestead of Mama Lopirop. A senior elder recited a blessing and prayed for the fertility and life force of the clan. Then, Mama Lopirop and the Maid of Honor, representing all the wives of the fire-stick elders, came to the front. They held out the “feather”—in this case, a hat—that they had “stolen” from Mister Lopirop. Shivering visibly with emotion, the women returned this object to Mister Lopirop, thus indicating that the adulterous relationships between their respective age-gender cohorts had come to an end. Then the main ritual actors exchanged expensive gifts. Mama Lopirop and the Maid of Honor gave Mister Lopirop and the Best Man a motorbike and a bicycle, respectively. The women also gave them tailor-made neotraditional garments, snuff boxes, decorated clubs, and helmets. Junior elders then gave Mama Lopirop and the Maid of Honor strings of beads, white fabrics decorated with beads, red skirts, beaded leather belts, shoes, purses, wallets, umbrellas, and leather covers for their cell phones (see Figures 3 and 4). The four main actors also exchanged gifts of cash, from about \$350 to \$700 in Kenyan currency.

We may interpret these ritual exchanges in three ways. First, we may see them as attempts to redirect desires from sex to commodities. As the main ritual actors violently “shivered” (M: *keikirikira*), a senior elder, acting as master of ceremonies, encouraged them—over a microphone—to calm down (see Figure 5). Then he praised each gift in Maa, joking and entertaining his audience:

Elders! Elders! We are seeing motorbikes right here in front of us. We are seeing bicycles and other beautiful decorations. Just look at these things! These [are] things that the [junior] elders will use to go into politics. These [junior] elders will campaign in politics. Thank you so much, women! [...] These children of ours [referring to the women] have produced something very beautiful here. We have seen a motorbike that is worth thousands. We have seen a bicycle that is worth a lot of money. Clap your hands! Clap your hands, Lorokushu [clan name]!

Presenting and praising every item, the master of ceremonies encouraged these two age-gender cohorts to rejoice in the pleasures of the commodities, which he offered in lieu of the pleasures of ritual participants’ secret intimacies. Although commodities that circulated through adultery disrupted reproductive sexuality, it was through commodities that sex could be contained within the family. In this sense, substituting commodities for sex more readily served the purposes of clan politics. This ritual appropriates modalities of power that, in the present, circulate widely throughout Africa. Rosalind Morris—writing of South Africa in the time of AIDS—argues that the “substitution of commodity consumption for sex” is a wider trend that allows for the “multiplication of avenues of transference” of desire and opens up new possibilities of satisfaction and pleasure (2008, 212; see also Singer 1993, 37–38).



Figure 4. Junior elders admiring the bicycle and the motorbike they received from the wives of more senior elders during the *lopiro* ceremony. Samburu District, Kenya, December 2010.

Second, we may see the gift exchange as an attempt to reconfigure how “foreign” commodities circulated and shaped the Samburu’s lived worlds. These commodities had long been present in Samburu District. “These are beautiful things,” one woman told me. “People like these things because they are fashion [M: *pachon*].” But because they were not accessible to everyone, these commodities also marked the district’s emerging inequalities. Motorbikes, tailor-made clothes, and large sums of money were common among the businessmen and political leaders in towns. In rural areas, however, they were the privilege of few rich people, among whom the richest were often the so-called young big men in relationships with European women. These men often failed to circulate wealth in ways that included poorer kin and age-mates. Fearing the depletion of their own wealth, young big men typically engaged in reciprocity with other young big men, excluding poorer households. In *lopiro*, rural men and women responded to these new patterns of commodity circulation. For the organization of the ceremony and for the gifts exchanged between the four main ritual actors, for example, all married men and women of the clan had to contribute money (about \$5–\$10). But the young big men were asked for the highest contributions (about \$30–\$50). In this way, rural men and women sought to reroute cash through channels that emphasized clan solidarity. After the ceremony, the four main actors redistributed this money as small cash gifts to the

poor families of their clan. They did this even though, in an everyday context, locals considered the young big men’s cash the money of wrongdoings, because it originated in the tourist commodification of moran sexuality. But by rerouting this money through a *lopiro* ceremony for the collective good, they purified it or removed its unpropitious qualities.

