



African Unity Project GB

Representing the Congolese Community of Milton Keynes

Introduction

We are a community group based in Wolverton, established since 2006 and we serve the African French speaking community in Milton Keynes.

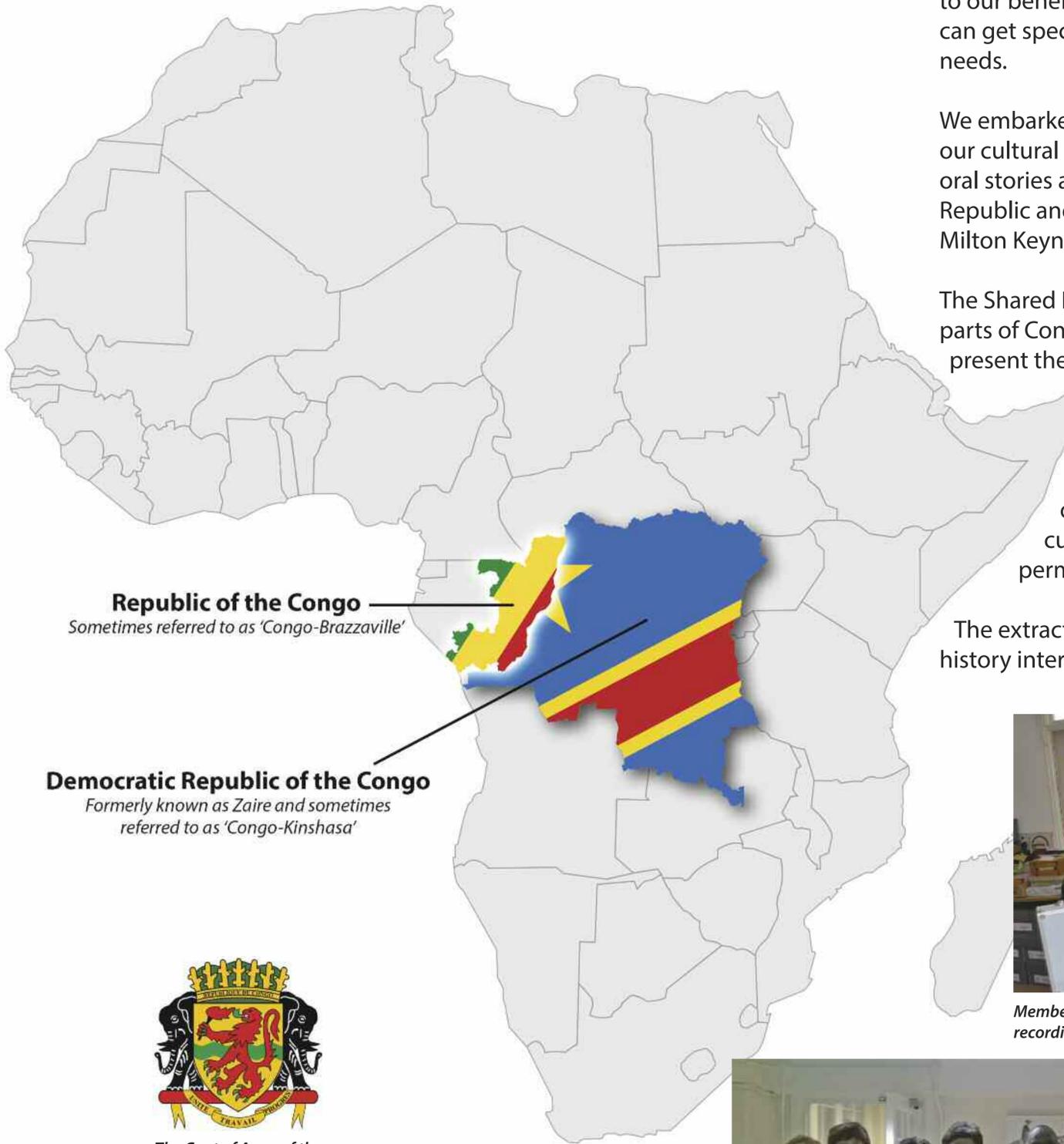
We provide general information, advice and guidance to our beneficiaries and signpost them to where they can get specialist advice and support linked to their needs.

We embarked on this HLF funded project to preserve our cultural heritage. We will focus on the narratives, oral stories and cultural traditions of the Congo, Republic and Democratic communities that live in Milton Keynes.

