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### Secularization of Marriage Ritual Among the Ameru in Kenya.

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The Ameru are a Bantu group of people who inhabit Meru and Tharaka Nithi Counties of Kenya. This paper examines how the ritual of marriage was conducted in the traditional setup and the changes that it has undergone with the coming of European missionaries and the influence of the Western ways of life since 1912. In order to contextualize the discussion, the following questions are addressed. First, how was marriage practised among the indigenous Ameru? Second, what are the changes that have affected this ritual in contemporary society? The Secularization theory is adopted to explain the changes that have taken place in this important rite of passage. The findings of this study are based on research conducted in Meru and Tharaka Nithi counties in Kenya. The study reveals that the Ameru society is dynamic and marriage as observed in the contemporary society is no longer practised the way it was before they interacted with the European missionaries. The indigenous positive cultural values should be accommodated while adjusting to modernity.

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## INTRODUCTION

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 objective of marriage is to beget offspring and create a family which is the basic unit of all political and social organizations (Culture, 2017). Mbiti (1969, p. 133) observes that 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, p. 15).

### Marriage in Traditional Ameru Society

Prior to the coming of European missionaries, the Ameru traditional marriage started with courtship, followed by the settlement of bride wealth and the actual day of fetching the bride (Mbijiwe, 2015, p. 56). Initiated boys and girls grew up and knew each other well as they congregated during public village dances or at earlier wedding occasions. It is at this moment that 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, p. 28).

In most cases, it was the initiated boy who began by expressing interest in a mature girl and started the dating process (Mbijiwe, 2015, p. 52). He investigated from close neighbours the bride's age, name of the father, and the clan from which she belonged. It was at this juncture that they could now inform 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 family. In some cases, a boy could elope a girl by engaging young warriors who were often not resisted by the girl's family warriors. This kind of marriage could then be validated if the boy and the girl loved each other. The bride's wealth could then be agreed upon and disbursed to the girl's parents to solemnize the marriage. If it was established during courtship that the boy and girl were closely related by blood or belonged to the same clan, the relationship was terminated. 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. But, in normal circumstances, 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, p. 23).

He was accompanied on this day 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 maiden visit 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, a great celebration meal was prepared by women from the bride's clan and village. 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 girl who was a virgin. 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, p. 56). All these items were not paid at once, but 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 reminds 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 counselling sessions to both the bride and 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 groundbreaking 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. The village warriors rose up early with machetes and axes to cut and chop building materials, while girls fetched dry reeds or grass for thatching the house. 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 garlic 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 old woman to indicate her new status in the family, while the groom was shaved by an elderly man. 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.

In the Ameru traditional society, it was however 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 a 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 in case the population of girls outnumbered that of boys in a given area. Third, in certain rare cases, if the first wife was incapable of begetting children, then the husband was encouraged to marry a second wife and prove out 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, 2015:19, 22). This was perhaps one of the ways that were used to identify a rich man in society.

Divorce was very rare in the traditional Ameru community (Kirimi, 2019, p. 4). However, if any misunderstandings were noticed in marriage, they were often discussed with both families, and solutions were reached amicably. Most often, an entire village could collaborate to help a discordant couple solve their marital issues and keep a marriage from failing. But temporary separation could be granted by elders where an aggrieved wife was granted leave to go back to her parents' home for a short time, while the process of reconciliation was remedied by elders. The Ameru traditional marriage did not end with the death of a husband because the wife could be inherited by an older or younger brother or a closer male relative. However, the children who were born in this relationship belonged to the deceased man.

### Contemporary Ameru Marriage Ritual

After examining the traditional understanding of marriage, it is appropriate to discuss the contemporary approach to marriage among the Ameru. Most African societies were greatly influenced by the African traditional religion and values, while the western cultural aspects have impacted on Ameru cultural aspects in the marriage institution. This has given room to the adoption of European culture and new forms of life occasioned by modernity and post-modernity (Hannah, 1983, p. 23). The contemporary institution of marriage has changed due to new life patterns and practices. Ezenweke (2016, p. 30) further advances that cultures change because of alterations within the environment which affect even rites of passage.

