

Origins and customs of Abanyole

By Nandemu Barasa Omutolometi, June 14 2011

Abanyore is a one of the sub tribes that make up the larger Luhya Community of Western Kenya and its descendants are believed to have migrated from Egypt and followed River Nile, went up to Khartoum before entering Uganda.

Abanyore are also called Banyore and speak Lunyore/Kinyore. In Uganda they settled at a place called Kiliatongo before splitting where a section of them moved towards Kenya leaving behind another group which became Abanyoro who are still in Uganda.

Abanyore argue that they are the ones who brought the name *Mulembe* which is commonly used among the Luhya community to mean peace. That they used that name to mean putting things in the open and discussing them in an open place called *Luyaa*.

According to Mzee Camelous Ottawa, it is the Abanyore who gave birth to Waganda people in Uganda. When they arrived in Kenya, Abanyore first settled at a place called Ebulonga before giving birth to many other children who formed several clans under Abanyore including Amutete, Abasiratsi, Abasakami, Abasiekwe among many more.

Abanyore people stayed in caves, under trees and walked naked. They ate birds, honey and fruits from the wild. Although they believed in their own god, Abanyore people claim that they knew God earlier than any other Luhya sub tribes and even claim because of that, the name Abanyore was written in the first bible something that they cannot vividly show. A section of Abanyore people claim that they were created first before God created any other Luhya Sub tribes.

They argue that that explains why Abanyore ladies are more beautiful among the Luhya although as the saying goes beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. Mzee Ottawa accepts that the notion that Abanyore people were created first among the Luhya has been there, but no one can prove that.



Lusiola tree that was highly regarded by the Banyore people as sacred where prayers were held as well as other ceremonies.

Religion

Abanyore people believed and still believe in a most powerful god, called *Were*. They worshiped facing East when the sun was rising. Unlike other sub tribes who would just face the sun or Mount Elgon and pray, Abanyore people offered their prayers under a tree they considered very sacred called *Olusiola* and prayers were led by the father of the home. They would ask God for blessings, food and protection from any sufferings. It is also under the *Lusiola* tree where special prayers were offered for instance if they faced drought, famine or any outbreak of diseases.

These prayers were led by a special elder chosen from other elders and he had to be the most disciplined, straight forward, respected and the one who followed strictly the customs of the community. *Olusiola* was planted in an open area directly to the door of the main house.

It was surrounded three stones, one for the father another one for the mother and the remaining for the children. This place was also used to curse people who had gone against ethics and rules of the tribe and it was done after serious consultations. In situations like prolonged drought seasons, the whole clan would gather in the morning and a sheep slaughtered.

A section of that mutton would be cut into pieces representing all the clans of Abanyore and then thrown as the elder calls the name of the clans. The special elder for prayers will then lead the gathering into prayers and thereafter the remaining mutton is roasted and eaten. Mutton is roasted to ensure that smoke will spread blessing to the whole tribe. That very day a heavy downpour would be experienced if the prayers were accepted.

Marriage

Among Abanyore people, a girl was ripe for marriage after attaining the age of 25 to 30 years while for the boy, it was at the age of 35 to 40 years. But currently, girls and boys move into marriages just after attaining 18 years. Earlier, when a boy attained the age of marriage, he will tell his mother that he wants to build his own house.

That one would mean the physical house and starting life with a companion that is a wife. He would even start cutting trees for the construction. The mother would then inform the father who would also ask the boy if he really means what he told the mother. If the boy insists then the father will assist him in preparing the logs and facilitate construction of his house. Boys could not choose wives on their own because they were chosen by their parents.

The boy's parents would then scrutinize the girl they had identified to be their daughter in law. They would investigate if the girl's clan and family was well mannered and with all the virtues enviable. They would also consider hereditary diseases in the girl's clan especially epilepsy and sickle cell anaemia among others. The scrutiny also involved getting to know if the family was involved in witchcraft or had night runners. If the girl came from the family with any short comings such as the ones we have mentioned then she would not be considered.

If the boy's parents considered the girl they would visit the girl's parents for a discussion on the intention of marriage between their children. It was so funny that after the discussion, the next visit, the boy's father will accompany his son to the girl's place to talk to the girl in a meeting that is strictly among three people that is the boy's father, his son and the daughter in law to be. The girl's parents will keep off the meeting and only wait for the outcome. In most cases, the girl would not turn down the offer for marriage because that one would also mean she has disobeyed her parents.

Remember that the meeting of the three can only go on after the girl's parents have accepted the request for marriage during the first meeting with the boy's parents. After the meeting, plans for marriage would then kick off. Dowry among Abanyore people was paid before the couple got married officially. Dowry was only two birds called *chisindu* but as time went by, they started paying goats before they turned to cattle which are still a practice to date.

