

The Nuer Marriage Process

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Introduction

The objective of this article is to provide the growing population of young Nuer and non-Nuer with the basic insights into the Nuer marriage process, including the concept of marriage, the steps of the marriage process, the size and value of the dowry to be paid, the kinds of gifts to be exchanged by the two families of the groom and the bride as well as the rituals of naming the first-born, among others.

The Meaning of Marriage

Marriage among the Nuer people is the basic principle which gives special value to each mature person's membership and participation in the community. In other words, marriage means a covenant to other partner under family and community supervision. Thus, all the basic Nuer cultures, social norms and customs are built on and around marriage. Culturally, the Nuer community believes that every male and female should be joined in the covenant of marriage. Accordingly, marriage is the only institution which gives a Nuer person full rights and duty to perform his/her legal role as a procreator and perpetuator of the life cycle of the Nuer people, a cycle that must continue generation after generation. In this regard, marriage among the Nuer people binds not only two people but it also binds and unites two families who come to respect each other as in-laws. Marriage is all about the children, the real glue that keeps the marriage together.

What if a person remains unmarried or is married but did not produce childless? The Nuer people refer to unmarried person as Thuoom (solitary) and Ruol (barren) for a childless person. The Ruol is a married or unmarried man or woman who has not borne a child but still alive. From this perspective, Ruol is literally a 'solid or raw material' which has not yet borne fruits, so to speak. Thus, the Nuer culture consigns unmarried and childless persons while they are still alive to the same category, Ruol. However, should a Ruol die child-

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less, he/she will forever become known as Thuoom. The death of a Thuoom adds to the family and entire community more sorrows for the deceased was childless or ‘nameless’ on earth. But the Nuer people have a remedy for the agony of being a Thuoom.

Marrying for Thuoom

The Nuer community has a typical belief that, life continues after death. Therefore, every human being, even the dead is still alive in the form of spirits, felt but not seen. The spirits of those dead family members are moving within the environment where the relatives live. According to this belief, they can appear to their relatives in visions and dreams. They visit their beloved ones and comfort them in time of sorrows, and they can bless if they are happy or harm in case they felt forgotten. The spirit of the dead continues to look for the joy-filled rights they used to have with the family when they were still alive. Sometimes, the dead may demand their portion in the family affairs such as the bride wealth of a girl who got married. They may even demand a delicious food cooked in a banquet as they used to share with their relatives. But most importantly, the Thuoom demands the right of marriage and children to be produced for them and named after them.

How do families know that their Thuooms are looking for those rights? The Nuer community in general has an absolute belief that God is looking after them for blessing, and therefore, any negative thing that happens to them has a cause. For example, whenever there is a serious sickness or any kind of disaster occurred in community, the elders who are in charge of the family affairs always consult those considered to be spiritual healers. Accordingly, the healers would divulge the reasons for the misfortune, which could be a specific demand from God the creator directly, or from the dead spirits. Thus, the entire family would sit, and discuss the spirits’ requests, and decide on a course of action after consultations. In practical terms, the family members contribute a certain number of cows to meet the demands of the spirits. Further, they would select among them someone who is eligible to marry a woman on behalf of the Thuoom. In addition to the requirement that he must be a brother or a paternal or maternal cousin of the deceased, the chosen individual to marry on behalf of the deceased must be younger than the Thuoom when he died. The women to be married on behalf of the deceased must not be a blood relative of the family, that is because the Nuer, like many Nilotic groups, do not marry blood relatives. Therefore, in many cases the lady and her relatives may not know the background of the family requesting their daughter for marriage. The whole matter is always approached with utmost transparency. Therefore, the bride’s family would decide if they accept that their daughter to be married as a wife for deceased person. The girl herself would decide if she has an objection. Generally, it’s very rare for the girl or her family to refuse due to the fact that, the issue is a typical part of the culture.

