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## **THE MARRIAGE RITES PRACTICED BY THE AMERU PEOPLE IN KENYA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Traditional marriage rites are crucial in many African communities, as they many roles among them being to ensure a stable marriage. The Ameru people in Kenya is a community that inhabit the entire Meru County in Kenya and have many traditional cultural activities that they observe from birth to death. This study explored the traditional marriage rites practiced by the Ameru people in Meru County, Kenya. The ethnography research design was used to implement the study, which was conducted in selected Catholic Church parishes in Meru County, Kenya. The study targeted all residents 1,145,114 inhabitants of Meru County. 20 Catholic parishes from one ward within the research area were selected by cluster sampling and used to reach the respondents. Data was collected using Focus Group Interview Guides and analyzed by thematic analysis. Results indicated that four marriage rites were in practice among the sampled respondents thus; pre-marriage preparation, courtship, dowry payment and traditional wedding ceremonies.

**Keywords:** African Traditional Marriage Rites, Ameru People

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### **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

In many African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, Zimbabwe and Angola, most cultures therein

conduct a number of mandatory rites from ones point of birth to the point of death. The rites include but not limited to child birth, initiation, marriage, exorcism, burial among others (Lucracia, 2024). In Kenya, there was a continuing debate on whether to teach family life and family life education in schools (Wanyonyi, 2014). Proponents of family life and family life education argue that young people do not receive the right education to help them manage their sexual desires according to societal norms. According to Guttmacher Institute (2017), comprehensive family life and family life education are needed in Kenya to ensure healthy sexual and reproductive lives. Opponents to the introduction of family life education in schools argued that family life was a moral issue that should be handled by religion and family (Kavivya, 2003). The proponents and opponents of teaching family life and family life education were all focusing on the adolescent lives but did not consider the post-adolescent lives, especially as it was done in the Meru traditional society before the advent of colonialism and Christianity.

Family life Knowledge among the Meru was aimed at establishing a satisfactory relationship between spouses. This knowledge was emphasized during the initiation period. Older women taught girls, and boys were taught by older men while in seclusion. There was set content, method of delivery, and an evaluation. However, in 1953 there was a ban on female circumcision and the Gaaru system (a system where young men were put in seclusion and taught the position of a man in the family and society and how to relate with a wife) that led to the disintegration of the delivery of C. The school system did not offer an equivalent replacement of the family life education; hence it is not clear the sources from which and the age at which married couples in Meru County got family life knowledge and how they influenced their marital satisfaction. Simultaneous with the change in family life education was a decline in marital satisfaction as manifested by an increase in marital violence, an upsurge in cases relating to custody and maintenance of children, and an increase in divorce cases (Meru County Law, 2016).

The objective of the study was to explore the traditional marriage rites practices by the Ameru people currently. The research question that guided this study was “what are the marriage rites currently being practiced by the Ameru people?”

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Marriage is one of the four rites of passage observed by the Ameru people. Other rites include birth and child naming, initiation, death, and funeral rituals. The main purpose of marriage is to beget offspring and create a family, which is the basic unit of all political and social organizations (Culture, 2017). According to Mbiti (1969), marriage is a vital ritual of existence that enables a family and the entire community to interact and create a lasting history of progeny. This is the reason why each member belongs to and is identified within the family unit in a given community (Ayisi, 1997). Marital stability refers to a firm, steady well balanced and healthy marital relationship between couples. For a marriage to be stable, each member ensures that he/she is responsible in the relationship. Echebe (2010), observed that marital stability lead to awell-balanced and well-adjusted family which in turn, lead to well-adjusted progressive society.

In the Meru community, the marriage process unfolded in three distinct steps: courtship, dowry, and finally, the wedding ceremony. Prior to the coming of European missionaries, the Ameru traditional marriage started with courtship, followed by the settlement of bridewealth and the actual day of fetching the bride (Mbijiwe, 2015). Courtship was an important foundation for any Meru marriage. It was at this stage that mutual attraction between two people was established. Initiated boys and girls grew up and knew each other well as they congregated during public village dances or at earlier wedding occasions. At this moment, a boy could identify and court a girl for marriage (Paukwa, 2020). Further encounters were facilitated to enable a bride and the groom to interrogate each other's family background which made them understand each other before the commencement of engagement (Ezenweke, 2016).

