

'ABA' LUYIA

General Background

Location and origin of the 'Aba' Luyia people of Western Kenya

The Luyia also referred to as Abaluyia, Baluyia, Luhya, Luluyha, Luhia, Kiluyia or Wakavirondo by early missionaries and colonisers (Thompson, 1884:5, Wagner, 1949:5) belong to the 'generally recognised subgroups of the modern day Bantu languages in the mashariki group (Ehret, 1998:36)¹. They are the dominant tribe in western province of Kenya and the third largest in the country². They comprise around 3.5 million people living mainly in the western, north of Lake Victoria and the north end of rift valley provinces of Kenya. (Johnstone; 2003:330)³ Some Luyia speaking people exist in northern Tanzania and in the eastern portion of neighbouring Uganda (Kanyoro; 1983:2)⁴.

There are various migration traditions among the different Luyia groups. Many of the Luyia clans (and sub tribes) have it in their traditions that they came from Egypt (*Misri*) A few state that they came from West Africa (Osogo 1966: 21-28)⁵. Some pre-euro oral traditions also believed they migrated from Egypt i.e. the northern area from the Sudan or Ethiopia⁶. Ehret (ibid: 31) states that their origin can be traced back to the '... western end of the great lakes region from around or not long after 1000 BC...' However, a predominant view also supported by the two most notable Luyia historians Were (1967:94) and Osogo (1966:133) is that '...they came into Kenya from Uganda around 1570 - 1600⁷ and '...established themselves in the present areas by the early 1840s...'

What is the meaning and origin of the term 'Luyia'?

The term 'Luyia' is said to derive from the verb '*Okhuyia*' which in Luyia means 'to burn'. It is said that not too long ago there was a custom among the Luyia whereby in the evenings a number of families bound by a common blood-relationship usually sat round a bonfire where the men chatted, exchanged the news and discussed important family matters. The boys sat with them so that they learnt about their people's history, customs and clans. This fire around which they gathered was known as "*O1uyia*", and to distinguish a Luyia from other groups, [or one Luyia clan from another] the question was often asked '...to which '*O1uyia*' do you belong?'" (Osogo; 1966:7, Wamukoya; 1982 1-2). This helped to safeguard against infiltration by enemies but also ensured no one who belonged to the clan was lost or unaccounted for as they wandered around. The Luyia believe this to be their most significant and oldest custom because it reminds them of their common history and sustains the bond between the different clans which form the Luyia language group.

¹ See also Ethnologue.com (2001) which classifies the Luyia as Niger –Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Southern, Narrow Bantu, Central and Masaba-Luyia. Cf. _____ 'Early Settlements and Migrations' <http://www.KenyaWeb.com/people/luyia.html> (August 2001) 'Bantu people came to Kenya, probably from what is now Zaire, during the first millennium A.D. Bantu-speakers originating from the west of Lake Victoria migrated around the edges of the lake to intermingle with Bantu from the Eastern Highlands. Fusion of different Bantu groups was an ongoing process and contemporary Bantu groups did not emerge as distinct groupings until relatively recent times

²This is according to the 1969 Census. Subsequent census results placing the Luyia as the fourth largest tribe have been disputed chiefly for political reasons but also because they contradict family planning accounts which estimate the birth rate amongst the Luyia to increase by 7.1% annually - the highest in Kenya

³See also Preliminary Kenya Census Report May 2000

⁴The Uganda Luyia generally belong to the Saamia, Songa and Lugwe (Gwe) sub tribes cf. Ethnologue.com (2001)

⁵ During the researchers interviewing with elders several words were repeated over and over again '*Misri*' (Egypt) '*Emukulu*' (North) '*Bunyoro*' (Uganda) '*Bukiri*' (a place in Egypt) They also spoke of a long river (River Nile)

⁶ cf. _____ 'Early settlements and Migrations' <http://www.KenyaWeb.com/people/luyia.html> (August 2001) es.shu.ac.uk/meaning/67600 (August 2001) Ibid.