During the marriage process, they would perform rituals peculiar to the marriage of deceased person, Thuoom. When the process is completed, the designated family member performs the duties of a husband towards his wife and the children are named for their deceased father. Though the wife now belongs to an individual person, she also belongs by extension to the whole family and the community at large. Therefore, whenever, both couples knew that, there is a child on the way to be born, this means a family or community member is coming a male or a female. The family membership rights after birth is followed by the naming. Thus, naming the child usually depends on the occasion or the incident that might have occurred at the time of the child's birth. Moreover, naming a child is a right of everyone within the family, community or even a friend from another community. Therefore, all the Nuer names always do carry deep meanings which always reflect negative or positive reasons. Yet, marriage has many stages to be taken.

Reasons for Early Marriage

Traditionally, the Nuer community raises up their children with a typical lofty expectation that each of them will inevitably form a family. That orientation creates a high ambition to become a married person and a parent. These expectations lay a solid ground for the child to develop self-confidence and also strive to always be part of the extended family and the larger community. The accepted cyclical wisdom is that the child belongs to the community, and the community is built on the pillars of its youth with marriage as one of the principal institutions.

Ironically, early marriage in the Nuer community is not a favorite choice for both boys and girls. Consequently, youth begins from the day young boys get the scarifications on their forehead. For a Nuer youth, these are very interesting times as every young man is eager to enjoy the benefits of his new status which the society has bestowed upon him. It gives the newly initiated young man a chance to freely express his energy through many activities, including dance, singing, hunting, adventure, and the exploration of new things within the boundaries or through travel. The males always adventure beyond the tribal boundary and cross the international borders. Due to this new-found freedom, therefore, young Nuer men prefer to defer early marriage because marriage is a fulltime family occupation with attendant responsibilities. Marriage is to be entered into when one has rubbed shoulders with others. While travelling and interacting with members of other clans or tribes, Nuer youth always adopt new cultures and experiences, including new dance styles, body decoration, passion for new dresses and designs, and new war tactics, among others.

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The Authorization;

For each mature person to get married, the process starts with authorization from the father. When someone seeks a girl for marriage, although the father has the absolute authority, the mother does have a say. Authorization for marriage in the case of young men depends on the availability of the resources, namely; the dowry to be paid as bride wealth. As for a girl, the mother is consulted because she is the only one who knows the secrets of her daughter's physical and mental maturity, and social skills. Parents usually have secrets about the readiness of their children for marriage. When the girl's parents accept the marriage of their daughter, members of the extended family, including aunts, uncles and cousins from both sides of the family, are consulted for their views about the groom's personality and his family background. Each family member can oppose the marriage proposal for logical and practical reasons.

The Nuer marriage starts with certain processes, conditions and issues of the ages of both the young man and the young woman who plan to become married. In urgent cases, the Nuer people allow their daughters to be married at the early age of 15. For the boy, marriage process would start when he is 16 years old, based on the need which forces the family to think of their son to get married in this early age. But the girl's father always decides based on consultation with his wife, the girl's mother, or on pieces of advice from elder women within the family. This suggests that the mother holds big influence from behind the scenes. If she feels that her daughter is not yet ready for marriage, the father takes her advice seriously.

Due to the girl's family good reputation, however, the groom's family would prefer to take the route of engagement before the actual marriage process. A small party would be conducted during which the groom's family willingly pays two to five cows. Traditionally, the engagement is a gesture intended to block out any other man or family from asking for the girl's hand in marriage. Engagement can sometimes extend up to three years or until the girl's mother acquiesces. The two families would practically develop their relationship of exchanging visits and gifts known by Puoth with a high level of care and respect. At the same time, the period of engagement offers the future couple an ample opportunity to get to know each other more.

