

Giriama Marriages (Attala 2019)

The Giriama are traditionally polygamous. Today the majority of marriages are monogamous but there are still significant numbers of families with more than one wife. Giriama girls are expected to leave their family homes to become wives; women, therefore, move out of their families to be brought into another receiving family. Producing echoes of many other African social systems (e.g.: Evans Pritchard 1940) the Giriama method embeds people into something akin to a 'hire purchase' scheme, which establishes women and children as primary economic units for consolidation of networks via exchange (Meillassoux 1981). The movement of money and alcohol accompanies the movement of women. Bridewealth payment is comprised of two discrete types. Firstly, the families negotiate a sum of money for payment by the groom's family to the father of the bride at the wedding. Then, as a result of that union, a further amount is due as each child is born. Alcohol is the expected payment for children; cash is given at the wedding. This system sets up a continuous burden of payments across lifetimes – something like a pay-as-you-go contract – that not only produces and maintains alliance networks, but also enables families to prescribe and control actions. Payments are often late, delayed, or even fail to be completed and are sometimes reneged upon. In the event that families fail to receive the correct payments they are within their rights to demand their daughter and her children be returned to their original home. This right arises because the seller retains ownership until payment is complete. The same applies to any children. Children can only be seen as the husband's after he has paid for them.

In addition, this system demands a return of the payment in the event of a divorce, not from the father who originally received the money but from the divorcing daughter herself. A father will support the returning daughter if she can buy herself out of her marriage. However, if she cannot pay her way out, it is unlikely that the family will support her separation, and she will have to find a way to manage on her own.

According to this generation, while there have been some changes to the traditional system of bridewealth, the sale and purchase of women is still a standard and unquestioned practice. Women today talk about their value in terms of the price their

husbands paid and compare themselves with the current market values attributed to new brides. For example, not so long ago, Lennox, a relatively affluent man who has accumulated enough earnings to build a furnished breeze block house with tin roof from employment as a private nurse on the coast, paid 48,000 Ksh (equiv. £35) for his wife Clara; a price she remains unhappy about because she believes it failed to represent her worth. Lennox is an elder but he is not often in Boré, coming only for fleeting visits. He has had some medical training and owns an apartment and practice in Malindi where he treats patients. He has built the house in Boré for just his immediate family (his wife and children). Its design mimics those in an urban setting sporting concrete floors; a decorative, coloured tin roof; glass windows with iron bars over them; a huge water container to collect water from the roof through guttering and an internal bathroom with a toilet. Regardless of any differences in design, the materials used make it stand out strikingly alongside the mud walls that the rest of the houses in the area use. Adding a bougainvillea arched entrance and plastic chairs on a tiled patio make it (as far as I was concerned) almost a gaudy eyesore against the rest of the vista. Clara is left alone in this opulence surrounded by family who have markedly less than her and live in almost abject poverty - a situation that seems to have created an air of separation and loneliness between her and the rest of the group. As a result of this prosperity, it seems Clara would prefer her bride price to reflect her current value, and it does not¹.

Past prices circled around 50,000 Ksh. Today, I am told, the price could be as much as 300,000 Ksh (equivalent to over £2000 British pounds) to be paid in cash – but in instalments over time² accumulating into substantial amounts of money not dissimilar to perhaps getting a mortgage to buy a house in the UK. On occasion, fathers, have been known to set prices prohibitively high to deter suitors. Women recount stories of lovers meeting extortionate prices with a sense of romanticism and amusement that their fathers were thwarted.

“When Laurence Charo’s daughter wanted to marry a Waathe man [Waathe is the name of the last hunter gatherer group that used to inhabit the forest in the

¹ After my return to Wales, I was informed that Clara had suffered a mental breakdown, had become violent and had to be treated to help her stabilise.

² Average wages are approximately 300-500 Ksh per day. Wage labour is typically casual and consequently payment is daily.

area.], the man was asked for 70,000. This was a high price but the man came and he brought 100,000 instead. The men want the women very much” (Clara Katana, Sept 2016 pers. comm.)

Families can receive money back for transgressions – such as violence, infidelity or lack of conception - although divorce is discouraged. For example, 50 year old Theophrastus Kasungu received money back after his first wife’s attempt to poison him was brought to light. He received 25,000 Ksh in compensation. He paid 65,000 Ksh for his significantly younger third wife in 2012. She gave birth to their second child in 2018.

In the past, this generation’s grandfathers chose the family’s wives, and very young girls were obliged to marry older males as a result. Nowadays, mothers are involved in the discussions and need to be happy with the choices made or they can threaten to leave and return home. Even though people claim that unmarried women are mistrusted, some women have children, remain on their father’s compound and simply do not marry without encountering social stigma. On the other hand, those women who live out of a compound on their own with children and no husband can be socially frowned upon and spoken of derogatorily. Contemporary middle-aged mothers have modernity-inspired aspirations for their growing daughters. These women, who were once bought into a family to work for their husbands, now talk about how they want their daughters to have jobs before they get married and claim they would not let the girls become wives at the early age they did. Nevertheless, fathers still effectively sell their daughters and buy in brides for themselves and their sons, and through this process accumulatively increase the family wealth and status. As illustrated earlier, wives are desired but are equally considered expensive, and while many marriages are polygamous, the majority today prefer monogamy because it reduces the costs one can incur.

According to the women I lived with, removing female labour from the homestead for marriage adds strain on the women left behind caring for the men and children. Bringing in new women rebalances this and polygamy offered further female support for the other women. As polygamy fades its influence, women must increasingly work separately and much of the burden falls to the oldest children. The value of many working together is communicated by this system (a point that I will develop later in

the section entitled *fu ha mwenga*). Families with few children cannot easily increase their influence. Men repeatedly talk of the value of having lots of children, brag about their wives' fecundity and commiserate with those who are not producing. If a man has 20 or more children he is considered to be a successful individual. For example, when I mentioned that a Russian woman had lived to 76 and gave birth to 69 children during her life (see: Guinness book of records, Feodor Vassilyev's wife) this was met with nods of appreciation for the husband, with people ignoring the wife's abilities but noting that the husband was a very lucky man. This is not concerned with sexual prowess as one might immediately imagine, but rather references his ability to strengthen the family unit workforce and prepare properly for old age. Waaijenburg (1994) presents marriage as a method to strengthen the extended family by increasing the overall workforce, and this sentiment chimes with some of the current ideas employed by the inhabitants of Boré.