The Ashbrides of Kwanyma

Traditional education in the various communities of Namibia involved many different customs and ceremonies, through which children and young people were taught their future roles as adults. Some of these customs and ceremonies are still practised today, while others have almost been forgotten.

Research on traditional education has so far been done mainly by men, focussing on training and initiation of boys. However, Sister recently found an interesting study on the traditional education of girls in the Ovambo and Herero communities. It was written by Dr Ndeutala Hishongwa as part of her thesis: Comparative Study of Women’s Education in Namibia. We thank Dr Hishongwa for her permission to publish the following excerpt.

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This custom was only practised in Ukwanyama. In the week after the group marriage rite, the brides were given a complete new costume for the month-long wandering about the district. They were smeared with white clay and ashes thus they were referred to as 'ash' brides, oihanangolo.

Being covered with ashes and clay they were thought of as transitional spirits and were looked upon as boys. People believed that they were possessed by spirits of great warriors whose names they would assume.

Before the brides put on their costumes as 'ash' brides they had to have a married women's headdress. The headdress was a five peaked hat of wire, fibre and hair.

During the time of wandering the ash girls' marriage hats were called by a ceremonial name for bread, omungome. Their central peak was decorated with a shrub of fern or another plant symbolic of reproduction.

Each ash girl had a row of whistles, filled with herbs and stopped with cotton at the ends. The girls also wore fibre goatees.

Each girl had a long string of aloe sticks wound round her neck and under her arms so that she would look like a porcupine. In 1915 the girls wore men's front aprons and imitation cartridge belts made of wood.

Meme Sara Hailonga (78) remembered the Ashbride Song.
In olden days, the brides wandered the district as ash girls for two or more months, but in more recent decades the time was shortened to about a month. The brides were accompanied by their little sisters, carrying baskets containing the ash girls' fresh supply of white clay dust and ashes to powder the girls when required.

The little girls powdered their own faces too, but not their bodies. Also, the little girls carried rhythm sticks which were used when singing and dancing. The brides were armed with a man's walking stick and whatever knobkierie sticks and other weapons they had succeeded in capturing from men. They were pretending to be boys and while walking the leader of the group called, 'We are boys'. The girls were thought of as 'wild things'.

During this period the brides assumed the names of famous warriors and took turns in telling stories of those heroes. In former times all men kept away from the ash girls in order to avoid being beaten by the girls and their weapons and knobkierie sticks being taken away.

It was also believed that a man whose weapons were taken away by the ash girls would be easily captured in war. A man also did not dare defend himself from those attacks because it was believed that a person who shed the blood of one of the girls would soon die.

During the wandering period girls slept in the bush camping under a tree or in the hut where their group marriage ceremony was held because their dignity as warriors did not allow them to be accommodated inside. They were given freedom to obtain food. For example, they could enter any garden and take whatever quantity of millet, beans, watermelons, or vegetables they desired. Accompanied by their mothers, the girls could visit their bridgroom's homes and their former boy companions for a feast of meat, porridge and beer. But on these visits the men had to be absent.

At the end of their period of seclusion, the brides were allowed to return to their own houses. They were then cleaned with meal, covered with red ochre and dressed in formal bridal clothing.

This marked the complementary rite of the puberty ceremony and the end of the young woman's life as a single girl. The rite also marked the beginning of the separation of the girl from her parents. The girl was thus eligible for marriage.

Following is one of many songs the ashbrides sang during the initiation period:

OSHE OVO HATU DI OKO
OSHIHANANOLO KUNASHIPO
OMUNHU UTOKA KUNASHIDILA
OHOTUMBULA NAXOMUENO
NAINAKULU YOKALUME
OHOTI NGAHO KOLILOYE
EEEEWA WU!
OVAMATI OOVO!

△ △ △ △ △ △

Here we come!
Ashbrides have no accidents
Ashbrides have no limits
One can name your father-in-law
by his first name
One can even call the little husband's grandmother by her first name
One can even swear
Eeewa! Wu!
We are the boys.