

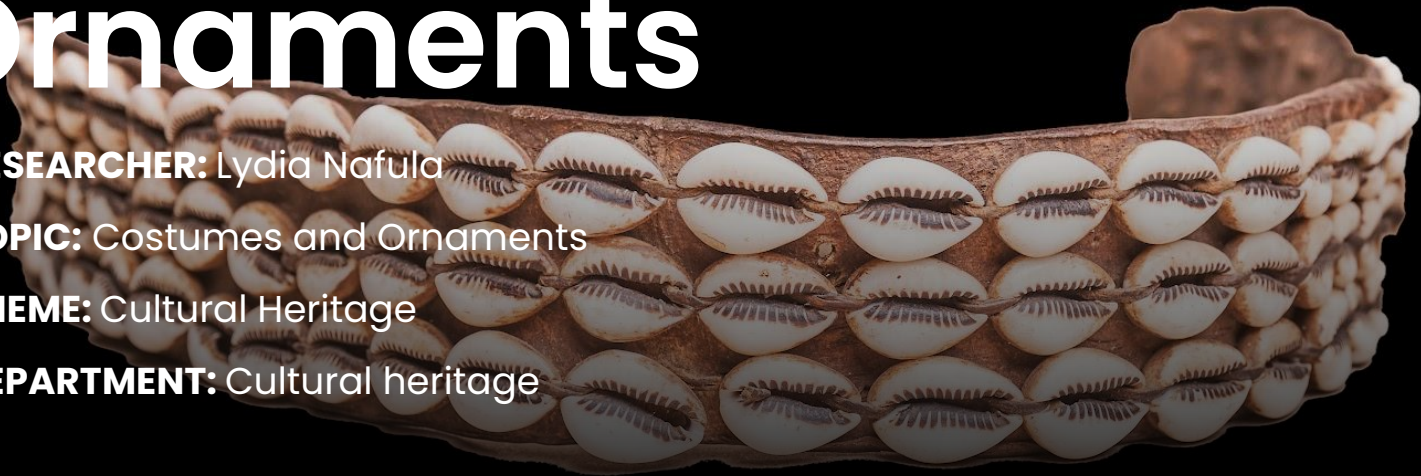
Costumes and Ornaments

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TOPIC: Costumes and Ornaments

THEME: Cultural Heritage

DEPARTMENT: Cultural heritage



Lesson Objectives

1. To describe costumes and ornaments.
2. To discuss the cultural significance of costumes and ornaments.
3. To highlight the symbolic meaning of some costumes and ornaments.



Maasai warrior's headgear and Samburu girl's front apron.

Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage

Learning resources

1. Text
2. Video
3. Photo

Costumes and ornaments

In the African context, costumes and ornaments serve not just for protection against the changes in weather patterns and for beauty, but they also act as identity markers and status symbols. They are markers and symbols depending on the materials they are made of, their colour, patterns, their shape and form, and the part of the body they are worn on. All these communicate information about the wearer, to members of the community



Illustration of Tiriki young man in circumcison mask Ingolole
Source: NMK - Joy Adamson Gallery

Defining costumes and ornaments

Costumes are outfits worn on the body by a person to protect them from the changing weather conditions. They are also referred to as body covers in relation to the primary function they serve. Costumes are a cultural visual of the people. They pass on a message about the wearer.

In the African context, the costumes include everyday wear as well as those worn during ceremonies. Examples of costumes include: front aprons, skirts, cloaks and headgears.



Maasai warrior's headgear and Samburu girl's front apron.

Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage

On the other hand, ornaments are a set of accessories added to a person's body to enhance their image. In the African context ornaments go beyond enhancing beauty; they communicate a message about the wearer.

Ornaments include objects worn on or around the neck, ears, forehead, arms, legs and waist. Some examples are earrings, necklaces, belts, bracelets, and head and arm bands.



Luo woman's headgear and a Turkana girl's front apron.

Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage



A variety of ornaments including necklaces, earrings, a headband and a support for a legbell.

Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage

Early costumes and ornaments

Communities initially made costumes and ornaments from materials that were readily available within their environment. These included seeds, wood, nuts, bones, stones, feathers, skin, plant materials, iron, mollusc and ostrich egg shells.

Later, other materials were introduced through trade and from industrial processes. These materials included plastic and glass beads, and cotton cloth among others.

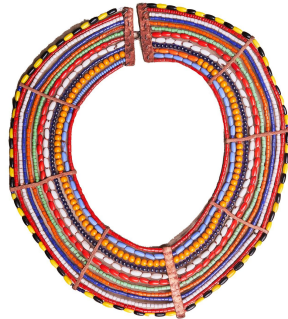


*Costumes and ornaments made from natural materials.
Source: NMK – Cultural Heritage*

Significance of materials, colour, numbers and body part in costumes and ornaments

Materials: For many communities, names of ornaments are related to the material they are made of, their shapes, part of the body on which they are worn, and the names of plants, flowers and fruits they resemble. For example, among the Maasai there is a big red bead known as *emporro*, named after a seed which is of the same shape.

Enomuatat is a big necklace which has several colours in a circular pattern. The verb *amuat* means “to coil” and in this case refers to “the coiling of colours” in the necklace. The *oltribe*, a Maasai necklace, is round and has several coloured beads. It is made and worn by a girl.



Maasai necklace oltribe, it has similarities with the enomuatat.
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage

Feathers are used for headgear among several communities and are linked with the rite of passage. For example, *kondo-ongo* is a Luo feather headgear, which is worn by young men during dances or when going to war. *Ongo* refers to an eagle, thus it is an eagle feathered headgear. *Esidai* is an oval shaped Maasai headgear made of ostrich feathers. It is worn by warriors called morans during ceremonies.



