

Traditional Marriage Customs among the Gusii of Kenya

¹Nyaruri Paul Okinyi, and Maangi Eric Nyankanga^{2*}

¹Coordinator, School of social science, Mount Kenya University, Kenya.

²Associate Faculty Member, Mount Kenya University and Doctoral Student University of South Africa, Pretoria.

*erikie83@yahoo.com

P.O BOX 2347-40200, KISII-KENYA.

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to locate the traditional marriage customs among the Gusii of Kenya in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Attempts will be made to trace the changing trends of the said traditions. Apart from secondary sources, the paper will highly depend on the use of oral testimonies.

Key words: marriage, customs, Abagusii.

Introduction

The Gusii are a Bantu ethnic group who occupy the Kisii highlands in Kisii and Nyamira counties, Nyanza region, Western Kenya. They are located about 50 Kilometers east of Lake Victoria. They are sandwiched between the Luo, Kuria, Maasai and Kipsigis ethnic groups of Kenya. They occupy one of the most densely populated and equally high fertile highlands in Kenya. They constitute the sixth largest ethnic group in Kenya. They comprise about seven percent of Kenya's national population (kisii.com).

Traditionally, the Gusii people are cultivators and animal keepers, favored both by the suitable climate and copious supply of water throughout the year. The average minimum temperatures are 61.5° F (61.4° C) and 50° F (9.8° C). Rain falls throughout the year, at an annual average of 60 to 80 inches (150 to 200 centimeters (Kisii.com)). In the nineteenth and twentieth century much of the present-day Gusii land was covered by moist upland forest.

Like the rest of the ethnic groups in Kenya, the Gusii people have observed a number of customs from their beginning as an organized ethnic group. These customs were and to a large extent are still regarded very highly amongst the people. This means breaking or disobeying one of the customs implies direct disrespect to the ancestors and ruining the whole '*Egesaku*' (*Mwamogusii*). One of these customs is the marriage rite. Among the Gusii, marriage was thought of as most important thing since it was believed to be the beginning of life. The bearing of children was regarded as the fruit of marriage.

It was the duty and responsibility of the parents of the boys (*Abamura*) to see to it that they got wives (*Abakungu*). At fourteen to eighteen years of age, the boy was judged to be mature and fit to serve and satisfy a woman. To know that the boy was active, he would be watched by certain women and if he was seen going about with girls, then he was declared fit to marry. The go-between (*esigani*, *pl.chisigani*) would be identified by the parents of the boy. The *esigani* may be of either gender. He or she is sent by the boy's parents to search for good, hardworking girl, a girl with a good sexual reputation and whose parents are not witches (*Abarogi*). The go-between is to first report to both sides (*ogosigana*); this was his first task. He then begins the necessary discreet inquiries about the girl he has in mind, and then calls on her family to introduce the subject of the proposed marriage. The girl's father will naturally want an assurance in general terms that the suitor is in a position to pay bride price. The final task of the go-between is to find out whether the girl has any disfiguring marks on her body which are not visible when dressed. He did this by asking the girls close to her. The close girls could know because girls bathed together in the river and streams. This therefore means that the girls would know of any childhood injuries that left scars on her body. The existence of such scars particularly those resulting from burns was sometimes mentioned as the cause for a prospective bride. If the marriage was to take place, the burns could drastically reduce the bride price. The bride therefore should be of good physical attractiveness, good sexual reputation and her family should have a good name as regards witchcraft. It is also important to note that the intermediary, besides giving the prospective groom information on the above topics, he informed the girl's father of the young man's interests. If the father has no particular objection to the youth or his family, he agreed, subject to satisfactory payment of the bride price (Levine, 1966).

THE MARRIAGE

The marriage began by the bride asking the go-between to ask the bridegroom to go with his group to her home (*ekerorano*) in order for the couple to see each. The bride then fixes a date for this feast called '*Ekeriboko*' (eating at the place of the in-laws). When the day comes, the bridegroom and his group go to the bride's home; usually this was done in the evening. When they reached the homestead, they had to stay outside before

they could be directed into the house. This was done by the girls who have been invited by the bride to come to the feast. This was followed by much dancing, drinking and festivity. Meanwhile during this time there was great security between both groups. The girl and her female mates judge the prospective groom. It is important to note that the bride and the bridegroom see each other for the first time. If the girl had strong objections, she could refuse to go through with the marriage although the father may force his daughter into the match (Mayer, 1950).

After this ceremony, the young man asks his father to arrange for the marriage to be effective. The bridegroom's father will then introduce himself at the girl's home and ask her father to come over on a certain day to look at the cattle. This feast, known as "*okomanachiombe*" (scrutiny and selection of cattle) constituted the first important step in the bride price transfer.