Assessing the Resources

Although marriage is the way of life for every young person, the Nuer community views the reasons for marriage from a different perspective. As

stated earlier, the urgent reasons for earlier marriage for the boy is related to the family's need. For example, if it is the case that one of the aunts from either side of the family had produced only girls and the girls got marriage with enough cows, the only way to keep the cows valuable is through the marriage of the young men of the family. One of the trusted nephews would be delegated to marry on behalf of a Thuoom who passed away some years earlier. Or an old man whose wives have gone away from him due to their old age, and now he is in need of younger woman to serve him and to take care of him. But he may choose someone among the family members, including younger brother, a favorite son or a nephew, to marry a woman and produce children on the old man's behalf and name them for him.

Assessing the Bride

Owing to the fact members of the Nuer community do not marry relatives with near blood relation, therefore, looking for the right bride is always the responsibility of all members of the extended family. Consequently, it does not always follows that the young man will necessarily choose a girl who is well-known to him, let alone one who happened to be his girl-friend. Therefore, the search takes a long time but the consolation comes from the Nuer proverb proclaims that, failure to find the right location to build one's house is better than the failure to choose the right woman. Thus, selection of the girl for marriage always calls for wide consultation and an inclusive decision-making process. Most of the family members are entitled to contribute not only to offering advice but also toward dowry payment.

The assessment of the right bride's personal character is always done with help of her female and male age-mates. Good ethics, hard-work and kindness are some of the most desirable characteristics of good Nuer woman. The background of the girl's parents' is very crucial. The information is gleaned from the parents' age-mates since childhood as well froneighbors who had lived with them for a long time. The young man's family also is interested in the girl's family tree. They want to know about her whole clan, including what people say about them'; their reproductive history; their temperament; and whether the girls from that clan stay at home without causing problems. Issues of the availability of wealth in the family and blood relations between the two clans are very important considerations for the two families.

After the family settled on bride, the young man would ask his best friend to accompany him to approach the chosen girl. Without giving the green light, the girl would in turn report the matter to her family, whose members would quietly conduct their own background check into the groom's family. After members of the girl's family meet discreetly and have consented to the marriage, they would tell their daughter to inform the groom

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initiate the process by seeking an appointment to meet a group of girl's friends and sisters. Those are the one will give the official acceptance in an occasion which bridges and enables the two families to meet face to face.

Meeting the Girls at the First Nightly Introduction

The youth would set a time where now they will come in the evening, bringing with them some cattle as the first payment of seven to 10 heads of cattle among which one or two must be bulls. This step gives the youth full right to spend the whole night in the home of the girl's parent's. The two groups would talk and discuss many issues. The language of the conversation is deliberately whimsical laden with ostentatious philosophical nuances and linguistic traps aimed at testing each other are level of wit and intellect.

The question for someone who is not familiar with the community would be "what authority do the girls have to the extent that they sabotage things for an official marriage? For starters, the Nuer people refer to marriage as *Kuen*, which literarily means 'counting' or 'talking'. what about then do the two groups talk for a whole night? It is more than simply talking. The singers in the midst would perform their best songs for entertainment. The dancers as well would have that chance to show off their talents, and the ones with funny bones would inject humor into the night. At the same time, the leaders of the two groups would discuss something called 'love gifts'. By 'love gifts', the friends and sisters of the bride is insinuating "while you come to ask our acceptance, we deserve some gifts". These 'love gifts' used to be beads and other natural stones but now they are offered in cash which the girls decide and negotiable between the two group. After the girls have given their positive response to the marriage proposal, the men will offer them some unconditional and none-refundable gifts in form of Cush.

The main focus of such a gathering is to offer the youth a chance to get to know each other better. Another unintended consequence of such a gathering could also be that someone from among the youth accompanying the groom may decide to select a bride for himself. But more importantly for the Nuer people, any marriage process that does not include taking this step would be considered as a mere youth game of no cultural consequence. Culturally, the groom would never meet the girl's father until all the procedures have completed. Otherwise, everything would remain as gossip with no legality and even may lead into spoiling of relationships if not handled with care by the groom's side. But the most important thing is that they do agree at the end.

