

Marachi history and culture

Part 1

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Former MP, Hon Gerald Masibayi at his home as he narrated the history of the Marachi people. *Photo: Nandemu Barasa*

Marachi people or Abamaraki as they are commonly called are a Luhya sub tribe comprising of at least twenty five clans. Some of the clans making up Marachi sub tribe are *Abafofoyo, Ababere, Abang'ayo, Ababonwe, Abarano, Abarunga, Abamwima* among others. They speak a language called *Olumaraki*. However some of these clans were not originally Marachi but they joined original Marachi and were assimilated a good example being Ababere who are believed to have been Nandi.

Marachi people like most of the Luhya sub tribes have their origin in Egypt. They migrated from Egypt and followed River Nile up to Lake Victoria where they stayed for sometime before settling at Buganda in Uganda. They stayed at Buganda for some time before setting off towards Busoga. They were stranded and had problems on how to cross River Nile so that they enter Busoga.

They camped there for a while then later cut a big tree from which they made a traditional boat that enabled them cross River Nile into Busoga. That boat according to former Member of Parliament Hon Gerald Masibayi was turned into a very sacred thing. They took it as supernatural thing and worshiped it

occasionally. On certain occasions when a child was sick they could go and pray around it. Also, a piece of wood was shaped resembling the boat and tied on a string and then hung in the child's neck and she would get well. Marachi people believe that they were the first ones to make a boat and that all other tribes used their skills to continue making boats so that they cross rivers, lakes and even oceans.

In Busoga, Marachi people created a very big home which they named *Ebulukala*. From Busoga they moved to and settled at what is now the boundary of Samia people and Luo. They also stayed along Lake Victoria and it is at that time that they encountered the Luo people whom they did not and could not even know where they came from. Luo people nicknamed Marachi people *Japoyo* meaning let us thank them for making a boat for us.

Later, Abamaraki moved and crossed River Nzoia then settled at Segga. They called that place *Mareba*. The name *Mareba* according to Retired senior Chief Mr Joseph Dipondo meant they had so many questions because they could not understand the place well. It was here at *Mareba* that Ababere clan joined the group. Note that Ababere joined the group at night and started eating their sorghum. That explains why they were named Ababere which is a coiled name for sorghum in Marachi language. *Mareba* who was their leader offered them a bull which they slaughtered but could not share it out so Mareba stepped in and shared that meat to them.

Luos followed them making them to move up to Butaliko on the boundary of Marachi and Indangalasia where they settled for a very short time before moving to the outskirts of Butula. They later moved to Siniangokho, Mulambo, Elukongo and Mauko. In most of the migrations, Marachi people were looking for better places in terms of fertile lands and pasture for their animals.

Later, one of their sisters who had gotten married to Bakhayo people was escorted at night by her husband to come and tell Marachi people that they were going to be attacked by Bakhayo and Iteso. The attack was targeting mostly the households of Dipondo but to their surprise they found Dipondo had already left the place after getting information from other sources. Dipondo had run away leaving behind his livestock and other valuables.

Dipondo's sister later went up to Muyoti's home at Lukongo by then and informed him about the planned attack. She also told him how Dipondo had fled leaving behind everything. Muyoti then sent a message to his son Makokha to come and assist in rescuing Dipondo's wealth which he did. They all moved to Butaliko and when Bakhayo and Iteso came, they could not get anything. They stayed there until colonialists came and subdivided the place.

Forefathers of Marachi people include Nandako who gave birth to Ngusa who gave birth to Sindu the father to Marachi who gave birth to Mango the father to Mareba who gave birth to Rapang'o 1st father to

Rapang`o 2nd who gave birth to Omoto the father to Kwena who gave birth to Musundi the father of Dipondo, Maero, Muyoti, Ndubi, Maili, Oduya the father to Ongoma.



Rtd Chief Joseph Dipondo (L) and Mzee Gregory Ayieko. [Photo/Robert Makokha/WestFm]

Religion

Abamaraki believed in the existence of a supernatural being which they called *Were Khakaba*. They believed his home was in the East although he moved all over. That one explains why Marachi people prayed facing east early in the morning at a special place in the middle of the compound and pray. That sacred place was called *Omwari* and three stones were placed at the place. They would first face east and spit saliva on the roof of the house and then proceed to offer their prayers at the *Omwari*. Their prayers included thanking god for the good care he had accorded to them then ask him to continue taking them through.

They also had special prayers for instance if they were faced with famine, death, outbreak of deadly diseases, drought among other calamities beyond human capability of dealing with them.