⁷ _____ 'Early Settlements and Migrations' <http://www.KenyaWeb.com/people/luyia.html> (August 2001) Ibid. See bibliography for details. Also, the researcher's conversation with Omuliebi his grandfather (c.1989) while explaining traditional burial customs. He told me that the Luyia always bury their dead facing Uganda (or '*emumbo*'- the Luyia word for west,) because that is where '... our ancestors came from...'

The Luyia as a collection of communities

The Luyia speak a cluster of dialects⁸ numbering around eighteen⁹. Early researchers estimated the number to be anywhere between fifteen and twenty-six (Appleby; 1961:180, Kanyoro; 1983:4). Kanyoro (ibid)¹⁰ argues in her linguistic study of the Luyia that the term 'Luyia' refers to a non-existent language. Her view is that not all Luyia people understand each other because the term 'Luyia' is in fact a cover term for some 17-language groups. and therefore Luyia people should be treated differently as far as providing literature is concerned.

However, Mirimo (1965) argues that even though there are variations in Luyia dialects, [languages], their ritual, emphases on economic pursuits and other cultural traits from group to group, the Luyia still share a common language¹¹ '... in its written form...' and some of the other essential elements of a total culture such as circumcision, marriage, burial ceremonies and other rites of passage.

Kanyoro (ibid1983:4)¹² appears to confirm this view despite of her conclusions on literature when she writes that '... there appears to be an established set of attitudes which allow members of the dialect groups to perceive themselves as belonging to a single linguistic group i.e. the Luyia but at the same time as being distinct within the terms of dialect and to a much lesser extent culture...'

⁸ Ehret Ibid p.33 writes that '...dialects arose out of clusters of communities who spoke several slightly differing versions of a single language...' In recent literature, the terms dialect and sub tribe seems to be used interchangeably. On the other hand, ask a Luyia to identify themselves and they say '... I am a Luyia from Saamia...' or '... a Luyia from Marama...' etc. Others will simply state their dialect. The assumption is that dialect and sub tribe is one and the same thing and that there is no real difference between sub tribe/dialect and Luyia tribe. Note however, Kanyoro's comments above cf. footnote 15

⁹ A consensus exists on sixteen: Isukha, Idakho, Bukusu, Kabras, Wanga, Banyala, Banyole, Maragoli (Logoli) Samia, Kisa (Shisa), Batirichi (Tiriki), Marama, Marachi, Bastosto, Bakhekhe and Batachoni. Kanyoro suggests they are seventeen including the unclassified Nyangori. It is common practice to refer to the 'Luyia' by any of the above dialects. However, the Uganda Luyia are known by their specific individual dialect names i.e. Saamia, Gwe, Nyuli, Gishu (Masaba). See Kanyoro op.cit p22

¹⁰ See Kanyoro's Introduction where she states that the Luyia are not a single entity, and do not constitute a homogeneous group of people but that they have been bestowed the status of a separate entity because they are distinct from their neighbours in the western Kenya province, who are the Luo speakers to the south, the highland Nilotic speakers to the east and north, and the Teso to the west.

¹¹ Mirimo, (1965) a pioneer Luyia paremiographer has stated that 'a careful linguistic analysis of Luyia as a language with its several dialects reveals that the dialects have more in common in their written form. The differences only appear to be pronounced in their spoken form due to variations in accent and tone. Only minor lexical differences in suffixation and prefixation divide them. Because Luyia dialects share 'a core lexical structure' it is safe to assume all Luyia proverbs regardless of dialect share one source and are therefore authentic and admissible Furthermore, Mirimo (ibid) in his collection of Luyia sayings (proverbs) has suggested that 'Luyia proverbs cut across dialectal variations in the contexts of use and in their meanings.

¹² Ibid. Kanyoro (1983) is a first language speaker of the Luyia dialects and has long experience in Bible translation.