Courtship was only acceptable for only those who had undergone circumcision. In most cases, the initiated boy began by expressing interest in a mature girl and started the dating process (Mbijiwe, 2015). A boy never approached a girl without first inquiring about her to find out whether she was a good match for him. He investigated from close neighbors the bride's age, name of the father, and the clan from which she belonged. This investigation was perhaps the most important because it determined if the engagements would continue. The peers could recommend, warn, discourage or encourage the relationship.

If the two liked each other, they informed their parents about their proposed marriage plans. Both parents further cross-examined their family character traits, respectively. Parents could also deliberately arrange for their two children to meet eliciting their preferences. Sometimes the boy's old female relatives could influence the boy without his awareness of the girl whom his parents preferred for marriage. Both parents could also mutually consent to their children's marriage when they were of age. They examined the character and other important details, and if they found them to be worthy, they encouraged their son or daughter to meet the prospective marriage partner and the engagement process was initiated. Such an encounter was arranged so as to discourage any displeasing engagement that either a boy or girl could have started. The parents did this in a very tactful and peaceful way. This was meant to cement family friendships among the involved families. But, if the children objected, such an engagement could be terminated.

In certain cases, a boy and a girl could fall in love and their parents could oppose the engagement because the boy or girl hailed from a poor or unmatchable clan and family. The bride's wealth could then be agreed upon and disbursed to the girl's parents to solemnize the marriage. The relationship was terminated if it was established during courtship that the boy and girl were closely related by blood or belonged to the same clan. The courtship process was very important to Ameru boys and girls because it enabled partners to learn and know each other well before they could settle for marriage. After establishing the preliminary background information of both families and acknowledging that there was no close relationship that could stop the marital arrangements, the groom officially planned to visit the bride's home (Nyaga, 1997). He was accompanied by another boy who belonged to his age set at least thrice or more times to give him more courage in dealing with his prospective in-laws. The groom made guttural sounds as he approached his suitor's home to alert the occupants, especially the would-be mother-in-law of his arrival. He then

presented a bunch of khat miraa to book his girlfriend from other marriages' gwikia uthoni', who now handed it over to her father. The father acknowledged the offer and chewed openly as a form of acceptance. He was further presented with a he-goat 'nthenge ya miraa'. The groom then returned to his home where his mother prepared some gruel and arranged to visit the bride's family on an appointed day carrying in a big gourd. The bride's mother reciprocated and filled the same gourd with fresh gruel that was taken back to the groom's family. This was followed by yet another special appointment by a group of women from both sides carrying several gourds of gruel (Paukwa, 2020). These visits were meant to acquaint the in-laws. Finally, women from the bride's clan and village prepared a great celebration meal. It was attended by women from the groom's village who carried some bags of finger millet, sorghum, millet, black beans, or cowpeas. These gifts were emptied in big baskets' nkaranga' to the prospective in-laws.

After it was agreeable to both sides that marriage could be sanctioned, the father and selected elders went to the bride's home to negotiate bride wealth payment for the prospective daughter-in-law. He chose four adult male age mates, preferably Njuri Ncheke elders who were full of wisdom and negotiation skills. Women and young men were prohibited from participating in bride wealth negotiations because they could create jokes during the serious deliberations. Upon arrival, they were welcomed by a similar delegation led by the bride's father for negotiations. After eating, they settled down to discussions and the payment was pegged on her state and what the father had initially paid for the mother of the bride. In some cases, a groom paid more bride wealth for a virgin girl. This payment was agreed to by both parties and was to be disbursed in manageable instalments so that the groom could be permitted to take the bride. It was assumed that the payment of bride wealth commenced a relationship and locked any other further encounters of male suitors (David, 2013).

