

## Marachi Customs: PART II

### Child birth, death, dressing

By Nandemu Barasa Omutolometi, July 28 2011



Former MP Mr. Gerald Masibayi.

Wealth comes in different forms and in some African communities, the size of family one had, was one of the basis used to describe how wealthy one was.

This is the same with the Marachi people of Western Kenya's Luhya, who valued their children so much as the number of children a Marachi had, the wealthier he was viewed. As a result of this belief, polygamy was embraced.

The Marachi did not discriminate against any child and valued both the boy and girl child equally as they believed that all children were a gift from God.

An expectant mother was regarded as a delicate person and was accorded minimal duties but in most cases, they were not given any work.

And just like the Iteso, expectant women among Abamaraki were not allowed to eat chicken as well as eggs. According to retired chief Mr. Dipondo, they believed if an expectant mother ate eggs or chicken, it would make the child stupid.

On the other hand Mzee Masibayi who is now 87 says Abamaraki believed if a woman ate chicken and eggs when she was expectant, she would eat all the chicken and eggs from the homestead immediately she gives birth.

Unlike in some communities where twins were seen as a curse, they were seen as a blessing to the Marachi.

After giving birth, there were norms that were to be followed keenly for instance, a mother would take four days to expose her new born in case it was a boy and she took three days in the case of a girl child.

Child naming was one of the biggest ceremonies held by the Marachi people and a child was given a name after a rigorous ritual where villagers would gather round the house while the child's grandfather or uncle, would throw a cock on the roof of the house then calls out all the names on a list prepared from the clan.

When the cock crows four times while still on the roof when a certain name is called out, the child is given that name but if the cock flies down from the roof without crowing four times, it will be thrown back and the process started all over again until it does so and the right name is found.

However, in as much as the Abamaraki valued their children, those born from incest were not allowed to be part of the family. Such children could be taken to a farthest place and dumped there. The Abamaraki did not kill them but just abandoned them there and did not care whether the child was rescued by a Good Samaritan or devoured by wild animals as all they wanted was not to see them back to the community.

## **Death**

Like every tribe Abamaraki feared death so much although they viewed it as a punishment after their forefathers went against *Were Khakaba* (God).

Message that one had died was relayed through drum beating and burial arrangements conducted within 24 hours after death.

The dead were buried in cow skins with men being buried at the right hand side of the main door to the house while a woman was buried on the left hand side.

However, in cases where a child died before any other person in the family, the body of the minor would be buried at the back of the house.

A person who was suffering from epilepsy was buried outside the compound and their body moved from the house with his legs first as elders disown him or her.

On the other hand if one died without giving birth, he or she would be buried by elders who were beyond the age of siring children. A temporary door was made at the back of the house where the body of the deceased would be taken out by the old men who would also bury it as the Abamaraki believed if such a person was buried by men still siring children, they would be affected and would never make a woman pregnant.

Those who died as a result of tragedies such as being hit by lightning or accidents would be buried at night the same day they died. Like many tribes, Marachi people did not have any respect for those people who had committed suicide and as a result they were buried at night and a sheep was slaughtered for those who attended the burial for cleansing. That sheep according to Mzee Masibayi is meant to keep away the deceased so that he or she does not haunt the living.

In other incidences where the bodies of those who had passed away were not traced or found, the Abamaraki buried a banana stem and all the respect accorded to a human being would be observed.

On the fourth day after burial for men and third day for women, all the relatives who had come for funeral would go to the river to bath to signify a new beginning but before that shaving is done around the grave.

Another interesting practice was that after one died all the cattle would be taken out of the compound and only driven back on the fourth or third day depending on the sex of the deceased to mourn.

At the river men bathed on the different sides with women and afterwards go back home and mourn for the last time. They will mourn for some hours and then be served with food after holding a special meeting where everything concerning the death is discussed. They discussed about the deceased debts and the person to inherit the widow(s) is chosen.

Widow re marrying among Marachi people was allowed but unlike other tribes, in Marachi if a man left behind at least two wives, the first wife was the one to decide who to inherit her co wives because the man she chooses was to take over all the widows. For the first wife to choose the man to be their new husband it would be done in the open where men gathered at one place and after preparing food, she would take it direct to the feet of the man she has chosen. There would be no objection and all the other widows respected the man chosen. If they moved into any other relationship, it would be termed as adultery by the clan.

### **Dressing among Marachi people**

Like many tribes who took a very long time before they started wearing clothes, Marachi people did not have clothes but they used skins. Women had special skins (skin cloaks), *Libola* that was to cover their bottoms and *Oluboya* that covered their front. Besides, women also wore bangles and were tattooed. In any house women had calabash, brewing pots, guards and cooking pots.

Men had a special skin called *Siabalila* made from a goat skin. Unlike women, men used to shift the skin to cover their groin and bottoms depending on which side a person met others on a path. They also had spears, arrows and bows, shield and hoes among others.

*Lusiola* tree was really valued just like other communities valued. *Lusiola* was very sacred and as such Marachi people used it when constructing houses.



A potato and rice plantation in Marachi land.

### **War and agriculture**

Marachi people fought with Bamasaba after they attacked them to raid their livestock. According to Mzee Masibayi, Bamasaba attacked Abamaraki after the Maasai raided them and ran away with their cattle. They therefore went to Marachi land to compensate for what they had lost to the Maasai.

Marachi people were growing cassava, *Simsim*, groundnuts, millet, sorghum, traditional vegetables. They also kept cattle, goats, sheep, and chicken.

Currently Marachi people grow sugarcane, bananas, maize, beans, coffee and rice among others and they keep cattle, goats, sheep, and chicken among others.

Some of the renowned people among the Marachi include great farmers such as Casperi Ohande, Muyala, Munyala Chetswe, Martin Ober and Nechesa Neema. Others include Gerald Masibayi, who is a former Member of Parliament of Marachi East Constituency from 1969 to 1974 who was also detained by colonialists, Henry Mukabi, Gabriel Mukele who was a commissioner at the disbanded Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) among a series of many others both living and departed according to Mr. Masibayi.

Marachi people are now found in Butula Constituency represented by Hon. Alfred Odhiambo. The constituency has previously been represented in parliament by Hon Francis Masakhalia, Prof Christine Mango.

They are in Butula district in Busia County.

Source: Westfm