

By Eunice Rukundo

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Many Ugandans are unaware that the **Bagwere** who occupy the district of Pallisa in eastern Uganda are a tribe from Bantu ethnic group of people. The Bagwere are mainly cultivators, their popular crops include rice, soy beans, sorghum and ground nuts, as well as cassava and millet (which also double as their staple foods). "We also rear cows and goats though on a small scale," explains Amina Namugosa, a Mugwere. However, many people from other parts of Uganda have been guilty of mistaking the Bagwere to belong to one of the sub-ethnic groups among the Basoga or even closely linking the Bagwere to the Itesots, all originally found in Eastern Uganda. Not even Asuman Baluku, who is married to a *Mugwere* woman, has any clear distinction of who they are. "They must be related to the Japs (Japhadola) or Badama," he says.

This confusion could be a result of their dialect, **Lugwere**. It has a close resemblance to **Lusoga** and **Luganda**. Both these languages are spoken by neighboring tribes to the *Bagwere*. *Lugwere* is in some ways similar to some languages in western Uganda. For example, 'musaiza (man) in Lugwere is 'mushiiza in some dialects spoken in western Uganda. The *Luruuli* spoken by *Baruuli* in Central Uganda is also similar in some ways to *Lugwere*.

Socially, the Bagwere are organized into clans based on totems and a groups area of residence in Pallisa. "The *Abalaka*, for instance, reside in an area called Macholi and have sheep as their totem," explains Namugosa. There are also the *Banyekelo* of the Sapiri area, and the *Obusikwe* of the mushroom totem residing mostly in Budaka, among others. Namugosa is of the *Balankwanga* clan whose totem is the elephant. Besides giving you a clue to where a Mugwere hails from, their names, like those of most Bantu tribes in Uganda, can also guide you in determining which clan they belong to. It is very important, especially for a Mugwere intending to marry a fellow Mugwere, to be informed about these clans since marriages between members of the same clan are prohibited.

Marriage traditions of the Bagwere.

There are a number of marriage traditions exclusive to this tribe. The issue of bride price, is for instance, handled differently from most other African tribes. Although bride price is important even among the **Bagwere**, it is not a must to pay it upfront like is the case among most of Ugandas tribes. "As long as the boy can afford to offer the girls parents assistance, especially financial, whenever they need it, a young Bagwere couple is usually given the chance to develop their home first and pay the agreed bride price later," Namugosa explains.

For his wife, Asuman paid five cows, five goats, five cocks and some cash, which as far as he understood was a 'fine. According to Namugosa, however, traditionally bride price consists of 2 cows, 2 goats and a substantial amount of cash. "The cash is supposed to pay for a replacement of the labour lost when the girl moves to another family. Today, it also pays for the investment the parents have made in their daughter, usually in the form of education." This explains Asumans "fine".

Among the Bagwere, young couples are fully involved in the process of

finding their spouse, a task usually left to the boys parents in most other African traditions. Sometimes among the Bagwere, however, there are a few special cases where two fathers agree that their children marry to cement the friendship existing between the two families. "Even then, the children have to agree to marry when they grow up," explains Namugosa. "Every boy identifies a girl they want to marry and informs her of his intentions before they can speak to her parents."

Namugosa says that up to the stage when the parents negotiate the bride price, the boy undertakes all the initial preparations (like the first visit to the girls family, usually alone or with a few male friends of his own age). After the girl has agreed to marry the boy, he tells his parents about it so that they can assist him put together some requirements for when he introduces himself to the parents of his intended bride. "For that first introduction ceremony, I took things like salt, sugar, saucepans, etc" admits Baluku.



A Mugwere lady attends to her harvest.
Source: wycliffe.org.uk

With the first introduction ceremony out of the way, the boys family now sends an invitation to the girls parents to attend the bride price negotiations. It is with this invitation that the money for paying for the girl is sent. It is important to note here again that the Bagwere differ from most Ugandan tribes in that it is the girls parents who visit the boys family to conduct the bride price negotiations. Among the majority of Ugandan tribes (including the **Baganda**, **Banyoro**, **Acholi**, Japadhola, **Banyankole** among others), bride price negotiations are held at the girls home.

During the bride price negotiations (which may involve some haggling), the parents from both sides agree on the bride price and the day it shall be paid. When the bride price is paid, the marriage is as good as sealed. Weddings parties among the **Bagwere**, even to this day are considered a luxury that only the financially able engage in. "When the boy pays the bride price, he also states on what day he wants his wife to come home permanently." Namugosa says. "It is only when the young couple feels like they have the means to throw a wedding party that they indulge in this practice. Other wise, what matters most is agreeing on the bride price," Namugosa says.

Elopement among the Bagwere.

There have been cases where a girl disappears from her family, only for her parents to receive a message from another family saying the daughter is with living their son and inviting them for bride price negotiations. In this case, a fine must be paid by the boy for 'stealing their daughter. This was in many cases, an avenue for a poor boy to express his commitment to his

choice of a girl for marriage. "This usually happens when the boy comes from a very poor family and he suspects that his chosen wife-to-bes parents will not accept him readily. Also, if the girl is not so committed to the boy to the level of defying her parents, her father may simply fetch her from the boys family instead of coming for bride price negotiations," says Namugosa.

In that case, the boy has to try his luck elsewhere.

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