The Shared Identity Project records stories from all parts of Congo, Democratic and Republic, and will present them in a creative manner.

With the support of Heritage Lottery Fund, **African Unity Project GB** will produce a comic book that will illustrate our traditions and culture as a way for current and future generations to have a permanent memory of their roots.

The extracts on these panels are taken from the oral history interviews that form part of this project.



Republic of the Congo
Sometimes referred to as 'Congo-Brazzaville'

Democratic Republic of the Congo
Formerly known as Zaire and sometimes referred to as 'Congo-Kinshasa'



The Coat of Arms of the Republic of the Congo



The Coat of Arms of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The group recently visited a special exhibition of Congolese textiles (dating from the 16th century) at the London Textile Museum.



Members of the group being taught how to use the recording equipment.





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Birth



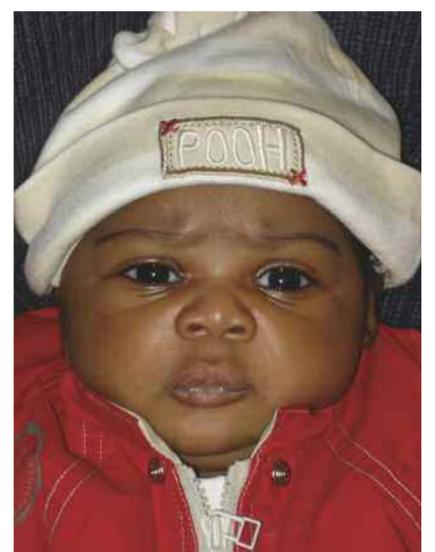
Adolf: Birth is something very significant in our Bantu culture and more precisely for us Kongo people, it is something extraordinary, this thing always tends to reunite the family. So when the news is given, the village chief announces this news to the entire village. They say for example that the woman has just given birth and we will celebrate that birth on Sunday. We invite everyone to be at "Mbongui" – they always have a place where they will meet, to solve problems, and they use the place to celebrate birth as well.

Pathy: If I understand you correctly, every birth must be informed to the village chief?

Adolf: Indeed.

Pathy: After the child is born, how is the naming ceremony done? How do you name a child? Is it linked to an event or related to something in particular?

Adolf: The name of the child is decided by the father, he has no external opposition. The naming of the child is done well before, I think at least two or three weeks after the child is born.



The bones from a lion are ground and mixed with warm water to bath a new born. They help them to be brighter and stronger.

Other bones can be used for fortune telling, healing, and for cleansing.

The tail is also from a lion, used by children born to royal families as a sign of their power and kingdom. They are also used to call upon spirits for protection and fortune telling.

Horns have many healing powers and virtues, mostly used in Royal Courts. They are also used for water purification and medicinal properties.



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Birth



Pathy: *What are twins called in your tribe?*

Adolf: *The twins, for example in the south [of Congo], we call them Nsimba and Nzouzi, no matter the sex. It is for both boys and girls.*

When it's twins the ceremony is different. It's a ceremony that is much more traditional in the sense that we have to get the children out of the house, so there are certain ceremonies that are done. I will explain what it means; they say, "Bana bo yala ba yala bo", it is for the twins, there is a ceremony that we call "Yala". The ceremony it is more structured than when it is only one child. I explain, for example, when there are twins, for the father of these children to pass the news to the village chief, he must bring two gallons of "Nsamba" – it is a wine that is made at the base of the palm tree – so he must bring two because they are twins,



These bells are used to make announcements in the community. When they are a set, they are used to welcome twins. They are also used as musical instruments.



This red stone is ground and mixed with water to make a healing paste. It also aids beauty and protection.

The white stone below is also ground and mixed with water to make a thick paste. It is used to welcome twins; two dots are dabbed onto the faces of the parents to identify them as parents of twins.

Shells are often used for fortune telling.



'Lucky nuts' are used for protection, especially of new-born baby boys "to protect them from evil eyes."



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Birth



Landry: *I will start with the childbirth as it is how we come into this world. The birth of a child, either boy or a girl, is not celebrated. We celebrate the birth of twins in my ethnic group. After giving birth the new mother has to stay indoors for about 6 months. After the 6 months, she will have to present the children to the family and friends; there will be a ceremony and rituals on the day. They will sing to her this song that they sing when twins are born. That's for the birth of twins. If it is a girl or a boy, there is not ceremony that will take place, just a normal arrival within the family.*

Nickly: *When a woman is pregnant, there is no ceremony. There will be one when she gives birth. When she is pregnant, people around her are happy and wait impatiently for the childbirth. When the child is born they will cook for the new mother. They will bring soaps and nappies for the new born.*

The Bembe will often name their child after their uncles or their father or even after the grandfather. They will always have a Bembe name. The new born will be given two names, either the name of the father and the grandfather or the name of the mother and the aunty.