Finally, we may interpret the ritual gift exchange as a way of anchoring commodities in the homestead and mobilizing their imagined power to produce recognition and belonging in a wider world. The homestead (M: *nkang*) iconically indexed the ideal polygynous family unit, headed by an elder. But the homestead was also a marginal place in relation to an imagined center of economic power. Hence, in *lopiro*, the Samburu homestead figured in moral opposition to the outer places of the bush, the market, and the state (cf. Comaroff 1985, 214–16; White 2004, 158–60). By bringing expensive commodities and exchanging them in the middle of the homestead, ritual actors not only anchored the powers of these goods in kinship but also made kinship ties central to their belonging to a world beyond Samburu. As the master of ceremonies suggested, the exchanged commodities were “beautiful things that the [junior] elders will use to go into politics”—referring here to formal state “politics” (S: *siasa*). Moreover, during the ritual gift exchanges, junior elders placed high-denomination banknotes into the headdresses of Mama *Lopiro* and her Maid of Honor,



Figure 5. Over the microphone, the master of ceremonies praises the gifts exchanged on the last day of the *lopiro* ceremony. Samburu District, Kenya, December 2010.

allowing money thus to contagiously transmit its regenerative capacities to the women who sought fertility. Ritual actors thus transformed foreign commodities into sources of life force and well-being.

Throughout the second half of the century, the ritual exchanges of *lopiro* grew spectacularly in proportions. The goods' exchange value as well as their quantities grew with every cycle of the ceremony. If in the 1970s participants exchanged cloth, tobacco, and soap, by the 1990s they also included bicycles. In 2010, they included motorbikes, and participants were trying to purchase cars and pick-up trucks. The inflation of the gifts' value and the intensification of the ritual around the commodity exchange were triggered, in part, by two sets of desires: First, members of different clans tried to outdo each other by offering higher sums of money and more expensive, more numerous gifts, as well as organizing larger, more conspicuous ceremonies. The prestige of each clan relative to others was centrally reflected in the proportions of its *lopiro*. In the context of the clan politics engendered by the new administrative order, *lopiro* ceremonies became important statements of power and claims to recognition for their organizers. Second, a *lopiro* congealed the clan's material power in relation to a larger world inhabited by its members. This world was constantly transforming, at once intensifying the circulation of commodities and excluding the poor from their consumption. In this context, clan members mobilized

resources, purchased expensive commodities, and threw large ceremonies as a way to challenge the sharp material inequalities that informed mundane life—its unsettling patterns of desire and disease—in Samburu. And because these inequalities have risen dramatically in the last few decades with the effects of land privatization, the rise of unemployment, and the commodification of ethnosexuality, so too have *lopiro* ceremonies.

Conclusion: Belonging in ethno-erotic economies

Through *lopiro*, rural Samburu desired to transform unsettling dynamics of intimacy and commodity circulation and reimagine and revitalize collective modes of relatedness through clans and age sets. Older patterns of adultery, a more recent intensification of commodity consumption, and the spread of HIV/AIDS prompted the desires of *lopiro*. The anxieties of rural men and women in the face of their increasing political and economic marginalization in their district, in Kenya, and in the world economy also played an important role in setting the stakes of the ceremony. For participants, it was urgent to craft ties of material support to centers of political and economic power. To actualize such ties, they had to mobilize their collective energies, solve domestic conflicts, and generate local belonging. In this sense, transforming intimacies was a condition of possibility for new forms of belonging to emerge.

