

Shelters of Long Ago

Types of dwellings and their construction:

The standard lint in Luhyaland was made of sticks filled in and plastered with mud. The roof structure was tied with sticks and was thatched with grass or local reeds. The floor was beaten hard and then regularly smeared with cowdung.

There was only one door in the common hut. There were windows, but openings were left all round the top of the wall for ventilation. Often little round holes were also left in the wall to let in fresh air. The roof provided wide eaves to make a verandah. Parts of the verandah had a wall round them to be used as a store for firewood, and also to house the grinding stone (*oluchina*).

Rituals: Before a new hut could be erected, the father or uncle of the owner had to be present to place the first stick in the ground. If the place was away from any old home, that is, if it was *olukala*, a chicken had to be killed and a little ceremony performed. On some occasions a very temporary hut built with sticks and grass only was erected for the inmates. This was necessary when starting a new home, or during certain types of funerals, or for people isolated due to an infectious disease such as leprosy. An unmarried man's hut was called *isimba*, and an old woman's hut where girls slept was called *eshibinzie*. The latter was also called *isimba* in Bukusu.

Layout of Homes and Huts

There was a definite arrangement of huts in the home. This differed slightly from place to place. The usual order was as follows: the hut of the first wife was directly opposite the gate of the home. That of the second wife was to the right of it; that of the third to the left of it, and so on alternately till all the huts of the wives were placed.

The oldest son's *isimba* was nearer the gate and to the right as you stand facing the gate. The second son's hut was at a corresponding place to the left; the third son's followed the first's on the gate side, and so on until all the sons' huts were built. Slaves or adopted strangers who were allowed to build a hut in the home were given the place of the youngest son. The stable for goats or kraal for cattle was in the centre of the circle of huts. If the man had a special hut, without a wife in it, it was also near the centre of the home.

The arrangement of the furniture, etc, inside a wife's hut was also important. The hut was by custom divided (not by a wall, but by understanding) into two halves. The left-hand side as you enter the hut was called the lower side (*emwalo*); the right-hand side was called the upper side (*emukulu*). The lower side had the sleeping area of the parents, and therefore married children were not allowed to step that way under any circumstances. It also had the hearth for warming or for cooking. The upper side is where the rest of the furniture (pots, etc.) was kept. Married sons and daughters could sit that way provided the door was left wide open, even if it was night

Walled Villages

There were walled villages in many parts of Luhyaland. Instead of fencing the home with euphorbia or with thorn, a wall of clay was built round the huts. Outside the wall usually ran a ditch (*olukoba*) all round. The walled villages were a protection against night raids by the Teso, or the Abakwabi (Maasai), who were generally known as Abaseebe.

Walled villages were commonest in Bukusu (eg Lumboka and Chetambe), Bukhayo, Saamia and Bunyala (Busia) and in Wanga. One of the early Europeans to enter Luhyaland, a German called Carl Peters, described the walled village of Chief Sakwa in Wanga Mukulu as follows:

“A wide ditch surrounds the walls of the palace, over which a dam leads to the gate. On entering the enclosure the stranger first comes upon a great open space, surrounded by the houses of the war garrison of the palace. From thence he comes to a second great space, which is surrounded, in a wide circle, by the many houses of the Sultan. All these houses are full of hundreds of women, in whose midst he himself dwells.’

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