William: *I want you to tell us precisely where you come from. How do you celebrate birth?*

Juslain: *Well, birth in a village, first to give birth is good news everywhere. When a child is born it is sign of joy for the entire family, you will see the woman being considered as a queen. From my tribe when a woman gives birth, she will stay indoors at least for three months or during a certain period of time.*

The neighbour will give support, by doing almost everything for her.



Wenge is a special wood. Some believe it is rich in mystic powers. It is used in its native Africa to make ceremonial masks and statues paying homage to gods.

Here it pays tribute to the hard work of African mothers who go about their work whilst carrying their children.

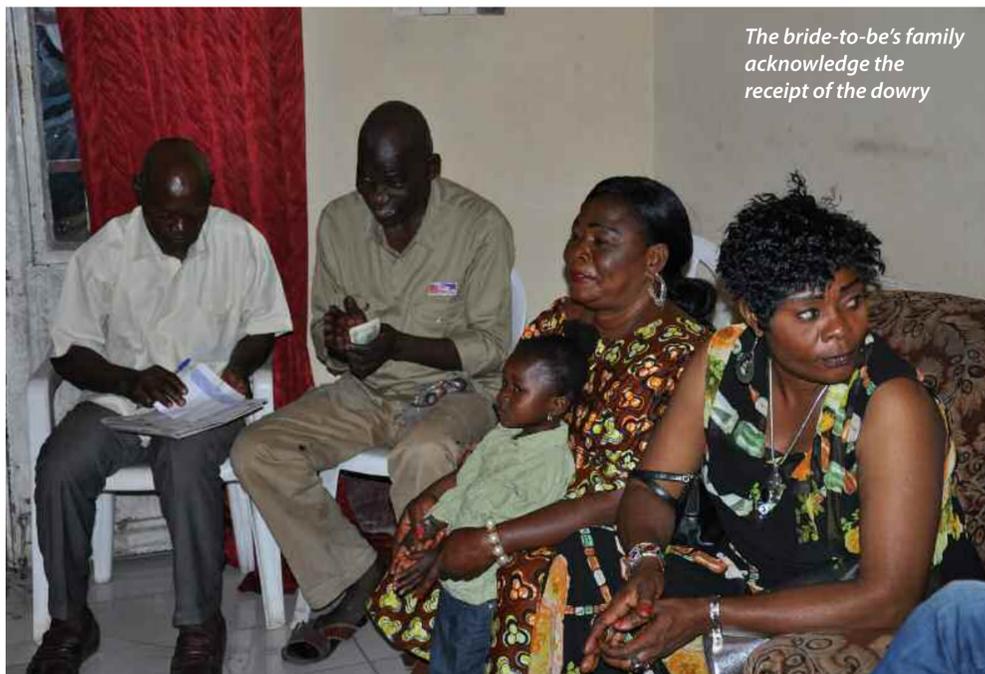




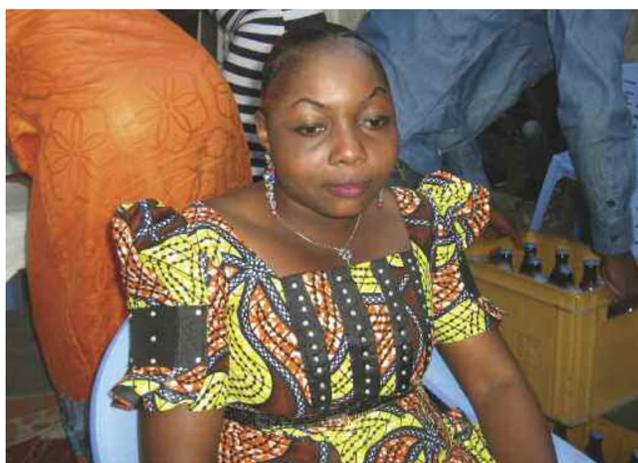
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Marriage