Maasai headgear esidai
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage



Luo headgear kondo-ongo
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage

Colour: Among the Kikuyu, Luhya and Kalenjin communities, initiates smear their arms, legs and faces with white clay; which is associated with the rite of passage. The Ogiek initiates, who are a sub-group of the larger Kalenjin community, also colour the area around their eyes with black charcoal.

Among many communities, white chalk is put on the faces of those who have participated in a ceremony to signify peace. White chalk is also a sign of transition. Morans cover their bodies with chalk as they come to the end of an initiation ceremony into elder-hood.

White is also seen as a colour of protection. White beads or cowrie shells are used for protection against disease, protection after initiation and to ward off “the evil eye”. An example is among the Kikuyu where white cowrie shells are used to protect pregnant mothers from the evil eye and a Tigania belt made of cowrie shells and worn by women.



*Tigania belt made of cowrie shells.
Source: NMK – Cultural Heritage*

Cowrie shells also symbolise peace, and are associated with fertility due to their womb-like shape as is seen among the Kalenjin community. The colour of the cowrie shells further signifies the life-giving aspect associated with milk and the relationship between the mother and child.

Red ochre is another item associated with the rite of passage as is evident with Maasai and Samburu morans. The red ochre smeared by the morans shows that their status is about to change. Similarly, red ochre is also smeared on the heads of a bride and a groom whose status will change once they get married.

Black, red and white are important colours to many communities. They are associated with the life-giving liquids such as water, milk and blood. This is seen especially among the Maasai and Orma. For example the Maasai's support for legbell *Ngene old wala* has the red, black and white colours associated with life-giving liquids. It is worn on the right leg, on the outside of the thigh.



*Maasai support for legbell ngene old wala.
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage*

Black and blue beads are worn by religious leaders among the Borana. The colours are linked to purity, infinity, mystery and to the supreme being. Yellow and red beads are common among the Borana women. Yellow here signifies fertility and good health. Among the Rendille, a mother whose daughter is about to get married wears a yellow and red bead necklace, known as *Si-gi-choi*.

For the Kikuyu, pink beads were commonly used in ornaments. The Kikuyu earrings *hangi* are mainly made of pink beads and are worn by married women whose children have been circumcised. The pink colour represented the rich, red earth of their land.



Rendille necklace si-gi-choi.
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage



Kikuyu earrings hangi.
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage

Numbers: Numbers are equally significant, for example among the Gabbra, the number of looped bead necklaces represent the number of sons one has. Numbers also feature prominently in other communities where certain ornaments can only be worn in even numbers. The Pokot headband *aretaiten* is worn by adult males for beauty.

Body Part: The body part on which an ornament is worn also passes on information about the wearer. For the Gabbra, a bracelet worn on the right arm of a woman shows that she has sons. Bracelets worn on the left hand signify marriage and a husband. Ornaments worn on the head are related to political, social and spiritual status.



Pokot headband aretaiten.
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage

Costumes and ornaments as status symbols

Different costumes and ornaments are used as status symbols in society. They signify the position one holds such as whether one is a mother, warrior or elder. They also indicate an individual's gender, age, clan or ritual office such as that of a spiritual leader, diviner or healer. For example, a baby girl among the Rendille wears a few white beads on strings around her neck and sometimes a bracelet.

A mature girl wears more elaborate ornaments consisting of broad and narrow headbands, a number of earrings and wide necklaces, and collars. A married woman will wear a special collar, *bukhurcha*, which comes from the chin to the breastbone. It is made from either palm tree fibres or giraffe tail hairs and with large egg-shaped red beads in the middle. The woman also wears brass coils over her ears.

A woman whose firstborn is a son adorns a special hair style that has been stiffened with mud. An older woman would shave her head and wear fewer ornaments.

Among the men, the warrior has a special hair-do and bead ornaments including strands of beads across the chest and facial paintings. A married elder will have his hair shaved and wear special ornaments, for example, an aluminium earring.



Rendille Bukhurcha
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage

Challenges facing the making and use of costumes and ornaments

There have been challenges in obtaining some of the materials used in making costumes and ornaments due to issues such as climate change. For example, some plants used to make headgears for initiates among the Kalenjin and Luhya communities are rare nowadays.

The influx of cheap imported or factory made substitutes is now prevalent. Such substitutes lack the intrinsic cultural value associated with costumes and ornaments made by community members. This includes lack of consideration of particular colour schemes and patterns which have meanings to the communities.

The current generation, especially the young people, have limited knowledge or interest in the cultural values associated with various costumes and ornaments.

Many communities are incorporating their traditional styles and designs on the contemporary materials to make costumes and ornaments. This can be seen among the Maasai where beadwork and metal ornamentation are incorporated into cotton fabrics. There is also a growing appreciation of African motifs by the society as a whole.



*Tiriki circumcision mask Ingolole, made of plant material.
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage*

Role of National Museum of Kenya's Cultural Heritage Department

The mission of the Cultural Heritage Department is to research, collect, document, preserve and present to the public Kenya's cultural heritage for education purposes, appreciation and for posterity. This is done through fieldwork, exhibitions, conferences and publications.

The department has collections dating back to 1885 comprising donated collections and collections obtained from the communities. Including pots, metal ornaments, weaponry which are available for research to members of the public or academic researchers. Visit the department to learn more about the culture of Kenyan communities.



*Samburu girl's front apron.
Source: NMK - Cultural Heritage*