The boy would also provide two rings and a bangle, one ring was for the mother in law then another one for the girl while a bangle was for the girl. After all the plans were ready and dowry paid, the girl would be escorted to the boy's place by women and then a very huge ceremony held by the father in law where people ate, drunk and danced the whole day and night. The boy will officially be joined as a husband and wife but remember that they will only be staying in their own house but they cannot cook their own food.

Although they will be eating from their parents' house they are restricted from entering all the rooms in the house other than the sitting room. Even when the girl visited her mother back home she would not be allowed to enter her parents' bedroom or milk cows back home. That was a taboo and everybody had to follow it strictly.



Mzee Ottawa's wife, displaying the different types of pots used for different purposes among the Banyore people.

As the couple starts living together, the girl will still be watched over. The mother in law will sent her to fetch water in a pot and if by any circumstance she breaks the pot on her way, then she would be sent home to bring chicken as a fine. If she breaks it again, it would break the marriage because it would be taken that she was not ready for marriage.

Permission for them to start cooking their own food came from the boy's mother. When permission is granted, the girl's mother will bring millet, two traditional pots one for preparing Ugali called *Yafuka* and another for cooking vegetables called *Yamunyu* not forgetting the cooking stick *Mwikho* and another pot for fetching water.

The parents would not eat from their children's house until a special ceremony was done to welcome them officially.

Birth and naming

Children were considered as fruits of marriage and any birth was accompanied by celebrations and presents. And before that an expectant woman would not be allowed to do heavy duties and was not allowed to eat certain parts of meat from a cow such as ribs.

If a woman gave birth to a boy child, a spear was put outside the house on the right hand but when the child was a girl, they would place the pot supporter, *Engaraa* (made from banana leaves) on the left hand of the house. Because of that when people came to visit the home they would just know the sex of the child before entering the house. They would bring food especially bananas, millet flour and chicken among others.

Unlike some other tribes who view twins as a curse, Abanyore people view twins as blessings from God and therefore they were really valued.

When it came to naming the child, it would take one week before a name was given to the child. This would also give the traditional preacher who was tasked to grace the occasion time to pray for the

ceremony. A sheep was slaughtered on this occasion and roasted for people. Abanyore people liked roasting the mutton arguing that boiling would not contribute to blessings; they say smoke from roasted meat was full of blessings and they would be spread to the whole clan.

The name given to the child came from deceased old people from the clan. On the material day, people would gather around the *Lusiola* tree that I told you earlier on. After prayers they would move near the house with mother of the baby holding it in her hands. Water is poured to the house and as it comes down it goes direct to the baby's head and chest as the elder calls the name chosen loudly for the gathering to hear and officially offer the child to gods to take care of.

Remember that not all the dead people were named after but only those who were highly revered. Also those ones who died from tragedies and suicide were not remembered by the clan through renaming.

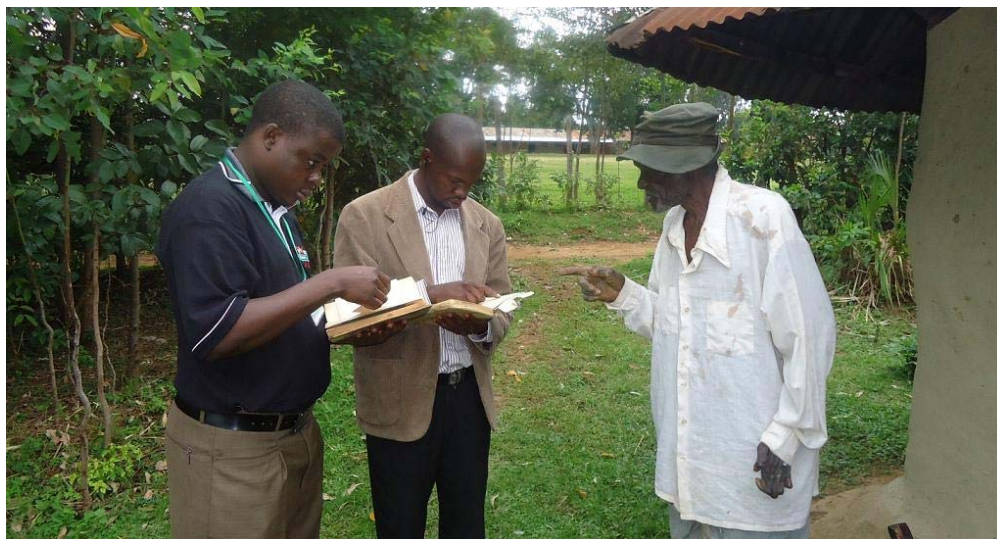
If the clan doubted the child to be their own blood, they performed a rite to confirm if indeed the child belongs to them or not but that one would take place later after like two months.