The bride-to-be's family acknowledge the receipt of the dowry



The bride-to-be offers a drink to the groom-to-be



The bride-to-be's family asks for the dowry to be presented

Jean Didier: *What are the main events that people celebrate in DR Congo?*

Patience: *As everywhere else in the world, I believe people celebrate birth. Giving birth is a major celebration event but for me I always associate it with death because when you are born, you also will die. The two go together. Between the two, the wedding which allows human beings to live and procreate. Whenever there is birth, people are happy, cook and dance. Moving to marriage, in my tradition specifically, this is an important event because the man doesn't choose his wife. It is up to his uncle to choose a wife for him and children belong to their mothers, a matriarchal system and he is the one to pay the dowry for his nephew who wants to get married. The wedding is mostly arranged between families, especially those who are very close and live together. Why do we pay the dowry? It's a sign that the man has means to look financially after the woman otherwise what is the point? We perceive the dowry as a list of gifts that the family of the groom is ready to give to the family of the bride-to-be and the gifts include: goat, clothes, kola nuts and so on... the sad thing today is that the practice has changed so badly as now everything needs to be paid in cash and they end up paying thousands of dollars to get a bride.*

Jean Didier: *You just said that the practice has changed. How do you do a wedding ceremony here in UK?*

Patience: *We keep our traditions but slightly different. What happens when you meet someone here, the woman calls her family back in DR Congo and tells them that she is ready to get married and the man also informs his family and requests them both to meet and proceed with ceremony and all requirements. The main difference here is that the man buys everything as requested by the bride's family and ships them to his family for them to give to the woman's family. The main difference is that in traditional society they used to choose a woman for a man but here both meet and agree to live together and inform their families, but they will still do the same things with regard to paying dowry and so on...*

Jean Didier: *You spoke about kola nuts, goat etc... Do you get all of that here and then send to DR Congo?*

Patience: *No. Among the requirements asked by the woman's family, there are things that can be bought there in Congo and there are some that can be bought here. You'll send cash to your family for them to make necessary arrangement over there.*



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Marriage



The dowry being received



Counting the dowry



William: *Let us talk now about marriage, what we call in "Lingala" "libala". How does it happen? What are the steps to follow before you take someone's daughter and put her in your house and call her your wife?*

Juslain: *Firstly, marriage from my culture can start anywhere, unless it is an arranged marriage. In the beginning, you will meet, and you act as in "caffouillage" [keep it low] to avoid gossip. Once you feel it is serious, first thing, the man has to go and introduce himself to the woman's family by taking some family member with him. He has to go with is "Noko" [maternal uncle], because he is the very important person in the family. You go so that the woman's family will be aware that when their daughter is out, she is with someone they know, in case of any problem they know where to look for her. That's what is called 'introduction'.*

After the introduction, then comes the "premier vin" which means the man goes with his parents to give a sign to the woman's family to know that their daughter belongs to them. After that stage, then comes the traditional wedding, religious wedding and the civil wedding (in the registration office), we have three types of marriage. After that the last thing is the dowry, when lots of things are asked of the man to give to the woman's family. Things like money, goat and other many things, at this stage the man has to spend lots of money to buy those things for the woman's family.

In the other hand the family of the woman also gives back something to the man's family. The reality is, in my culture, the man expends more.

Pipeeh: *The union of a man and a woman is arranged between two families, or is it just down to individuals?*

Nickly: *Both families will contribute to the dowry to start with. Both families will give presents to one and other, they will save money in order to do that.*

Pipeeh: *What is the special dish the in-laws will cook in order to receive/welcome them?*

Nickly: *The Bembe have a special dish that they call the "Vumlumako"; it is smoked pork meat with plantain bananas. That's something that cannot be missed on the Bembe's table. There will also be cassava leaves on the table.*



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Pathy: *How does marriage happen in relation to your home country, your province? Is it arranged or is it individual? How does it happen?*

Adolf: *Ok, there are two forms of marriage as you know, the first form is the arranged marriage, it is the parents who decide to find the spouse for their child. This can be a man or a woman, and the second marriage is more an individual marriage where the man finds his wife and presents her to his relatives or vice versa. There are some cases where a gentleman is married to a woman and the woman does not give him children, and he will be allowed to take another woman, but he must not abandon the first woman. He must always keep his first wife, and this is done with the approval of the first woman. So the first woman also has the right in the matter, she has no choice but she must still be aware of the situation. So the man has the right to go and take a second wife, and I do not say that it is official but it has become accepted as unofficial.*





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Death



This is a 'lokole', a traditional slit drum played by the Mongo people in different areas of the Congo. It is used both as a musical instrument and as a log drum to send messages in the bush. For example, it is known to be played to announce someone's death to the neighbouring villages.