In the morning following the night long rendezvous, the groom and his colleagues wait for the girl's father to invite them into his Luak (cattle shed). The

Nuer Luak is a symbol of authority where the girl’s father sits to conduct his duties, including taking decisions on important matters. Upon entering into the bride’s father luak, the groom and his group pay more unconditional and nonrefundable gifts before starting any talks. In the past, this second gift used to be a spear, but nowadays cash is offered in lieu of a spear. The young determine the amount of cash to be paid to the father of the girl. In his opening speech, one of the youth will act as the spokesperson, and he will introduce the members of the group. The introduction would include where they come from, whose sons they are, what their intention is, which girl they are looking for and who the focal point person or the groom is. After hearing the speech, the girl’s father and his people would give their consent. They immediately proceed to announce the good news.

Discussion of the Dowry and the Major Celebration

The discussion to determine the size of the dowry of a Nuer marriage is the major and legal event where a young man will earn the official title as a groom. The event is in reality two occasions in one. After receiving the girls and after the father’s acceptance, now the groom and his relatives will prepare themselves for the biggest event. The two families would exchange visits in order to know themselves more, and exchange some little gifts (*Puoth*). In most cases the two fathers-in-law and the mothers-in-law would meet privately and separately in order to know each other. They would discuss mostly issues of blood relationships; and the minimum size of the dowry required in order for the wedding to take place. Sometimes the in-laws discuss their sets of spiritual beliefs. These discussions also settle questions of the nature of whether the groom intends to marry for himself or for someone else, and whether the groom or bride has a different biological parent. These secret meetings help the two families to know each other very well and build confidence. For example, if this marriage is for *Thuoom* or for *Ruol* and so forth. Nothing of limit during such intimate discussions, should either side discover something negative and unacceptable, the concerned party may call for the marriage to be called off altogether in order to avert any disaster that may occur and spoil the relationship between the two families in the future.

On the other hand, if things go smoothly, and the relationship gets strengthened, the groom and his friend would come to his father-in-law to requesting an appointment for the dowry discussion known as (*Bul in Diit*), the biggest dance. This type of dance is very special. It is readily recognizable.

The time set for the *Bul in Diit* is always based on consensus in order to give each family ample time to invite relatives. However, the period given to the families to prepare is almost always between five to 10 days maxi-

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mum. The bride and the groom shoulder the responsibility of inviting their respective relatives, guests and friends. Sometimes, it may happen that the two families share the invited relatives. In this case, the invited families would decide to come as guests of either of the families based on the closeness of their relationships or honor the invitation that arrived to their family first. The girl as well would go and invite all the girls, while her mother would invite other relatives. From the side of the bride, all the invited families always contribute some food items which may include; grains, milk, cooking oil, traditional alcohol and other goods.

The groom and his friends would tour the whole area house-to-house with song and dance. Members of the visited households would come out jumping with joy and welcoming the visitors with song and dance. The heralds of the good news dance in front of each house for three to five minutes. Only one question is asked. How many days are left for the festivities to take place, they would ask. The young men will response with the message and the exact date before they run to the next household.

The groom's father and his colleagues would come in the evening one day before the official day; the both sides in that evening would sit face to face. They would introduce themselves, and start discussing the issue of blood relationship again. Next day morning, they would start the dowry discussion which may take the whole day up to after noon. During the discussion, both sides use a polite language full of words of honor and respect. This is *Kuen*, a time for counting all the positive things. At this time, singers would really perform their best songs and poems. Although the men would indulge in drink lot of local brew on this occasion, everyone is always very careful and respectful. Whoever dares to misbehave, especially from the side of the groom would be penalized instantly. Furthermore, on this day of *Bul in Diit*, any member of the bride's family has a right to raise any wrongdoing committed on him/her in the past by someone from the groom's side. Unfortunately, some individuals see the occasion as a golden chance to revenge against their nemeses. But both sides remain very careful and responsible, because the community is conservative, and such occasions are cycling themselves. Nonetheless, everyone is always on standby because the whole event may break down for whatever reason. In the meantime, and while the old men discuss dowry seriously, the youth are waiting outside preparing themselves for the greatest dance of their lives to take place later in the evening hours.