Boys and girls spend most of their time in primary, secondary schools, and in colleges going through formal education under the tutelage of their teachers. Adolescent girls no longer undergo scarification and the female genital mutilation ritual but are instead assembled during the holidays at nearby boarding schools after completing their K.C.P.E examination. It is during this moment that they are taught by respectable women and female counsellors about adult life. Parents make private arrangements to circumcise their boys in hospitals and hold congratulatory parties to mark the transition period without the knowledge of the extended family members. The initiates are briefly taught a few moral values by selected adult men and *Njuri Ncheke* elders who often lament that the current Ameru do not prepare young people on responsibilities towards preparing food, behaving well towards men and in-laws, taking care of the children, and other domestic chores (Kagwiria 2018, p. 2). This is because, available time that could be used to inculcate these values to the youth is too short and limits the scope of coverage. The choice of a suitable marriage partner, betrothal, and courtship has taken a new dimension. It is no longer a collective responsibility but, an individual affair due to the breakdown of the extended family structures. The qualities of a prospective groom and the bride which included honesty, strength and health, hospitality, kindness and industriousness are no longer considered while choosing a marriage partner. Emphasis is laid on the beauty, social and financial status of the prospective marriage partner.

Today, a young man identifies a spouse either at a place of work or through social interaction and proposes to her (Sobania, 2003, p. 138). Her consent leads to further interaction where a groom could now proceed and notify his family members about the intention to wed. The bride likewise apprises her parents or guardians. It is at this juncture that parents or guardians get enquire about their families' ethnicity, clan, and community backgrounds. Once this is ascertained, the father of the groom passes the invitation to his relatives who then convene to start the marriage process.

A reputable spokesman who is often a self-controlled wise man for the occasion is selected among the senior uncles. He is often a married man with offspring and of sound reputation in the

community. Just like the groom's side, the bride's family forms a group that could now represent the family at the negotiations and plans further meetings for the wedding. The groom's parents organize to visit the bride's home, either in the rural areas or in town. This is then followed by a reciprocal visit to the groom's home. The committee could consist of up to 20 elders who belong to the same age bracket of the girl's or groom's father (David, 2013).

The delegation would now plan to visit the bride's home where they are met by their hosts. They carry with them bales of maize and wheat flour, sugar, tea leaves, crates of beer and soft drinks, cooking oil, and an envelope containing some money. The introductions will then be made after eating a communal meal before commencing the discussions. A special day is then set for the elders to come back to the bride's home and negotiate bride wealth disbursement. If it is ascertained that the bride is expectant, the discussion could be postponed, but the girl is appreciated with monetary gifts which do not form part of the bride's wealth. This ensures that the offspring to be born officially belongs to the new couple. Any further negotiations of bride wealth and its disbursement are factored based on the educational qualification, profession, and career of the bride (Sobania, 2003, p. 139). The negotiations involve only the two nuclear families. In certain cases, bride wealth is not paid when the bride is pregnant. The bride's wealth is negotiated in terms of cows, goats, honey, blankets, lesos, and money stuffed in an envelope. The groom then holds fundraising sessions or applies for a Sacco or bank loan to facilitate the payment. A day is then set when elders arrange to visit the bride's home to make a major down payment which is then followed by setting a pre-wedding session at the bride's home which is then followed by the final wedding date. In most cases, the bride's family could not demand for the outstanding arrears, but in case it was not fully settled, the instalment was carried forward and recovered when a daughter gets married. In case the couple does not beget children, then the bride's wealth could be refunded.

In preparation for marriage, young men and women organize get-together parties, WhatsApp, Twitter, telegram, Facebook social groups, where the team meets to raise sufficient funds that would be used to

facilitate the wedding process. On the wedding day, young men arrange to transport their guests and refreshments to the wedding venue and at the reception parties or could organize for catering services (David, 2013). The bride has to select her bride's maids, who are most often her close friends and relatives. The bride's family organizes to buy or fit the wedding gown and the bridal team's garments, while the groom and his best men organize to fit matching suits, shirts, ties and shoes for the occasion.