The Ameru traditional bride wealth comprised a container of honey giempe Kia naichu, an ewe, a bull, a heifer, five she-goats, and a ram (Mbijiwe, 2015). All these items were paid in reasonable instalments so that even the poor grooms could afford to engage a spouse. All the articles that consisted of bride wealth had a symbolic meaning. A heifer, ewe, and honey symbolized that the bride was a virgin (Paukwa, 2020). The five goats were meant to replace the vacuum left at the girl's home and remind her parents and siblings that she was figuratively present despite getting married elsewhere. A special day was then set and agreed upon for the disbursement of items to the in-laws. The settlement of bride wealth was followed by guidance and counseling sessions to both the bride and the groom respectively to inculcate Ameru customs and traditions. The teachings focused on respect for in-laws, responsible handling of home affairs, respect for the husband and wife, how to relate with the children.

While the guidance and counselling sessions were in progress, the groom constructed a new hut where he would settle with his bride. A special ground-breaking ceremony was conducted by an elderly paternal uncle who gave appropriate directions on siting of the new hut (Paukwa, 2020). The construction process started very early in the morning to keep away any malicious people from interrupting the process. While girls fetched dry reeds or grass for thatching the house, the village warriors rose up early with machetes and axes to cut and chop building materials. The girls also drew water and placed some mud on the rafters

that had been tied around the standing pillars of the house to sustain the walls. This hut was supposed to be constructed and completed in a single day in readiness for the wedding day. It was just a mere temporary shelter which was replaced later by a well-planned house. The first fire was then kindled in the new hut by the groom in the evening using the traditional method of rubbing two sticks together covered with some dry grass to warm it and symbolize a new beginning of new life.

This was then followed by a wedding ceremony the next day 'guika' where some female groom's relatives and children were selected and mandated to collect the bride from her home. In most cases, the team was led by strong young men muraa who were often not resisted at all by the bride's family (Culture, 2017; Paukwa, 2020). The wedding ceremony took place at sunset when it was believed that evil spirits had become tired and moved to their resting abodes, while malicious people had also retired to their houses and slept.

The bride's father or paternal uncle came out of the house with a gourd containing a mixture of honey and milk while female relatives led by her mother brought finger millet and presented it to their daughter (Culture, 2017; Paukwa, 2020). An elder then prayed for the bride and adorned her with bracelets and necklaces before leaving her parental home to the bridegroom's residence. The wedding could however be terminated if it was discovered that the bride and the groom had already been involved in sexual intercourse before the wedding. The bride was further smeared with Ash powder as a sign of purity by her aunt. It was at this moment that a girl whose hymen had been ruptured was chastised for embarrassing her parents. Once the news of such a bride was passed over to the groom's family, the wedding ceremony could be cancelled. Women who had been assigned to escort the bride could withdraw any further arrangements. However, a groom who was still interested in the bride could arrange to marry her secretly with less ceremonial arrangements. In some cases, the whole wedding arrangements could be annulled and the girl could be married off to an old man.

A girl who was proven to be a virgin was escorted to the groom's house which was well warmed with glowing fire from a muriiru tree. Upon arrival, the groom welcomed the bride and untied her necklaces and string bracelets. The couple was then left alone in their new hut to consummate their marriage. In the morning, the groom's mother offered them a gourd containing gruel with two serving calabashes and was replenished regularly with gruel. The bride exchanged her goat's hide garment with that of her spouse which was made from a cow's hide. The couple was then expected to spend the whole day in their exchanged garments, signifying acceptance and tolerance of marital union. On the following day, the bride's hair was shaved by either a young girl or an older woman to indicate her new status in the family, while an elderly man shaved the groom. They then returned their exchanged garments, and the bride distributed her bracelets and necklaces to young girls who were present while a great feast was held to celebrate their marriage. This is how a man and woman started their nuclear family in the traditional Ameru society.