On the morning of the named day, the father of the girl arrives at the suitor's village with a number of elders from his immediate family. The suitor's father orders the cows to be brought before them. The cows are then closely and critically examined by the visiting elders, who question the father of the bridegroom as to their various characteristics including their age, the number of times they have calved among other questions. The animals which meet approval are led to one side, while those regarded as too thin, or having any other defects, were rejected and replacement was demanded. The bridegroom was not allowed to be at this meeting. The selection of cattle was followed by that of goats. In the process of selection the elders portrayed a business-like spirit of hard bargaining between the giving elders and the receiving elders. By accepting the animals offered at the view, the bride's father declared his final satisfaction. He could not afterwards ask for more. This means that if he was not satisfied with the offered bride wealth, he rejected the proposal there and then. The element of finality in the agreement was outwardly symbolized by celebration on a large scale, which took place immediately after acceptance (Obegi, 1920).

After the completion of the negotiations by the visiting elders, they sat down to enjoy themselves around the beer pot which was prepared for them by their host. The drinking continued until midnight or even later. This continued until everyone was suitably drunk, the host would then have a goat slaughtered for these visiting elders. The elders had to go to their homes very late in the morning in case the bride's father and his party rejects the bride price after the feast of meat and beer, it would be considered a gross insult. This will result in fighting between the two groups. This therefore means that food was served when they had agreed, otherwise without an agreement they were given beer only but not meat.

Upon completion of the feast, the bride's father will take the cows with him the following morning. They had to remain at his home for a month. During this time the marriage may be called off by either side if any of the cattle's dies of natural causes, or if the go-between brings some bad news concerning the bride or the groom, the bride wealth had to be returned.

If part or all the bride wealth cows died soon, they had to be replaced by the bridegroom's father. The groom's father was called to view the carcass, this way he had an opportunity to gather more information on how the animals died. The groom's father will be given the hide of the animal that died. In case the groom's father didn't go, the hide was sent to him plus dry beer. If the bride's father kept the hide for himself instead of sending it to the groom's father, he had then to give a goat for the carcass (*emboriyegetondo*). If the bride groom's father had previously received the animal as '*enyaika*' in bride wealth from a third party, he was not expected to provide the replacement himself, but he passed the skin to the third party. This man in turn will get rid of responsibility and pass on the skin to the person from whom he received the cows. A dead cow has to be replaced by another of the same category. This means that it was cow for cow, bull for bull- no amount of goats could replace a cow. However, it was reduced somewhat if the cow dies a year or so, if four died then in this case three will replace. Now that the animals have been handed over to the father's satisfaction, the girl then can be taken to her new home. At this stage, the girl was expected to show some resistance. She may plead for delay by giving excuses; this will include trying or pretending to hide. Always the family especially the father and brothers insisted on her to go. Then young men from the groom's side will drug the girl away, she went along with her hands on the head, weeping. When she reached in the groom's house a kind of honeymoon (*egechabero*) started, which lasted about six weeks. She was to dress in her best clothes, eat the choosiest food and entertained by the husband's friends. A bull or more were killed and a portion was sent to the husband's parents'-in-law.

The other important thing on the bride's arrival was the sexual performance of both the bride and the groom. This was a trial for the two because impotence of the groom would cause the bride to break off the marriage. The discovery of scars of deformities on the body, including vaginal obstruction, would induce the groom to send her away and return of the bride wealth would be requested. The bride therefore was determined to put her new husband sexual competence to the most severe test possible.

Within the first week after the bride has come to the bridegroom's home, '*obokima*' ugali in a nicely made basket and raw meat is brought by women from the brides home. The reason for this is to check how their daughter arrived and how she was welcomed. They also took this opportunity to inquire on her husband's 'fitness'. This bringing of food could be done two or more occasions.

After staying for about three to four months, the bride could go back to her home. This was time when all the issues concerning marriage could be discussed. The bride was questioned by her parents and close relatives about her life at the new home. She was to brief them on the behavior and habits of the husband and his parents and the neighboring relations. She had to report on any signs of witchcraft in her husband's family. Therefore this was the time for her to put forward her complaints if any. She had the right to complain of any little mistake her husband has done to her. Similarly, she could also accuse the parents of the husband for any maltreatment. This was very important, because if she reports a lot of evil things about the husband and his parents, her father had to cancel the marriage. Meanwhile, the husband would be investigating through different sources on etiquette of the wives family. If anything wrong was found, the bride wealth was demanded back immediately. If nothing bad was found in both cases then preparations for the actual wedding started.