However, the minimum size of the dowry is always 25 heads of cattle, but in some cases it goes beyond 30 heads of cattle. Traditionally, the bride's father would show much greed and he may request more than what is recognized by the community. But two things always rescue the situation; (a) the community elders always have a say because any current misbehavior will reflect badly of future marriages, and (b) the secret agreements concluded

by the two fathers-in-law always remains inviolable. The number of the cows they agreed upon during their secret discussion will be the figure to be paid before the groom takes his wife, otherwise the final wedding may be delayed

After agreeing on certain number of cattle, four additional goats and four spears of different types would be offered to the father of the bride. There is sometimes a risk of the girl becoming weak and as a result becomes pregnant by the young man before the wedding. Nonetheless, the distribution of the cows among the family members is clear (James Toang 2012). The bride's father and mother receive two cows each and one cow for the family spirits, the grandfather and grandmother. One cow and a bull are earmarked for each of the paternal uncles, two bulls for the brother, a cow for the parental aunt, four calves of the grandparents, one ox for the master of ceremonies, bringing the total to roughly 17 heads of cattle. On the mother's side the distribution is as follows. Two cows for grandfather and mother, one cow and one bull for the uncle, a cow for aunt, two calves for grandparents, a small ox for grandparents, bringing the total to 26 (9+17) heads of cattle (Toang 2012). Whatever left unpaid will be the portion of the bride's father. This is being the minimum; it is now understandable why sometimes, especially in large families, the size of the dowry exceeds 30 cows. But at the same time, in Nuer marriages the dowry is not paid fully at once. A certain portion must be left pending in order to keep the relationship between the families cordial and warm. Secondly, and in spite of the movement of great amount of wealth from one family to another, the Nuer do not view marriage as a sell-and-buy transaction. Therefore, whatever promises are left unfulfilled can always be requested five, ten or more years down the road. Young male cousins and friends of the groom may remain in the house of the bride's father for a period of five days or more, depending on the quantity of food that has been prepared for them. The period is just for dancing, singing, drinking and eating.

The Weeding Day (*Noong*)

After the (*Bul in Diit*) or the biggest dance, the groom would come back alone to his father -in-law to request permission for the final wedding known as *Noong*. The groom will be allowed to celebrate his *Noong* if all the dues have been paid, except the portion that has been set aside to be paid sometime in the unknown future. If the remaining portion of the dowry could be obtained, a certain date would be set aside for the girl and her friend to invite all their young female relatives including the marriage ones. In that day, the groom and his friends would come back again in order to collect the girls, which is the meaning of *Noong* which has to take place in the groom's house.

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friends must seek permission from the mothers-in-law to meet her. This could sometimes be the first meeting ever between the groom and his own mother in-law. Although the two might have met somewhere several times before, the meeting would constitute the absolute legal one between the two. Ritually, the meeting is not between the groom and his mother-in-law alone. Thus, the mother-in-law invites her friends for the meeting during which the son-in-law and his friends give her and her friends special gifts which used to be in form of beads, jewels and precious stones and the girls gifts as well. But due to the cultural changes, the gifts became in form of cash. After that, the mother-in-law and her friends would give their blessings and allow their daughter to start her family life. The father would also be the last person to perform some rituals and offers blessings to his daughter.

At the end of that evening, the most interesting journey will start. The girl would be accompanied to the groom's village by hundreds of her friends in a very free environment of dance and songs. The journey would continue for the whole night even when the distance is known to be short between the two villages. The girls would meander till they reach in the early morning hours, nearly at three or four o'clock.