However, in the Ameru traditional society, it was observed that the wife was subordinate to the husband, though she had her established rights. Polygamy could be permitted for reasons that were acceptable to the community. There were many explanations that could warrant a man to marry more than one wife. First, it was taboo for a nursing mother to engage in sexual intercourse with her husband. This is the reason why a sexually active man needed an alternative woman to fulfil his sexual urge rather than indulging in adultery hence curbing promiscuity. Second, polygamy ensured that every woman among the Ameru was accorded an opportunity to get married if the population of girls outnumbered boys in a given area. Third, in certain rare cases, if the first wife was incapable of begetting children, the husband was encouraged to marry a second wife and prove his potency. Fourth, if a man had a bigger parcel of land, he could marry more than one wife so that children who were born could inherit and till the land, increase food production, good harvest, and generate more wealth (Mbijiwe, 2015). This was perhaps one of the ways that were used to identify a rich man in society.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study employed the ethnography research design. This type of research design involves staying with the people being investigated for a given period of time to study their culture and other characteristics. This study involves the researcher mingling with the respondents in their natural settings to assess the traditional marriage rites practices by the Ameru people before, during and after marriage.

This study utilized primary data obtained through a survey conducted among the inhabitants of the Ameru community. The target population were the Ameru residents of Meru County. Meru County consists of three Districts; Meru North, Meru central and Meru South. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census survey, Meru tribe has a population of approximately 1,545,714 people.

This study was conducted in one ward. The cluster sampling technique was used. According to Frey (2018) cluster sampling is a probability sampling approach that categorizes all population elements into mutually exclusive and exhaustive groups called clusters. Clusters are chosen for sampling, and the sample is made up of all or portion of the elements from those clusters. When natural groups (e.g., schools or counties) exist in the population, or when getting a list of all population items is unfeasible or impracticable, this method is often utilized.

Cluster sampling, as opposed to ordinary random sampling, can save money on in-person data collecting by using geographically concentrated clusters. In cluster sampling is a technique researchers divide a population into smaller groups known as clusters. The next draw a sample at random from these clusters. Cluster sampling is frequently used to examine large populations, particularly those that are geographically distributed. As clusters, researchers typically use pre-existing units such as schools or cities. This study utilized catholic churches in the ward as clusters, and from the clusters, each and every member will have an equal chance of participating in the survey provided he/she is an Ameru. The sample size for this study was determined using the online sample calculator.

This study utilized both focus groups discussion schedules as instruments of data collection. In the focus groups, the respondents were be asked to explain the elements in the traditional courtship ceremony and explain what they symbolized. The focus groups proceedings were recorded and transcribed. The focus group methodology was both qualitative and exploratory in nature, and it was not designed to produce data that is generalizable to a specified population. Focus groups are used to gather responses from participants regarding a certain issue and to develop ideas and concepts that aid the client's understanding of the subject under investigation.

The results of a focus group study are frequently used as preliminary data in the development of more conclusive, quantitative studies with a bigger sample size. To evaluate the independent variable; traditional marriage rites, the participants were asked to indicate which traditional marriage rites were conducted at their traditional marriage ceremony. The study also involved controlling variables such as income and family status. Furthermore, the questionnaire also evaluated demographic factors of the participants such as their education level, age, and gender.

The data was coded, cleaned, and analyzed by thematic analysis. A pilot test is an analysis on a small portion of the sample to detect shortcomings of the research design and instrument before the data collection (Schindler & Cooper, 2011).

Validity refers to the extent to which the instrument measures what the researcher intends it to measure and it performs as the researcher designed it to perform (Bashir & Marudhar, 2018). The researcher measured the instrument's validity by measuring the content's face validity using Cohen's Kappa Index. The validity of 0.785 obtained was good since it was greater than the recommended Kappa of 0.75 (Erdogan & Temel, 2015).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Five focus groups were conducted as a part of the research program that explored the role of African traditional marriage rites of the Ameru people. Focus groups were conducted at three districts which makes the Meru tribe. The focus group interviews had the following objectives, “To explore the marriage rites practiced by the Ameru and People”. Three focus groups were conducted in Meru County. Each focus group consisted of 20 members, and they lasted for about 6 minutes each. Data emanating from the interviews was analyzed by thematic analysis as follows:

This section of the report presents findings from the focus group interviews in the form of a summary of what respondents said in response to specific questions. The information in this section represents the researchers’ interpretation based upon: (1) notes made during the focus group meetings, (2) a review of the audio and video recordings, and (3) a content analysis of the typed transcripts from the three meetings. According to the research objective, we had four items to investigate namely preparation, courtship, dowry and wedding, in-law relationship.