THE WEDDING

Apart from preparing for food and beer at the brides home, there had to be a meeting between the parents at the bride's home. The bridegroom's father went there with some elders from among his relatives. At this meeting, the issue of dowry was again discussed. It is important to note that dowry was usually paid in installments; therefore they talked about the animals still to be paid. Promises of confirming the relationship were made at this point. If the boy's father had no cow left at home as a result of dowry payment, he could ask the girl's father to lend him one cow. This was to enable him sell it and buy food. After this, beer was drunk and dances followed. They sang songs, '*emeino*'. Afterwards the visits returned to their homes.

When the beer for the wedding was prepared some of it (about five pots) was taken to the bridegroom's home. The people bringing the beer informed the bridegroom that the preparations for the wedding are ready at the bride's home. On the very day, boys of the bridegroom set out for the girls' home. This is called '*egesabo*'. That evening was followed by much feasting and a goat was killed for them. The goat was given by the girl's father, or it could be brought from the groom's home. Feasting was until morning and there was much dancing and drinking. The girl invited some girls from the neighborhood to keep the groom and his company happy and make them feel at home. At this time, there followed much wrestling between the men of the girl's party and the groom's men. It's during this celebration that the '*entwoni*' of the '*obokano*' was to be cut. The '*obokano*' (herp) is the main musical instrument of the Gusii people. It has eight strings. The '*entwoni*' is the central string, which makes the loudest and best sound. The best players of both parties start a kind of competition, to find out which player could cut the '*etwoni*' first. After this, they were allowed into the house. Here, they could kill their bull. Then divide the meat, one half for the in-laws and the other half for the villagers. The bride got the thigh, the hide and the head. She also got some beer to take to her new home when the wedding (*enyangi*) ended.

The wedding itself was performed by the person who acted as a priest, to join the couple. He puts a huge pot on the ground, and then supports it on the sides with grass or '*chintamame*'. Then he slaughters the wedding goat. This goat when being killed was held by the mouth with grass by small lass. It was only opened on one side, after which the stomach was also opened from that side. Some meat was given to the bridegroom to eat there and then. The bridegroom wore traditionally, that is '*esumati, ekeore, chindege, enguba and ritimo*'. Those are kind of clothes made from animals skin, crown made of branches and flowers, a small iron ball in a metal container a shield and a spear. He was to be accompanied by a small girl who walked ahead of the bridegroom, carrying a basket full of wimbi on her head and small boy carrying oil. When they reached the brides home, they had to wait at the gate. The gate was usually fences with trees of particular type, especially the ones called '*emesabakwayemesocho*'. The small girl then passes through first. The person going to act as a priest (*omokundekane*) then snatches the shield and spear away and keeps them; the wimbi is also kept. The bridegroom is then taken into the house and he sits in the lower part '*Eero*' where his seat of grass was erected. Now, the big pot, which had been dug into the ground, was filled with beer. Then dancing followed. Most care was taken to ensure that the bridegroom's crown does not fall down while dancing, as it would be a bad omen. The '*omokundekane*' then gives the meat that was kept for the bridegroom, who receives it with open hands. From the open hands, the bridegroom takes the meat, using his mouth. Then the '*omokundekane*' gives him food, a big lump of ugali in which a hole has been made, so that the meat could be placed in it. The bride then comes from the inner room with a kind of gourd, '*enkondo*', and hands it to her husband. She is then given the lump of food with the meat in it, and then takes it into the house. She then comes back and takes away the '*enkondo*' to the inner house. Then a skin was spread on the ground and the couple sat there. The '*enkondo*' was

