Sitekho: a cultural way of marriage confirmation among Bamasaba people

By Nandemu Barasa and Timothy Makokha, August 13 2012

Relatives and friends dancing during the sitekho ceremony for Dr. George Masafu at his home. Photo: Nandemu Barasa

Sitekho is the ceremony that is meant to confirm a marriage among the bamasaba people. It’s a cultural practice that brings together relatives of the husband and wife to feast together, dance and drink local brew, kwete.

It was such a treasured ceremony as it enabled marriages to be strong as cases of separation were unheard of. It also enhanced faithfulness in marriages as a couple is taught on the importance of faithfulness and respect to one another in a marriage.

It is so important that it is one way of giving permission to the father-in-law to and other elders of the clan to eat any food in that home or else before sitekho a married woman cannot cook food for father-in-law as their married is yet to be confirmed.

Traditionally among the bamasaba people, sitekho was very popular as in the current situation a few people who uphold and love culture can undergo it as majority of the people prefer a modern marriage.

The West FM Chairman Dr George Masafu is not left behind in such a practice as on Friday he was
leading from the front as he confirmed his marriage with his wife Maureen in a jovial ceremony, sitekho.

Dr. George Masafu as he was talking to elders in his house

For a couple to undergo this cultural practice the husband is supposed to have paid dowry and dowry negotiations completed.

During courtship the man identify a girl and then consult with his parents about the clan of the girl to investigate if they are allowed to marry from such a clan. If parents agree, the mother is send to go early in the morning and negotiate with parents of the girl seeking for permission of her son marrying their daughter. For instance she would say, endi nende embako rendikho neny a kumwini, meaning I have a hoe but I don’t have a handle. In most cases she would just hide the hoe, jembe tied in banana leaves secretly in the house but later when the family finds it, they will automatically understand what the woman was looking for. If the girl’s family agrees of course after doing their own investigations about the boy’s clan, they will put a new handle in the traditional hoe and take it back to the boy’s home.

It will then be reported to the elders. A day is then set for men from the boy’s clan to visit the girl to set the date for dowry negotiation, eng’anana.

Dowry negotiation is done in the boy’s home as clan members of the wife to be are shown the cattle to go with. They would count sticks to represent the number of cattle required but in most cases a man was expected to pay up to 13 head of cattle. The first 12 heads of cattle are for the father of the girl as the thirteenth one is given to khochia, a brother to the mother of the girl.
Relatives and friends dancing as they celebrate during sitekho

Boys would be elected to escort the cattle to the girl’s home. After which *siselelo* is done. When the girl goes to the boy’s home for the first time, she goes with lufufu in her hand. This special tree lufufu is believed to be a tree of life that renews life of a person among bamsaaba people.

*Siselelo* was normally done in the evening according to traditional beliefs of the masaaba community.

For the first three days in her husband’s house, she was not supposed to eat food cooked from within the compound as her sisters would secretly bring food for her from her parent’s home. Within those first three days after marriage, a newly married couple is not to become intimate as they take time to learn and get used to one another.

After the three days after marriage, a newly married woman would return to her parents’ home in company of her husband to be advised or to receive lubito from the aunt (senge), uncle (khochia), and grandmother.

A person giving them advice, at this moment plucks grass from the roof of the house and holds it in hands while talking to the wife to be. Food is served, local brew kwete and dancing as the girl serves food to her husband and other men who accompanied him.

She will later go back to her husband to become a wife. At this point she is said to have gone to bring oil for her husband Achia khurera kamafura after which they can become intimate as husband and wife.

Sitiso involves slaughtering a bull or goat at her husband’s home. A married woman will take part of the meat to her parents home and on returning she comes with goat meat.

Sitekho is where a married wife goes back to her matrimonial home and then returns with her best maids
(bakesia) while carrying some cooking pot (eningilo), broom (siyeywe), cooking stick (kumukango), basket (endubi), maize flour, bananas and some firewood prepared from kumulaa tree. The father-in-law is not supposed to taste the food that is brought by his daughter-in-law during this cultural practice.

A day before the wife set on the journey back to her parents a sheep is slaughtered to cleanse the cooking stones. Then a goat is also slaughtered as part of the ceremony as she carries some of the goat meat to her parents and relatives.

On reaching to her parents’ home she is taught or given some informal education on marital matters as she is advised by her mother, aunt, uncle, and grandmother if possible.

The food is cooked to be eaten by husband and wife only at night and no other person is to taste it. While cooking, the water that is used is poured in the house. While eating they call one another sir names as they promise one another a lasting marriage.

After that before sunrise in the morning, they would sweep the house and even the cooking place and all remains of the food and hide then far away in a place where nobody can see. A husband pays bakesia the following day morning as they return to their homes.

After sitekho, a couple can organize to welcome their parents to their house in a ceremony called k Mukhwingisia or khulisia baba.

Khulisia baba involves slaughtering a cock and inviting the father to the man of the house to eat. The whole full chicken is served for the father who will eat and carry the remaining to his house. After this event he will be free to eat any food prepared in his son's home. Note that it is the cock to be slaughtered according to Bamasaaba people beliefs.

Kh Mukhwingisia baba munju is where a father together with other clan elders is invited to eat in a house of a married son. A man is to buy for his father new clothes, a chair, and a pair of shoes, and utensils to be used during the ceremony for the father to take them after the ceremony.

At the time for the father to enter the house, only two people a husband and wife are meant to welcome him and his delegation. The man of the house with chisekhe (traditional straws) in his hands as he hands them to his father as he welcomes them to enter and at the same time the wife with kumwendo (traditional kettle) containing warm water in her hands welcomes her father-in-law as she pours the water in the local brew at the center of the house.

Then the father becomes the first one to put his straw in the local brew, sips and spits the first bit of it on the ground. He then allows fellow elders to start taking the local brew.

They are to stay there up to 5pm and leave as the sun is not supposed to set when elders are still in the compound of the son. They will then take the remaining brew, drinking straws, utensils, and all gifts they had received during the ceremony.

He can also buy some items like shirts or blankets for the elders who accompany his father. A bull is slaughtered for the elders and after the ceremony is over, the father is to leave with one hind leg, the head and the skin of the slaughtered bull.
Mzee William Wanyonyi Masafu

According to mzee William Masafu such cultural practices strengthens marriages and makes the man head of family as he deserves the respect. He at the same time encouraged people to continue with the same practice for the good of the marriages as it makes marriages last.

Source: Westfm