### **Pre-Marriage Preparation**

All the focus groups indicated that preparation for marriage was a critical rite. They indicated that the preparation process involved male circumcision and identifying the lady that the man is interested in. In most situations, the boy initiated the dating process by expressing interest in a mature girl. The boy could enquire from close neighbors about the bride's age, father's name, and clan affiliation. After gathering the information, the boy could now inform his parents about his prospective marriage intentions. Before giving the boy the go-ahead, both parents went over their family's character features in greater detail. In other cases, the man's parents would investigate the family of another girl and examine the family traits of the girl, which would be along the lines of the family members being good judges, hardworking people, generous people, and other such good traits. The parents would then establish a good relationship with the girl's family when she was young so that when she grew up, it would be easier to ask for her hand in marriage. The young man was advised by his parents to marry the family with whom his parents had a good relationship.

In the Ameru community, a young man is said to have four fathers who play different roles in the young man's life. The four fathers are

- (a) "Ithe wa Kiganda" is the man who took care of the young man after being circumcised, and they are in the healing process.
- (b) "Ithe wa Mumuciari" is the biological dad of the young man (Dhaka).
- (c) "Ithe wa Rukiiri" is the father who took the young man to undergo the circumcision rite of passage.
- (d) "Ithe wa Kumuriungia" was the father who walked with the young man in errands.

All the four fathers were important.

After identifying a lady, he would like to marry, the young man would go to his father, who had cared for him during his circumcision healing process (Ithe was Kiganda). The father of the house would inform the biological father of the suitor, who would then approve or deny his son's request through his father in the house. Depending on the traits of the girl's family, the biological father would either deny or grant his son permission. If he is given permission, the young man will go in and pursue the girl. If permission is not granted, the young man does not pursue the girl in question.

### **Courtship**

The groups indicated that the courtship process was extremely significant to Ameru boys and girls since it allowed partners to get to know each other before deciding to marry. However, in typical circumstances, the groom would plan to visit the bride's home after gathering preliminary background information from both families and confirming that there was no close link that could jeopardize the marriage plans. In the Ameru culture, proper courtship began with both families developing a solid relationship so that the man's and lady's families could exchange things like food (Kurijanira). The young man's father would ask his son to pursue a young girl from a particular family through the house's father. In the Ameru culture, a young man would not approach a young lady to ask for her hand in marriage without his father's



permission (s). Even the lady was taught and emphasis was placed on the significance of respecting the parents through the circumcision rite of passage.

When the young man and the young woman agreed to marry, the young man was required to present Miraa to the father-in-law. The young man would approach his father and request, "ncoolo ya miraa." The young man was not supposed to be sold the miraa. The young man would be permitted to pick miraa from the miraa plantation, after which he would take the miraa to another old man, who would tie the miraa with a banana leaf and deliver it to the in-laws. When the young man arrived at his in-law's house, he would place his arrow and miraa on the doorstep of the house of the lady he wished to marry. The lady will then take the arrow and enter her house, followed by the suitor carrying the miraa. The young man will then give the miraa to his future bride and request that she take it to her father.

