

Widow re-marrying among Luhya's Bamasaba people

By Nandemu Barasa, February 3, 2011

Widow re-marrying among Bamasaba people comes after all traditional rituals have been performed including *Khukhala kumulindi* that we looked at in the last article.

On the 40th day after the burial of the deceased, relatives will gather at his home for a traditional ritual called *Sisinini* known to many as memorial ceremony.



Note that there were no calendars and therefore Bamasaba people used the appearance of the new moon and also counting stones that were put in guards to find out the day of *Sisinini*.

Sisinini is Luhya word for shadow. Bamasaba people believe that if

somebody dies, his or her spirit will stay at his home until the day of *Sisinini* where it is prepared to join the spirit world.

Unlike now days where anybody can attend *Sisinini* commonly known as *Kumbukumbu*, this ceremony was only a preserve of relatives of the deceased among the Bamasaba people of yester years.

Sisinini was only done if the deceased was a married man or woman and strictly who had given birth but in recent times, some people hold the ceremony even for the unmarried as many people embrace modern lifestyle.

The deceased's brother has to carter for beer to be brewed in his own home and also select a goat that is slaughtered and cooked before being taken to the home of the deceased together with the beer where

relatives are served the whole night. However, the sun should not rise when they are still at the deceased's home.



It was also on the day of *Sisinini* that the deceased's belongings, in this case the deceased's special traditional attire was taken and

kept safely, until another ceremony where the attire would be handed over to a new person identified by the elders.

After *Sisinini*, there is another ritual known as *Kamakumba*. Before the introduction of the modern day burial ceremonies and practices, the traditional Bamasaba used to throw the dead in the bushes and on the third day before *Lufu*, a section of the elders would go to the bush where they threw the body to confirm that the wild animals had feasted on it.

If so, the elders would then collect the bones and place them under a tree and then hang the skull on it before proceeding to *Lufu* but don't forget the other determinants of *Lufu* that I told you - removing *Lusuli* and one of the cooking stones.

After performing *Sisinini* elders will again go back to the tree they left the bones at and confirm if the skull is still there as well as all the bones left under the tree. That ritual is called *Kamakumba* and a cow is slaughtered to observe it, depending on the sex of the deceased.

However as time went by, pressure from the Public Health Officers in 1920s changed matters and people started burying their loved ones within their homesteads to avoid spread of contagious diseases but Bamasaba people did not let that culture of *Kamakumba* to die, they instead replaced it with *Khumala silindwa* (smearing the grave).

In this case after *Sisinini*, beer is brewed and a cow is slaughtered for the ritual. An elderly woman who has given birth and also went through all the rites of marriage will remove all the grass on the grave and then smear it with clay soil from the river.

Both *Kamakumba* and *Khumala silindwa* signify welcoming the deceased fully in the ancestral world.

We also have another ritual of *Khulotia*. Here, relatives will go to the place where one of their own died or was thrown in the wild to bring home his skull. Today people are buried in their homes, so if he died away from his home relatives will go at his place be it a hospital or town estate, pick a small stone or grass which they will put in a skin of a goat and be given to a sister who is married to carry it home.

When they reach home that skull is hang on a tree in the homestead or if it is a stone as it is in this new era, they do the same.

That is the place where the pillar from the deceased's house is put and all other traditional rituals will be done there.

Bamasaba people believe that if the ritual of *Khulotia* is not performed, the deceased's spirit will disturb whoever occupies that house be it rental or even company house.

They also believe that the late will be a great barrier to the success of the clan and community at large. That explains why there is an argument among Bamasaba people that the ritual for the late Masinde Muliro and Wamalwa Kijana should be done to welcome leadership to one of their own.

If it will be done, then a section of Bamasaba people will fly to London and go to Royal Free Hospital where the late Wamalwa passed on to bring home a stone the same way with the late Masinde Muliro who collapsed at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport and later died.

Another traditional ritual that comes after *Khumala silindwa* is *Khukhala kimikoye*. During funeral and burial ceremony cows are slaughtered and thin skins called *Chikhoba* (strap like) prepared to be given to the sisters to tie around their waists and heads.

Also note that after the woman has lost her husband, she should not shave hair until this ritual of *Khukhala kimikoye* and that long hair is called *Kumuchuru*.

During this tradition, sons of the deceased wear skins, special clothes and carry spears and shields as they take out cows for grazing but before that, they will sit and plan the whole ritual.



They will take special beer called *Kemurwe* during the planning session. They will also identify a bull to be slaughtered after grazing from the deceased's herd. That explains why it was important for one to have livestock because that bull could not come from anywhere else.

On the material day relatives go to the farthest place especially where deceased used to graze his animals. The whole ritual was done as a way of tracing the roots of the late.

The bull that had initially been identified is smeared with soil and it is called *Ye litosi*, this is the bull that is slaughtered immediately they arrive home and the thin skins together with *Kumuchuru* are

cut.

On the way from grazing, they sing traditional songs *Obilo wa Ngosia* and *Chabuyabuya*.

Obilo wa Ngosia means a gift to the vultures. In olden days there was a man called Obilo who went to graze with his fellow men but on the way back home he fell ill and died. His fellow men slaughtered a bull, put the body in the skin and left it there. The body was eaten by vultures and they saw it as a gift to the vultures. That is how that song was composed.

The deceased's house will be demolished and the pillar taken to the tree where his skull was hang awaiting other rituals. Demolishing the house shows that he is now fully gone and he will only come back through new born babies who will be named after him.

Now after all these rituals, the widow will be free to re- marry and there are steps to be followed.

Note that it was not a must for a widow to re marry but it was one's choice although it was advisable for widows to re- marry to avoid temptations. Bamasaba people argued out using the saying, *Kamafuki sokafukila ta* (*You cannot cook Ugali for blood to eat*).

Among Bamasaba people, the widow would go back to her parents or clan and then whoever is interested in her goes to her parents to inform them that he is interested in marrying the widow. He could not talk directly to the widow.

It was now the duty of the parents or clan to inform the widow of intentions of re-marrying her but if she was not interested with the man's desire to marry her, then the message would be passed to him by the woman's parents or incase they are all dead, her clansmen will pass the message.

The widow would not be forced on any man. But if she accepted the man, then he had to pay three cows before taking her as his wife.

The first cow was for cleansing and was called *Ye likokhe*, the second one was called *Ye embako* meaning the handle that had been removed from the hoe has now come back while the third cow was called *Ye khukobosia chingubo*. Note that on the second day after burial of the husband, the widow will be taken to the river to bath and that is when all her traditional dressings are striped off so this third cow signifies new dressing.

However, there are critical moments that call for other traditional rituals before a widow re-marries.

For instance, if a man dies leaving behind a young woman and there is completely no one to take her as a wife from the clan and at the same time, the clan is not in position to take back dowry that had been paid, the father in law will take her as his wife.

However, there is a ritual that has to be conducted before the father in- law proceeds to marry her. A castrated bull is slaughtered, all the intestines removed and then the father in-law sleeps there naked with his daughter in law. They cannot make love although they sleep for a moment in a compromising way with the woman being the first one to enter and immediately they come out, they become a couple.

This ritual is called *Khukona mwikhokho* and it was done in the evenings although now days with civilization, it is not common, although it is argued that some people do it at night and secretly. In the next article, we shall begin looking at marriage among Bamasaba people.

Source: WestFM