

# LOOKING FOR A SPOUSE IN MWERA FOLK NARRATIVES

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## INTRODUCTION

Folk narratives do reflect on the reality of life of those who tell them, even though it is frequently not rendered in a straightforward but rather in a subtle and sometimes distorted way (cf. Möhlig et al. (eds), 1988; Röhrich, 1964; Simmons, 1961; Steinbrich, 1997). In the rural areas of Africa these aspects of reality are up to now characterised by social prescriptions and cultural rules which put the individual under constraints one can not easily escape. The medium of folk narratives allows for some imaginative freedom in respect to these prescribed ways. This holds especially true in respect to marriage and marital life, where individual needs and desires can easily clash with social rules and thus lead to conflict. The importance of this topic is indicated by the large number of African folk narratives which deal with it. This also applies to the narratives of the Mwera who live as cultivators in the Southeast of the Republic of Tanzania. The Mwera speak a bantu language and they still narrate their folk stories in their villages. The performance of stories – the Mwera call them *ndango* – predominantly takes place in a family setting, where women, men and to a lesser extend children can act as narrators.

Between 1987 and 1991 I recorded some series of *ndango* in a kind of “induced natural context” (cf. Goldstein, 1964: 80 ff.). Each series comprises a number of narratives by different narrators, women and men, the women being in the majority. Many of the stories are dealing with special problems of marital life, like sterility, unfaithfulness and the difficult relationships with in-laws. But quite a number of stories concentrate on the period preceding marriage, the time of looking for and choosing a spouse. In this article I will focus on these stories.

## TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE RULES

For a better understanding of these narratives some information about their cultural background is required. The Mwera have matrilineal descent and are part of the “matrilineal belt” of Africa. Each person belongs to her or his group of

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matrikin, to which she or he must be loyal. In return each member of the group is entitled to get support by the maternal relatives. According to traditional rules a man should marry the daughter of his maternal uncle (cross cousin marriage), who belongs to another matrilineage. The couple has to take residence at the wife's home place (uxorilocal residence) at least for some years. There the husband has to work on the land of his wife's descent group. His domestic authority, especially in respect to his children, is limited. The person of authority is the wife's brother. Audrey Richards has stated that

the problem in all such matrilineal societies is similar. It is the difficulty of combining recognition of descent through the woman with the rule of exogamous marriage.[...] There are, of course, a number of solutions to the matrilineal puzzle (Richards, 1950: 246).

The solution of the Mwera is that which Richards calls "the detachable husband" (Richards, 1950: 248). It can be observed in societies practising uxorilocal residence. The men in this system have to act as mother's brothers with authority over their own local descent group while at the same time they are living in their wives' villages. There they remain strangers whereas their wives are at home and enjoy emotional support from their people. It is due to this fact, that marriages are not very stable. As Richards puts it: "A man who cannot stand the situation in his wife's village leaves and goes elsewhere" (Richards, 1950:248). But the woman is also affected by the "matrilineal puzzle". Her affection for her husband can bring her into a conflict of loyalty between him and her brother. When after some years of marriage the husband asks her to follow him to his own home place (virilocal residence) she must come to a decision which virtually cannot meet all demands and therefore must remain unsatisfactory.

Due to a number of factors the entire matrilineal system today is in a process of transformation towards patrilineal descent (cf. Moser, 1984 and 1987). Some former responsibilities of the mother's brother have passed over to the father, like for example paying school fees for the children. I heard many men complaining about the unjustness that the children should not belong to their father while they cause them expenses. The lack of authority over their children presented a problem to them even in former times and it does so even more today since their position as mother's brothers has been weakened. For this reason they don't want to comply with the matrilineal system anymore.

The mwera stories about choosing a spouse must be interpreted against this cultural background. There are principally two types of these stories, one dealing with the marriage of women, the other with that of men. Both types start with stating that a certain person is not married. Marriage is not a private affair but of social significance and therefore the unmarried state constitutes a lack or deficiency which in due course of the stories is striven to be overcome. Within the two types there is some variation. I will give one full example for each type which shall then be interpreted and compared to one another as well as with

other variants of the same type. The interpretation is based on comments by and interviews with mwera informants. Comparisons will be drawn also to similar tales from other parts of Africa where patrilineal descent exists. It will also be examined whether there is a bias in rendering the stories depending on whether the narrator is a man or a woman.

## STORIES OF THE DIFFICULT GIRL

We shall first consider stories which centre around the girl and her choice of a husband. The following story was narrated in 1987 by an approximately 80 years old man. The audience consisted of women, men and children. It is rendered here in a narrow translation, supplementary information is given in brackets where necessary.

So did a person in former times. There once was a girl who rejected all men who proposed to her. That went on until a pig came out of the bush [and transformed itself in a very handsome man]. "You, girl, I would like to marry you". She said: "Oh! I love men who are well dressed, who have a lot of hair, not weak men, no! Just like you". She said "Yes" and so that man stayed. In the evening he asked his in-laws: "Show me where is the field to be cultivated". They said: "Oooh! You have to cultivate over there, let's go and show you". Okay, they went off. They said: "You may cultivate here, here and here". He said: "I have understood. I shall cultivate in here". Okay, they returned. The next morning he set out, he took the knife and the axe and went there. When he arrived he started to sing:

dig up, dig up  
dig up the tasty *mingoko*<sup>1</sup>-roots

mother is here  
she has shown me the tendrils  
which have no leaves  
father is here  
he has shown me the forest  
this forest of the *mingoko*

dig up, dig up  
dig up the tasty *mingoko*-roots

Then he went to dig in the forest, that was how he cultivated, and he ate the *mingoko*. It went on like this. At twelve o'clock he rested and he had cut no tree. He rested. At two o'clock he sang:

dig up, dig up ...