A day to the wedding, women from the groom's village or family carry sodas, beer, and an assortment of whisky and wines to visit the bride's family. They team up and cook together the whole night in preparation for the marriage ceremony the following day. It is during this session that women and girls socialize, make connections and possibly create links leading to sound marital relationships. On the wedding day, the groom organizes for a fleet of vehicles and buses to collect the bride. As the entourage approaches the bride's home, they all start hooting their cars. This is a sound warning to alert women of their arrival at the bride's residence who lock and block the entrance to the homestead (David, 2013). They will only let in the groom's entourage after paying some money and presenting food items such as sugar, rice, cooking oil, and flour. The visitors are then welcomed into the homestead with gospel and secular music and dance. The food stuff items are then shared out among the relatives and villaged villagers. In most cases, the night cooking parties are few because most weddings are now serviced by professional caterers. The two groups leave the bride's home in a motorcade to go and solemnize the wedding in a church of their choice.

This is then followed by a reception party at open grounds or spacious hotel gardens where invited guests, friends, and relatives present their gifts to the new couple and pose for memorable photographs. The newly wedded couple then drives to their new home after a busy day to consummate their marriage. They could then proceed for a honeymoon holiday to Mombasa or even outside the country to enable them to get the opportunity to spend time together and learn more about themselves (Sobania, 2003, p. 145, Lee et al., 2010).

### **Implication of Secularization on Marriage Ritual Among the Ameru**

As the Ameru society becomes secularized, the institution of marriage with its associated ceremonies has to change and adapt to the contemporary environment (Pickering, 1974:63). Change is a departure from the old values that were cherished in the traditional society but, through discovery and diffusion, they have transformed in practice (Idang, 2015, p. 106). Most people are interested in learning the importance of traditional rites of passage and the moral values attached to them while admitting their resilience in practice. But the society is dynamic and the contemporary youth admire changes and new forms of life. This makes them adjust and incorporate only those values which are suitable to them. This is for example noticed by incorporating traditional music and dance in the contemporary marriage rituals. But, a few of the older generation would admire the way marriage was conducted in the traditional setup, which has now has changed with time. Most youths are involved in a come-we-stay relationship which culminates in marriage. The younger generation does not value expensive and lavish marriages. Very few of them would opt to solemnize their marriage in church and are not even bothered to discuss bride wealth or its disbursement. Many young people today opt to officiate their wedding at the Deputy County Commissioner's office, while others solemnize their marriage in churches and then go to celebrate at a hotel of their choice. This is nature of marriage in the contemporary Ameru society.

### **CONCLUSION**

This article has established marriage was an elaborate process in the traditional Ameru society. There are a few interethnic marriages. Today, young people interact at their places of work, schools, colleges, and churches. Initiated boys are too young and are no longer taught how to respect their in-laws, acquire wealth, and be responsible heads of families. In traditional society, marriage was a right of life in which everyone participated. This is no longer a duty for everyone among the Ameru, where some people opt not to get married just for social or personal reasons.

Some individuals seek different forms of unions, where members could be sanctioned or even considered deviants when they ignore their indigenous values. In contemporary society, there is an increase in cohabitation before marriage and single-parent families. This is a clear indication that marriage is not as important as it was before in the indigenous African setup. A few old practices related to marriage are still upheld calling for an urgent discourse on how to integrate these positive aspects to ensure that Ameru live in harmony. Male chauvinism that was dominant in traditional Ameru families has been affected by the need for gender equality championed by the women's liberation movement. Polygamy which was a common practice among traditional Ameru marriage is shunned today, while monogamy has become popular for religious and economic reasons. Marriage preparation is no longer an extensive process as it was observed in the traditional society (Sobania, 2003, p. 139). Marriage is not perceived as an institution that was traditionally believed to be and willed by God but has been secularized. There exist a variety of factors that have weakened the cultural bond and order of an authority. This is why the Ameru marriage institution is no longer a conglomerate affair but has become an individual affair involving just the nuclear family (Sobania, 2003, p. 153).

Today, cases of divorce and separation are on the increase because of increased unfaithfulness, suspicion, and mistrust. Most contemporary Ameru would find it difficult to adjust between their traditional marital practices and the modern forms of life (Idang, 2015, p. 107). Marriage is not only an important social institution but is also regarded with high esteem. European colonial masters and Christian Missionaries brought a lot of changes and transformation to this ritual and affected the new forms of unions thus weakening the importance of marriage on individuals (Sobania, 2003, p. 153). It is evident that the way this rite is observed now is different from what was happening some years ago. Rituals related to marriage are supposed to be observed depending on the Ameru customs and practices. The Ameru should avoid mere prejudice, but admire and keep what is relevant in society (Awoniyi, 2015, p. 2).

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