

From Rebecca Baldock

18/02/07

Dear All.

Hope you are all well. I hear it's quite cold over there at the moment. I'm hoping it'll warm up over the next few weeks to have nice spring weather for when I come home for a couple of weeks in March. Due to visiting home I probably won't write again until April.

I've spent the last two days celebrating Bambu Enid's (my house help) wedding to Baluku Antoli. Baluku means first born male. Bambu means fourth born female. In the Bakonzo tribe everyone is given a name relating to their position of birth. It makes me laugh as despite everyone being given another name as well, many people call each other by these general names. This happens all the time on the ward and it always amazes me how you can ask for Baluku and get the right patient, when many of them must be called that. Back to the point, this year is going to be a year of weddings for me. In the couple of months surrounding Christmas, 9 couples got engaged! Some of these I knew about and was expecting, mainly expatriates. But for others I had no idea. In the culture here it's seen as bad to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, it means you are loose and sleeping around. So the first thing you get to know is that someone has got engaged.

As far as I can make out weddings vary depending on the tribe so what I'm going to describe is what happens for the Bakonzo tribe, which is where I live. In order for the Wedding to take place, and the engagement to be official, the families of the bride and groom meet, and agree that these two people can marry. This takes place at the bride's house and is called the introduction. It is here the groom brings a dowry, after this wedding plans can be arranged.

The actual wedding celebration takes place over two days. The first being the "Give Away". It is called this as it's where the family officially give their daughter to be married to the groom. This is arranged by the bride and her family and takes place at her family's home. The groom arrives with a few friends, but his parents must not attend. The bride wears the traditional African dress, and a show occurs where the best man picks out the bride to be, who is then brought to the groom. At this point the bride then gives a flower to the groom. This is a conformation that these are the two who will get married and that they have chosen each other. Celebrations are always quite official affairs here. There is a master of ceremonies, and lots of speeches are given. And of course there's a big meal. In the Bakonzo culture it's polite to feed the guests first and then eat separately after, so bride and groom and their party have to wait until after the celebration has finished and people have started to go home before they move into the house and eat.

As long as the families can afford it the Give Away will take place on the Friday and the wedding on the Saturday. If money is tight then they will space the two out. The Wedding takes place at the church with a party afterwards at the groom's house. This day is paid for by the groom, his friends and relatives. When I talk about peoples homes, I don't mean that everyone fits into the actual houses. These would be too small. Everyone has a compound around their house, and most of the living is done outside. It's here the children play, food is prepared, clothes are washed, plates are cleaned and dried. People also have land around their houses so that they can cultivate their own food. It's in this space that a make shift shelter is put up and decorated using

banana trees, poles of wood and sheets. The weather is generally good enough to allow this and although it might rain, it won't last all day. For the wedding it's the bride's parent's turn to not attend the ceremony or party. And with the exception of the actual church service both parties are very similar. Gifts are given, but they are generally small, as people have already contributed towards the actual wedding day, and when they are given there's often much replication as there's no wedding list.

Weddings are expensive affairs. Even with other people contributing many people cannot afford to marry. To try and help this problem last year the church did mass weddings, where lots of vicars came and performed marriage ceremonies for those who wanted. In our village 300 couples came, in another one the number reached 500.

One of the differences that amuses me here is that one of the main reasons to get married is to have children. You only stop being a youth once you've actually had a child, this therefore proves that you are a man or a woman. It's therefore important to try and have a baby straight away. If you are not pregnant in the first year of marriage people feel very sorry for you.

At home only invited guests are allowed to attend the wedding reception. Although people are invite here too, anyone is allowed to turn up and it's good to have a big gathering of people. The more well known you are the more people attend.

Another difference is the colours the have for love and romance. At home we'd associate red with romance, but red means anger here. Instead it's blue and green – one means love, the other marriage, and I always get the two confused. And to show someone that you really like them you can buy them an apple. Not only is this the right colour, but it's an expensive fruit, and exotic as they're imported from South Africa.

I've attached a couple of photos of the wedding so you get a bit of an idea what the place is like.

Love Rebecca

Prayer requests

- In the last few emails I've been asking you to pray for the start of the community outreach. So far it's going really well. We've visited both the places we want to start it at, talked to them about what we'd like to do and listened to their thoughts. But it's time that will really tell whether it's going to be effective. So thanks for praying, and please continue to pray.
- I've been in contact with a charity who gives out wheelchairs (Wheels for the world). They are willing to consider coming to Kagando. I therefore have to write a proposal for this. There are many people around who need wheelchairs, not all will be appropriate, as some of them live in places that are inaccessible for wheelchairs. Please pray for this. It's still in early discussion stages and might not happen, but it's an exciting thought.
- Please pray for safe travels as I go home. For good times catching up with friends and family and for wisdom as I talk at a few different events.