After leaving their village, the girls would start singing very sexually suggestive songs which they cannot sing in the presence of their relatives or members of their community. The songs would be unabashedly about male and female sex organs. The occasion is well-known as girls' day or girls' season which is readily recognizable by anyone passing by. The young men the girls encounter on the way, and who are not the girls' blood relatives become the target for jokes, wrestling and playful groping.

When the girls finally reach the groom's house in the wee hours of the morning, the elderly people would have already gone away, leaving the house entirely for the groom energetic visitors. Some of the girls' age-mates from the groom's side of the family would be at hand to offer services to the visitors. In the meantime, the girls would target the groom's brothers, sisters and young relatives for practical pranks, jokes and wrestling. The youth would enjoy exchanging all kind of jokes to the extent some girls would dare unclothe the young men and women from the groom's side, grope them. For those poor souls who have no knowledge of the culture and who may witness the behaviors of the girls and boys during this occasion for first time, might erroneously believe the girls to be promiscuous.

In the morning, some dedication rituals are conducted to signal that the bride is now officially the woman of the house. Everyone must accord her all the respect and honor she deserves. Depending on the quantity of the food prepared for them, the girls may stay at the grooms' home for five to seven days or longer.

Position of groom and bride during the marriage

Throughout the process being conducted since the first day when the young man approached the would-be wife, the two of them would abstain from eating or drinking in the presence of their respective in-laws. They would also abstain from eating (*Puoth*) foods that has been exchanged by the two families that is because a Nuer person believes that if he or she eats the food offered by the in-laws and the marriage does not succeed in the future, the foods would harm each of them in the future. This harm, according to them, may manifest itself in difficulties related to childbearing, among others. Therefore, during the marriage process, the man and his friends just dance and sing. Other people would have made alternative arrangements to feed the groom and company.

Similarly, the girl and her best friend would not stay and eat in the groom's home during the wedding. They would be hiding in one of the neighboring houses. After the traditional rituals are concluded and the girls have departed, the young man would now be free to visit his in-laws house regularly, departs very early in the morning; without eating or drinking.

The girl may continue staying with her parents till she gives birth to her first child. While she is there, the young man now would prepare a house for him and his wife to mark the beginning of their separation from the main family and its dependency. After two years, the groom will come to officially request to take his wife home, an act the Nuer call (*Wah Chang, or Nang*) or homecoming or going home, or taking home. But the child remains with the grandmother.

For her going home, the girl would receive a special milking cow from her father. The cow would, however, be owned by the husband. Some other gifts such as foods items would be prepared. The woman's best friend or sister or both would accompany her to her new home for some time. In her new home, the woman is treated to a small occasion during which her sisters-in-law would introduce her to the family as the new mother of everyone, including her husband's. The husband's best friends would drink and eat for the first time in this new home.

When it is time for the man to ask for his child to be brought home, he would prepare a very special celebration where now his mother-in-law and her friends would be invited for food for the first time. Some special gifts would also be prepared for them. Sometimes, the girls' father would accompany the girl's mother along with other wives. However, the girl's mother is the most important person, and the guest of honor, at the occasion. Afterwards, the girl's father would reciprocate by preparing a very special day for his son in-law and his best friend would be invited.

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Naming of the child

Although during the marriage ceremony the elderly people always prefer the first born to be a boy for many reasons, every child has its own value. Regardless of the child's gender, occurrences that take place at the time of the child's birth determine the naming of a Nuer child. The best color of a cow or a bull offered as part of the dowry, for instance, could be chosen as the name of the new-born. If they do not carry either their grandmothers' or grandfathers' names, all Nuer children definitely reflects either the color of a favorite cow or a bull or a sad or happy occasion that surrounded the birth of the child.

Conclusion

Marriage in the Nuer culture is the most important social organization. Basically, it aims to rejuvenate life and to perpetuate the cycle of community growth. Therefore, each family member's full participation in building the institution of marriage is paramount. The child of a married couple is a public figure who deserves care, nourishment, empathy, and protection from harm by every member of the community at all times and by all means.

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