Accepting the miraa from the man symbolized the lady's acceptance of the young man. Following the presentation of the Miraa by his daughter, the father of the lady will call another old man/man in the village and give them the miraa, instructing them to keep the miraa for their daughter. The men will then examine the miraa carefully before one of them unties and separates it. When he shakes it, and some leaves fall down, he'll know a suitor is a generous man because he let other men pick miraa from his bunch. The young man would then bring another bunch of miraa, which he would give to the lady's father, who would ask her daughter's permission to eat miraa. If the daughter agreed that her father could eat the miraa, it meant that the lady agreed with the suitor. The suitor would then bring the miraa bunches until they were five. When they reached the fifth bunch, the father of the bride would ask the suitor to contact his father. The father of the lady would then request that the father of the young man begin dowry payment.

### **Dowry Payment**

The father and selected elders went to the bride's home to arrange bride wealth payment for the future daughter-in-law after all sides agreed the marriage may be sanctioned. The Ameru traditional bride wealth comprised a container of honey giempe Kia naichu, an ewe, a bull, a heifer, five she-goats, and a ram. The he-goat and she-goat presented to the bride's family represented the union that would be formed between the man and the woman after marriage. The goats were supposed to be virgins, and they were delivered to the bride's family by two young girls (*Kenya*) and a young boy (*kaiji*).

The bridal wealth also included "Nteguri." Nteguri was the most expensive dowry payment process because it included so many different types of gifts. Nteguri was given to the bride's family, who shared it with the bride's extended family members. To name a few of the gifts for Nteguri, there were yams (*ikwa*), arrowroots (*matuma*), and beer (*nchoobi*). The groom would also present the bride's family with a blanket (*muringeti*) from the groom's family, as well as a shuka or lesa and other clothing. The clothing gifts served as a reminder to the bride's parents, but they had a daughter who was married to someone else. All these things were paid in installments rather than all at once, so that even the poorest grooms could afford to marry. Sex before marriage was strictly prohibited in the traditional African community, particularly in the Meru community. If the lady engaged in extramarital sex and became pregnant, the

child she conceived was forcibly aborted. If the lady did not have an abortion, she would be forced to marry an elderly man. A man married to a young woman who had a child out of wedlock, was discriminated against by the elderly people, and he was served half of everything during a ceremony while other men were served everything in full.

### **Traditional Wedding ceremony**

The traditional wedding took place at sunset, when evil spirits were said to have grown tired and retired to their resting places, and malicious people had also retired to their homes and slept. Some of the female groom's relatives and children were chosen and assigned the task of picking up the bride from her home. The bride's father or paternal uncle emerged from the house with a gourd containing a honey-milk mixture, while female relatives led by her mother brought finger millet and presented it to their daughter. Before leaving her family house for the bridegroom's, an elder prayed for her and decorated her with bracelets and necklaces. The wedding may, however, be called off if it was revealed that the bride and groom had previously had sexual relations before to the ceremony.

Additionally, on the wedding day, the bride would spend in the house with other young but married ladies who would teach her the ways of marriage. A day was set aside for shaving (mbenjo), and honey was brewed on that day. Her parents then shaved the lady's head. After shaving the bride's hair, the groom was brought in and his bride shaved his hair as well. The groom and bride were both shaved to represent maturity. It was in charge of getting rid of the bad habits. The parents will then bless the couple by allowing them to have sex. The bride and groom will have sex, and the best man will announce whether or not the bride was a virgin. The lady was supposed to be a virgin, according to the expectations. The dowry would be reduced if the bride was not a virgin. The bride and the young girl who had brought her to her marital home would return to the bride's home the next day after the wedding. The bride was given food and miraa to take back to her marital home for celebration.

The participants mentioned that the Ameru marriage rites of passage were significant because they were a family affair that required extensive consultation from elders and knowledgeable community members. Marriage, as a rite of passage, demanded a lot of respect from the young to the old, and it also created respect among families and the community at large. Traditional marriage rites, when strictly followed, are thought to have a significant impact on the marriage life. Thus, children should obey their parents and follow their marriage advice.

### **CONCLUSION**

On the basis of empirical evidence emanating from data that was collected in this study, it was concluded that preparation of marriage, courtship, dowry payment and holding traditional wedding ceremony were the four major marriage rites practiced by the Ameru people in Kenya.

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