In *The Perils of Belonging*, Peter Geschiere argues that with recent democratization and state decentralization throughout the postcolonial world, “the rapidly increasing mobility of people, not only on a national but also on a transnational scale ... has generated the wider context for people’s preoccupation with belonging” (2009, 17). In this context, we witness a rise of “localist thinking” and a growing commitment to autochthony. “Autochthony’s appeal to the soil,” Geschiere suggests, “seems to promise some sort of primal belonging: what can be more secure than the knowledge that one is born from the soil?” (27). Similarly, in *Ethnicity, Inc.*, John and Jean Comaroff argue that following the effects of market liberalization, ethnicity does not disappear but rather becomes a central mode of belonging, “more implicated than ever before in the economics of everyday life” (2009, 1). People commodify ethnicity or turn it into corporate enterprises, seeking new ways of accessing resources. Lopiro ceremonies reflect very powerfully this historical moment when autochthonous, ethnic modes of belonging became central to how postcolonial subjects imagine their futures. But these ceremonies also bring into view the central role of sexuality and sexual alterity to contemporary forms of belonging.

Participants in lopiro had to position themselves in relation to long-standing hegemonic stereotypes of ethnosexuality. Lopiro’s colonial history, its relation to clan politics, the regulation of adultery, as well as the secrecy associated with sex in relation to foreigners attending these ceremonies show that Samburu have been aware of and positioned themselves in relation to such stereotypes. Furthermore, in lopiro, as we have seen, men and women also engaged with the material effects of their ethnosexuality’s commodification on the tourist market, as they recirculated the money of the young big men, opposed their elitism, and tried to offer clans and age sets—with their ethos of equality and reciprocity—as bases of moral life.

Lopiro ceremonies pertain to what I call *ethno-erotic economies*, a concept that points to the dialectical relationship between discourses of sexual alterity and the desires, subjectivities, and modes of belonging of those whom such discourses claim to represent. The ceremonies expressed and synthesized contradictions between the concrete struggles of postcolonial subjects and representations that depicted them as sexual Others. Approaching lopiro through the framework of ethno-erotic economies, rather than as instantiating an essentialized, dehistoricized “Samburu culture,” points to the inherent cosmopolitanism of ritual, that is, to the multiple geopolitical scales involved in its making.

Many Africanist scholars of sexuality focused extensively on critiquing *misrepresentation* of intimacies in African contexts, countering them with empirical “facts” (Arnfred 2004; Epprecht 2007; Murray and Roscoe 2001). But as Neville Hoad argues, “It is not enough to describe the diversity of African sexual practices on the ground ...

[for] description alone, no matter how scrupulous, still produces African sexuality as the object of a prurient Western gaze” (2007, xxii). Anthropologists therefore must also explore how representations of ethnosexuality have shaped belonging for postcolonial subjects. In Samburu, people have long dealt with colonial representations of their ethnosexuality and tried to imagine futures *through* and *around* them. What we must bring into question, then, are precisely the modes of belonging that are emerging with ethno-erotic economies.

Notes

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1. I use pseudonyms for all my interlocutors.
2. Throughout this article, I use the abbreviation *M* to mark words and phrases in the Samburu dialect of the Maa language and *S* for words and phrases in Swahili.
3. In rural areas, condoms were available only on the rare occasions when health workers distributed them to young men. In the absence of condoms, risk became an inescapable element of sexual intimacies. While most HIV-prevention campaigns emphasized abstinence, high levels of HIV infection often prompted Kenyan journalists to invoke the sexual alterity of Samburu people (for a similar dynamic in the Trobriand Islands, see Lepani 2012).
4. For example, the competition between two age-gender groups, the mobilization of women as an age set in pursuit of fertility, or the symbolic role of the feather, among other things, can also be encountered in the Maasai *lolbaa* ceremony (Spencer 1988, 252).
5. Ritual specialists explained to me that lopiro brought together, transformed, and recombined ritual elements of older ceremonies such as *kishkish*, *nkijare*, and *ntorosi*. In *kishkish*, girls “stole” a feather from the morans of another clan or region by way of inviting them to organize a dance in the girls’ area. In *nkijare*, married men and women of different clans gathered in a dancing competition between different, alternating age-gender cohorts. Finally, in *ntorosi*, all barren women who resided in a certain area walked together for two months, singing songs, blessing other women in exchange for food, and forcing men they came upon to have sex with them. At the end of *ntorosi*, women would regain their fertility.

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