

MARRIAGE IN LUHYA LAND

How Marriage Was Arranged

This was done in one of two ways. In one case the father of a boy arranged with the father of a girl with or without the knowledge of the boy. In the other case, the boy himself looked for a hard-working girl from a reputed family. He was usually accompanied by his boy friends. The meeting place was usually in or near the girl's home. She too came to the meeting place accompanied by her girl friends. The question was then put to the girl, and if she agreed, both parties went to tell their parents.

Before the boy or his father approached to make the suggestion, careful, private inquiries were made about the girl's character and her ability to work. A go-between (wangira) was often used. Before accepting - sometimes even after accepting - the girl too caused inquiries to be made about the boy's character. She also scrutinised his deformities, if any.

After everything was checked, male relatives of the boy visited the girl's parents to talk things over, and if necessary, start paying the dowry. In some parts of Luhyaland the boy gave the girl a token (e.g. *eshitiri*, a bangle) to indicate that they were now engaged.

PAYING DOWRY (IKHWE)

This differed slightly from place to place. Generally, it was done in instalments. Representatives of the boy took the items available to the girl's home where they met her parents and relatives. Usually a beer party was made for the meeting. During the party important matters concerning the dowry would be discussed.

The items of dowry were cows and bulls. The equivalent of a cow was four goats, and of a bull, three goats, depending on local practice. The equivalent of a goat was, on the average, three hoes. (In some places it was an insult to pay a sheep as dowry.) Every time an item was brought equivalent to a cow or bull, a short stick was cut and marked and then tied on the little bundle of similar sticks denoting earlier instalments. The girl's parents kept one bundle while the groom's parents went away with another for the record. These bundles were kept carefully in case some of the animals died and had to be returned to the groom's home, as happened in some places; they were also kept in case the marriage did not materialize, or would end up in a divorce, in which case some of the items had to be refunded.

The final amount or total paid again depended on local custom. In some places three to six head of cattle or their equivalent were sufficient while in others it was more (sometimes much more), say between 13 and 20 head of cattle.

In other places, an initial number of cattle had to be paid; the number depended on the bargaining power of both parties. The second lot of cattle was 'customary' and had to be paid over the lifetime of the marriage. In western Luhyaland, four head of cattle had to be

paid: a cow for the mother, a cow for the father (paternal uncle) a bull or cow for the maternal uncle, and a bull for the brother (usually paternal cousin).

When these were paid, there remained many small but important items which were paid to the girl or her relatives during or shortly after the marriage feast.

(Note: Certain relatives of the boy helped to subscribe the items of the dowry while certain relatives of the girl got a share of the dowry.)

THE MARRIAGE FEAST (SHITALO)

When the parents and relatives of the girl were satisfied with the dowry paid, arrangements were made for the wedding. *(Note: There were only a few cases where the dowry was satisfactory to the parents. It was only in such cases that the type of wedding described here took place)*

A big feast was prepared, both at the girl's and at the boy's home. The boy, together with his friends, went to the girl's home to fetch her. There was much singing at the girl's home. When everything was ready, the boys left with the bride and a large group of girls to act as bridesmaids. These girls sang wedding songs the whole journey to the boy's home.

(Note: In some places the boy had to go and live at the girl's home cultivating, fetching water and firewood, to prove that he was suitable as a hardworking husband - This was done before Eshitilo.)

In some cases the boy did not come to fetch his bride in the manner explained. Instead, the girl's brothers and male cousins accompanied her and her bridesmaids to the groom's home. At the groom's home, too, the women of his side sang appropriate songs. There was much dancing, drinking and eating.

As soon as the bride entered the home, certain customs were observed. These differed slightly from place to place. In some areas the girl ate only food from her home or her relatives until the customary fees for eating the boy's food were paid.

After the first night there were several things to be done, and again they varied from place to place. If the girl was found a virgin, there was a great deal of festivity and dancing, and presents for her mother.

During one of the days of the marriage feast (for it sometimes lasted several days), certain animals were killed to fulfill various customs. The meat was also shared according to custom, which also differed from place to place.

(Note: Where the dowry was not sufficient, the girl had to be dragged by men hired by the boy. There was usually a fight with the girl's male relatives, and if the opposition was strong some people were badly hurt.)

THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY

This was called *Eshitishio* in some places. It consisted of slaughtering a cow (in other places a he-goat) to fulfil a custom; the meat was shared and cooked according to custom. It was usually the climax of the marriage ceremony. Where a girl had to receive a fee in order to start eating the boy's food, she received it on this day.

A kind of ceremony was carried out in the boy's mother's hut; the bride entered this hut for the first time during the ceremony. Several customary presents were given to the girl for the various functions she was going to perform: cooking, fetching firewood, fetching water, etc. This practice varied according to locality.

(Note: The marriage ceremonies in Maragoli, Tiriki, Idakho and Isukha are in some details very different from the practice elsewhere in Luhyaland)

TYPES OF MARRIAGES

There were several types of marriages with the most perfect being the one described above. There was also marriage by elopement when the girl and the boy agreed to marry without their parents' consent. There was marriage by forceful dragging of a girl for whom no dowry or very little had previously been paid. In either case there was a definite procedure later to make the marriage valid; and dowry had to be paid sooner or later.

Wife Inheritance:

In western Luhyaland, a man married his older brother's wife when the brother died. Where there was no younger brother to inherit the wife according to custom, a male cousin took her instead. This type of marriage was called *okhukerama*; it was not practised among some eastern Luhya.

The opposite type of marriage was when a man married the sister or female cousin of his wife - while the wife was still alive or dead. This marriage was called *eshibeyo* and again it was practiced mainly among the western Luhya.

Adapted: Life in Kenya in the Olden Days: The Baluyia, By John Osogo, Oxford University Press, 1965, ISBN 0 19 644012 2