

Samburu Necklaces

art activity

The Samburu are a tribe in north-central Kenya. They are semi-nomadic people who herd cattle, sheep, and goats. Until recently the Samburu have been largely isolated and uninfluenced by other cultures and have retained unique and colorful artistic traditions. Samburu girls and women wear distinctive beaded necklaces called *mporros*. These necklaces are stiff or rigid rather than relaxed and flowing. Social status is identified by the number of necklaces worn. Necklaces of red beads predominate, but many are also made with alternate patterns of two colors such as black, yellow, black and so on. Young women ready for marriage rub their necklaces with fat to make them glisten in sun. This, they believe, makes them more attractive to suitors. Once married, a young woman's *Moran* (husband) will heap strands of beads upon her so that after a few years she has barely space left around her neck for another strand. The Samburu get their name from the word *Samburr*, a traditional leather bag peculiar to them, for carrying honey and meat. These bags are carried on their backs. The Samburu are part of the Maa-speaking peoples, of whom the Maasai are the most well known.

Materials

14 to 18 gauge wire (15" to 20" length per student) (coat hangers are great in a pinch)
wire cutters
needle nose pliers
barrel and tube beads of various colors with large holes
mother of pearl buttons 1/2" diameter or larger
string

Process

Step 1. Cut a 15" length of steel wire and form it into a round hoop. With needle nose pliers bend a small J-hook at one end.

Step 2. Thread the wire with beads until the hoop is full, leaving a 1/2" of wire exposed near each end. Use solid color schemes or alternate two or three colors. Bend the other end into a J-hook. The two Js should hook onto each other and hold the necklace in place, with tension, when finished.

Step 3. Take a piece of string and loop it around the necklace's bottom end. Pull tight so that the two strands are an inch or two apart.

Step 4. Thread the strands with beads and a button. Knot the button at the back.