What happens is that one of the elders will cook bananas which are not mature enough and after they are ready, he will take a piece and mash it ready to give the baby. He will ask the baby although it does not respond, to eat the mashed banana if indeed it was their blood. If the child eats it, he will not finish that day before he dies if he was not their blood but if he was the clan's blood he will not die.

Remember this was done in a very private way that the mother of the child could not know and it was used to discourage unfaithfulness.

On the other hand if people committed incest and gave birth to a child, that child would not survive for long as a result of the ritual that is performed. A chicken's beak is cut and tied on a string and then those who gave birth to the child are smeared with a mixture of millet flour and herbs as they disown the act. They will stay with the beak in the neck plus the flour as smeared on them until they are set free the following day. They will be advised and warned fully and also fined heavily.

It was taken as unnatural for a woman to miscarry. Abanyore people believed in certain reasons that would lead to a miscarriage. A woman making love with a different man other than the one who was responsible for the pregnancy, ate food not recommended for expectant women, drinking stagnant water, sickness, too much work and beating were among the reasons that led to miscarriage.



Mzee Ottawa takes the author of this story Nandemu Barasa Omutolometi (L) and Moses Misoga one of West Fm's marketing team through the Bible he claims was the first to mention the Abanyore before any other Luhya tribe.

Circumcision

In those days, Abanyore people did not practice circumcision until they interacted with the Idakho and Maragoli. On their part Idakho and Maragoli are said to have aped circumcision from the Nandi whom they interacted with.

Among Abanyore boys were circumcised at the age of 15 and they would assemble in a homestead of one of the elders who had integrity and followed clan rules and ethics. They would be initiated and stay in that homestead but their parents used to take them food until healing. The elders would on several occasions go there to advise them and also treating them.

Because they did not have modern health facilities, they were treated using leaves from a traditional tree called *Engai* an equivalent to *Enguu* among the Bukusu and the Kabras. According to Mzee Ottawa, the herb was good for treating the initiates but adds that it was very painful especially when the person who went to pick those leaves whistled near the plant before picking the leaves. He says if one made noise near the tree before picking, the initiates would have it rough that day when it is applied on them.

After they have recovered, a ceremony would be prepared where they would gather to offer advice to the initiates and thereafter every family leaves with its initiate back home. At home the father would slaughter, a goat to welcome his son and late in the evening, the boy goes to his house, *Etitsi* built by his father. The boy will now be restricted from entering his parents' bedroom and also staying up to too late in his father's house.



A brown sheep. The Banyore people preferred to slaughter and roast brown sheep among other colored sheep while conducting ceremonies.

Death

Death was feared among Abanyore people. Initially dead people were just thrown in the wild to be eaten by the wild animals but as life changed and pressure mounted by health policies to curb infectious disease they started burying their dead. When a person passed on, he or she would be buried the same day. As time went by and people started getting civilized, the burial day changed and Abanyore people explain the change using a bizarre incident.

There was a man who had died but when they went to bury him, he coughed and made everybody run for their lives. The man had come back to life and indeed he lived but died later. That incident made elders to converge and changed the burial period making it one day after.

However, another incident occurred when they were going to bury another person who had passed on a day after his death but he raised his hand when they were just about to feel the grave with soil. He came out alive and the elders again met and changed burial to two days after death. That is the duration that has remained up to now. A point to note is that the Banyore did not bury their dead in a coffin. When a person committed suicide, he or she was buried at night away from home and never accorded any respect.

The person who had not given birth and the mad were buried in the homestead but not direct to the house. They were not valued in the clan. If a woman miscarried, the foetus was buried outside the homestead and no ceremony was done. A sheep was slaughtered and used to disown such incidents. The colour of the sheep depended on advice from the traditional preacher. In most cases, sheep mostly used were black, white or brown in colour.

On the second day after burial, family members will shave around the grave to signify new beginning. After at least three weeks, the widow will wear her husband's shirt or coat and move around the whole clan collecting presents from the people. She will also carry her husband's photograph. To Abanyore people, doing so signified that the widow is now free to eat with people after losing her husband. This one also draws attention to men who have any interest of inheriting the wife to do so because she would have finished mourning her husband. A man was not allowed to inherit any woman before she showed herself out because Abanyore people say the deceased will appear to them every time and if by any chance they gave birth to a child he or she will die mysteriously.

Abanyore people had lived to appreciate their culture only that on the onset of civilization, it is draining away as many people start to embrace new culture especially the Western culture. They occasionally fought with Nandi people over grazing fields but Nandi could not displace them. Currently Abanyore people practice farming despite the challenges of having small pieces of land.

They plant maize, beans, bananas among others and they occupy Emuhaya Constituency in Vihiga County initially represented in parliament by House Speaker Kenneth Marende but currently represented by Hon Wilbur Ottichilo.

Source: Westfm