Pathy: *How is death seen in your province? How do people receive the news that someone is gone?*

Adolf: *When people die at first people cry, and after it is a great feast, particularly when someone who is more than sixty dies. The people of the Bwenzu say that he lived his days. People almost don't cry, it is much more the feast. It is more painful when it is a young person, from zero to fifty years, it is mixed between feast and crying, because people said that it is a young man, although there will be a feast as well. When an old man of over 60 dies it is a 100 percent celebration. People will be well dressed, the corpse will be escorted with drums, so it is extraordinary. All the musicians of the area will come around, those who play the flute and those who play drums will play. The event can last two weeks, in which every day people gather somewhere, and do everything together, sleeping, eating, and any other activities for at least two weeks until the burial.*

Pipeeh: *How does the widow mourn her husband? What attitude does she have to have? How long does the mourning take?*

Nickly: *It normally takes one week to mourn the deceased. The widow is not supposed to speak to anyone, she has to keep her head down and when she needs to use the bathroom she has to be accompanied by two other widows. And the day before the burial they will shave her head.*





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Pepe: *How about when the woman just lost her husband? How is she supposed to mourn him? How do you do it within the Lari circle?*

Landry: *The society has changed, we're no longer in the 1960s. Back then when a woman loses her husband she was treated like a hostage, she could not do much other than staying where she has to be seen by everyone. Even going to the bathroom she needed to be accompanied, she could not take a bath or shower. She could not go out. She will only be allowed to go out on the day of the funeral. And after the funeral her deceased husband's family will tell her what to do; how long she will carry out the mourning process; which could easily be for up to two years. She would also receive instructions as to how to look, her presence. That does not include that in certain families they will be generous and ask her to only pay and show respect and not to carry on with the mourning process. Respect could mean anything from what you're wearing, how you present yourself, how do you respect your deceased husband. During that period women use to dress up in a complete black outfit, they will wear African clothes up to their knees. Things are now different, the widow dresses up in all white clothes that cover her feet, she will also wear a head-tie. The day before the funeral she wasn't allowed to even speak to her brother or any men around her. From the hostage she used to be, she is today the sensible widow. Today she can speak to anyone over the phone. I had a sister and cousin who lost their husbands and who call me and we spoke normally. Things have now changed. Things have now improved. The mourning process used to take up to three years but today it only takes 45 days; on the 45th day they will ask for a mass; people will come by. There have been cases where a widow will carry on with the mourning process for six months because of the love she has for him. Again, it depends on the women. Now when it comes to a husband who has just lost her wife, they used to have a black sign in the form of a button on their shirts. I can describe it as a snow ball, a tiny one. And when you see a man with that you will understand and know that he is mourning his wife.*

Pepe: *How long is he supposed to keep it on for?*

Landry: *Back in the days he used to wear it for about a year.*





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Death



Patrick: *How about when a head of the tribe passes away? How does the tribe react to his death?*

Edward: *It's an enormous loss because he was a head of the tribe, it is an authority that is gone. There will be a big turmoil within the tribe, they will have to find who will succeed him. There will be so many different things that they will have to look in to find the correct replacement. It is a powerful position and who says power says problems. There will also be some rituals and ceremonies to take place.*

Patrick: *All that so the tribe does not feel that bad luck was thrown at them?*

Edward: *Exactly, and that is why I said that the turmoil will be huge. The state of great disturbance, confusion and uncertainty will reign within the tribe. The tribe might even ask if the chief did not throw away his baton, has been any transmission, who will be next, etc... They need to make sure that his replacement is the perfect one to succeed his throne. The level of concern will be very high. There is a story whereby the nephew killed his uncle and his uncle's wife because she was pregnant with the future heir to the throne. He did it because he wanted to be the next person to reign the tribe.*

Jean Didier: *We covered birth, wedding and divorce. Can we move to mourning?*

Patience: *It is always sad to lose someone and naturally, people cry and regardless of who is dead, people will gather together and spend night there. Depending on their rank within the society, funerals may last up to three days or more, if it is a chief, notable or someone with high position in the community. In my tribe, people cry, dance and recall what the dead person did when he was still alive. The next morning, they will do a few ceremonies and then buried. Three days later, if it was a man who died, his family has a moral duty to give a shower to the widow and the meaning of that ceremony is to separate them from each other and break their union. They encourage one of the brothers to marry the widow so that she remains in the family and raises her children but now it is common for widow to move on with her life anyway.*