They would assemble at *Omwari* but in this case for the whole clan and offer prayers from there. Prayers were led by special people called *Abachesi* (the wise). At that prayer ceremony, a white goat of either sex is slaughtered to appease the gods. Those who attend the exercise will all eat a piece of that meat and then when they go back home this will be different. If they were experiencing famine, drought or outbreak of a deadly disease, it will stop instantly. Mzee Gregory Ayieko notes that Marachi people used a white goat because white colour signifies peace.

Circumcision

Abamaraki did not initially practice circumcision until early 1960s when they adapted it from Bamasaaba (Bukusu) people. Instead Marachi people used to remove six teeth on their lower side as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. The removal of the teeth was done among boys and girls.

Later they embraced circumcision from Bamasaaba and it was carried out on boys alone. Boys could be circumcised at the age of fifteen years. The whole exercise resembles the one followed by Bamasaaba where boys would first tell their mothers about their intention to be initiated. The mother would later inform the father but to confirm the information, the father would call the boy to tease him. He will take and throw down the boy's jingles and ask him to take them if indeed he is ready for the cut. If he took them, the father would then be convinced that the boy is ready and therefore let him go ahead to inform the relatives to come and witness the initiation ceremony.

The boy will move around playing jingles and receive presents in form of money, goats, sheep, cows, maize, beans, sorghum, millet and other material items.



A Bukusu elder hanging pieces of raw meat around initiates as preparation for circumcision.
[Photo/File/WestFm]

On the eve of the initiation day, the boy would dance the whole night as relatives abuse and tease him in readiness for the cut. He would be taken to the river very early in the morning and be smeared with soil which will stick to his body tightly. The soil makes the boy's body numb so that he cannot feel more pain

when being initiated and also so that he cannot over bleed. He would be initiated and be kept in a house constructed away from the homestead.

In most cases boys could be circumcised while in groups and kept under one roof where young boys would take their food for them. They would stay there up to the time they heal completely when a big ceremony was organized to receive them home officially. They would be advised to understand that they have moved from childhood to adulthood and therefore carry on their life as mature people. They would move into their new houses and start a new life as adults.

Mzee Masibayi says they decided to embrace circumcision also as a form of cleanliness because they felt uncircumcised people were very untidy. We should note that unlike Bamasaaba people who had age groups, Marachi people did not embrace the idea of having age groups.

Marriage

Wealth determined the age at which one would move into a marriage. Those who were wealthy moved into marriages at an early stage compared to the poor.

However the right stage for a boy to marry was between 25 to 30 years while girls were 18 years and above. Before girls were allowed to get married they would be tattooed on their faces and given bangles to wear on their hands and legs.

Normally when a boy reached the age of marriage, he would walk around and if he spots a girl whom he would like to marry they will talk and then agree to each inform their respective parents. The boy's father will start to investigate the girl's family the same way the girl's father will do before any talk between them. If the boy's father is satisfied with the girl's family that is if it is a good family he will go ahead and visit the girl's home to seek her hand into marriage but if not, he will stop the boy and advise him to look for another girl. Now because they would have investigated both sides the girl's father if satisfied with the boy's family will confirm and then a day of paying dowry is set. If the girl's parents are not for the marriage they would object it and then everything ends there. Dowry among Marachi people was not fixed, you could pay the much you could afford paid in form of cows and one or two goats for the girl's uncles.

After that the boy and the girl would start meeting secretly before they officially get married. It is important to note that some families after you had paid dowry they would again hold on the girl until a raid is organized by the boys to get the girl by force. The girl's family would keep her and demand for an additional gift such as a goat, /esos among others.

If the girl's parents don't hold on her, a day would be set for the girl to leave their home and get married officially. She would be escorted by her sisters up to the boy's house in the evening. They would start their marriage life and those girls having escorted the girl to be married will stay there for a while before returning.

The girl would not be allowed to carry anything not even her clothes. Clothes were always brought by the girl's grandmother who also confirmed from the girl if indeed she got married to a normal man. If the girl was still a virgin the grandmother would know on the day she brings the clothes and she will take sheets that were first used by the couple and go with them as a gift. Women who got married while still virgins, were highly respected besides being held with high esteem seen as good examples and advisors.

The new couple will not begin cooking their own food until after two to three years when a ceremony would be organized for them to start cooking their own food. By this time, they would have harvested their own crops from a piece of land showed to them by the boy's father.

A big ceremony would be organized for the couple to start eating from their own house. A cow was always slaughtered and people invited for a great feast with beer also served. Note that the boy's father cannot eat that food until another ceremony was organized to welcome him officially to the boy's house. In a ceremony to welcome the boy's father, only a goat was slaughtered and traditional food such as ugali made from millet flour were served not forgetting traditional beer.

Source: Westfm