brought and kept near them. After this, *omokundekane* went to his home. Then, the bridegroom goes to the bush to hide, while the bride goes to dress in her wedding skins, '*chingobo*'. When the bride is ready the bridegroom then stands next to her surrounded by the people. The small girl '*egesagane*' smears the bridegroom with oil on the face. Then small boy, '*omoisia*' is also smeared with that oil. They then had to enter into the house to celebrate once more. The bride brings the bridegroom's shield and hands it over to him. The small boy is given '*ekenama*' thigh of the remaining meat. The '*egesagane*' is given a basketful of flour. The small girl then now leads the way. When they start going they are ordered by the people not to look back. All the way home they were not allowed to talk. They made sure that no other couple, in the same situation as they themselves, will meet them on the way. The best man of the bridegroom goes a head of them, carrying a spear, and if he meets another couple, coming from their wedding ceremony, he orders them to hide until 'his' couple had passed. He did this not by talking but by showing them his spear. When the party reached the boy's home, the bride stays at the gate of the homestead. The bridegroom then goes to his mother and here he is given a skin to sit on, '*riyo*'. Then the bride is brought from the gate and takes her place next to her husband. In the evening they got to their own house. They slept with the small girl, '*omoimari*', between them, so that he prevents them from having marital intercourse. The next morning food, '*obokima*' is brought from the bride's home. The basket in which the food was brought was taken back full of wimbi, '*obori*'. For two days the fire was to be kept burning, and great care was taken that it was not extinguished. On the second day the goat of the bride, '*omoriakari*', was slaughtered, '*okong'wansa*'. Before that, it was passed around her four times. It was then allowed to urinate on her. When it was slaughtered only the brothers and sisters of the groom are allowed to eat the meat. The groom's parents are not supposed to eat the meat. The skin of this goat was then torn into small pieces, '*ebitwanga*'. One was put on the right hand of the husband as such are put on both. Then the bride goes to her home with the remainder of the skin which was to be squeezed and made into '*engobo*'. After a day's stay at home she wears the newly made '*engobo*'. By this time she also wears the '*ebitinge*', to confirm that she was indeed married. She then returned to her husband accompanied by about five girls each carrying flour. The next day the mother of the bride groom cooks a lot of food and calls in the neighbours. During this festival, the bride is given a new name. Then follows a lot of drinking, and the couple is allowed to join. After this water is boiled, and the bride called on to start cooking. She is then watched by her mother-in-law and other women as she cooks. That night the bride sleeps in her skins until the morning. She then takes off and collected firewood for every woman in the neighborhood.

LIFE AFTER THE WEDDING

For a year the girl sleeps in the groom's hut, but eats and cooks in the hut of her mother-in-law. The reason is that by now she has not harvested her own crop. After harvesting her own produce, she then becomes independent of the mother-in-law. At this period when she cooks at her mother-in-law, she is closely scrutinized. Neighboring women could call her, '*nyamworoto*', the lazy one, but the in-laws never say much about the way she works. It is important to note that she did most of the domestic work and the outdoor work, such as collecting firewood, bringing water and of course digging at the farm.

If the married couples live together for about two years without offspring, people begin to suspect both of them. In most cases, the parents of the boy contact some magicians to tell them what is wrong, and for advice on the steps to be taken. On the other hand a close relation of the groom may be identified and then asked to come privately, and commit sexual intercourse with the bride. This is to prove whom to blame for the failure to bring forth children. If she conceives shortly after the secret meeting, then it is obvious that the problem is with the groom. Therefore, he is declared sterile, '*riteba*'. If the girl doesn't conceive either for a long time after this, she was also declared, '*riteba*'. If it is the man's fault, the girl is allowed to stay and somebody takes the opportunity to give birth with her. The man in such a case is called, '*omosoinyomba*', who usually come at night, unobserved. The husband then sleeps in different hut, pretending not to know what is going on with his wife, although he knows very well. Of course, the offspring of the *omosoinyomba* and the woman are to be of the initial husband, and not of the *omosoinyomba*. However, if the woman is at fault, the man has full responsibility to divorce her.

If all goes well, and the couple has a child, after a year or so, several rites are performed, beer and food are brought from the girl's home. This occasion is called '*ogwasimoria omwana*', calling the child by name. After this normal life starts the bride is now called, '*omokungu*' and his brothers call her '*omosubati*', and she has all the rights and privileges of living in her new community as a full member.

CONCLUSION

The marriage customs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a great deal. In the past interactions between unmarried people were highly regulated. Nowadays, young people meet and socialize in various places outside the home. Sexual activities before marriage is quite common and many young girls have become single mothers in the Gusii community. It is important to note however, that marriage is still established by the payment of bride wealth, but a part from the payment of cows, money is equally given by the husband's family to that of the wife. Divorce as it was in the nineteenth and the twentieth century remains quite rare, it still requires the return of bride wealth.

Until the mid-twentieth century, boys got married soon after puberty. Since then elopements have increased in fact the people cohabit for a long period of time as dowry is paid much later. Today, at least 95 percent of all new unions in Gusii are established without payment of dowry. However, payment of dowry shows a socially approved union. Therefore, when dowry has not been paid there is no social or legal foundation to the marriage. In the past, households were based on polygamous (multiple) families form. Today the households is quite nuclear (man, wife and children). Nowadays, the household may include the husband's mother and for brief periods the wife's sisters and brothers and young siblings of the husband. Just like in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the married couple cooks and co-operates in farming with the mother for some time. After the birth of the second child married sons and their wives then maintain their own households and even resources.

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