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<sup>1</sup> The *mingoko* are a kind of wild plant of which the roots are edible.

He dug *tirí tirí tirí tirí tirí*<sup>2</sup>, like this! Six o'clock, he returned. He returned home. [There he said:] "Ouh! That is real fieldwork!" He slept. In the morning he rushed out with his axes, out he went. He arrived, *gojo*! His clothes he threw there

dig up, dig up ...

Like this! Twelve o'clock, he rested and ate [the *mingoko*-roots]. He ate them all. And he started again

dig up, dig up ...

*tirí tirí tirí tirí tirí*, he got a lot [of *mingoko*-roots], then he ate. Now his brother-in-law said: "Please, I shall go with you to the field." The husband said: "I did not ask you to do so, you can't come just like this." "Oh, yes, I want to see it." "No, you shall not come!" But now that one followed stealthily. They went. [The brother said to himself:] "Oh, he takes off his shirt, why does he take it off?" Now, he [the husband] laid his shirt there and also laid off his clothes. Aha.

dig up, dig up ...

Okay, that one [the brother] returned. He said: "People, he is a pig there. Now I will prepare mine." That husband returned. The wife prepared the *ugali* [stiff porridge] for the evening! Now he ate.

dig up, dig up [the brother started to sing that song]

[The husband said] "Amamama, man, don't sing like that, what kind of songs are these? These, which you are singing, of what kind are they?" "A'a, but no! Oh! Just let me sing."

dig up, dig up [the brother sang]

[The husband said] "A'aaa, you, brother-in-law, don't do such a thing, man! These songs are not for singing!" Oho, the tail is appearing.

dig up, dig up [the brother sang]

A'a, he turned into a pig, he ran away *pepepepepepe*. A pig! It went off – "Do you see, my sister? This comes from rejecting the other, good men. Do you see? That thing which went off, what kind of animal is it? It's name is pig. As you can see, he will make efforts to please you, so that you will take him." So did a person in former times. That's the end of the story.

During the period of courtship the young women experience an appreciation by men which they cannot expect to continue after marriage. The brother in the story comments on this when he says to his sister: "He [the wooer] will make

<sup>2</sup> "Tirí" is an ideophone, that is a "vivid representation of an idea in sound" (Doke, 1935: 118 f.). In the translation they are added to their meaning in order to preserve some of the flavour of the original narration. In the original text they sometimes stand alone and sometimes are added to a verb or adjective.

efforts to please you". But the story also makes clear that considering only the physical attractiveness of a man can lead to a wrong choice. In the first part the story is based on the wishful thinking that it is possible to get a really attractive husband who fulfils the girl's sexual desires. Thus it is not surprising that the real nature of the wooer is animal, since this stands for carnal instincts. His animality on the other hand is the cause of his asocial behaviour. He is not concerned with his wife's needs for food and an income. While he is pretending to work hard to clear the field he is pursuing his own satisfaction with food. Taking the "matrilineal puzzle" into account, it is not surprising that the one who discovers the real nature of the husband is the wife's brother. In many versions though not in this one his people at home do not believe him when he tells them about his discovery. But in the evening when all have come back to the homestead from their work he uses a trick to make the husband turn into the pig again. Under these circumstances the marriage cannot of course continue and the pig leaves the scene. The brother, and by assuming this role also the narrator, then takes the opportunity to warn his sister and the female audience respectively not to be capricious in choosing a partner: ordinary men are better fitting for marriage. Besides expressing this explicit warning, the story, through the representation of events, reminds the women in the audience of their responsibility towards the community of which they themselves are a part and which includes also their future children. That means that in making their choice they have to consider their future husband's economic ability and willingness to support them. But the story doesn't end too badly for the woman. It is just her marriage which is broken. She had not directly suffered from her husband and if her brother had not revealed his identity she wouldn't even have been ashamed. Of course it is clear that in the long run the marriage could not persist, since the husband doesn't work for it.

Stories of the difficult girl are widespread in Africa. In many of them, especially in West Africa, the outcome for the girl is either fatal or at least very humiliating (cf. Görög-Karady, 1997: 77 ff.; Steinbrich, 1997:263 ff.). In those stories the wife after marriage follows her husband to his own place where she discovers that he is an ogre or a wild beast. In some versions he threatens to kill and eat her. In most cases she can be rescued by her own relatives, often a younger brother or sister, and led back to her home village. These stories have been interpreted within the frame of patrilineal descent, where the women have to leave their families after marriage in order to become incorporated into their affinal families. The unwillingness to accept a wooer by the difficult girl in the stories is thus seen as a means to avoid leaving her family. In the Mwera context this motif can be excluded since the girls remain in their families even after marriage. The frame for interpretation is rather the conflict between individual desire and the demands of the community. By marrying a man for his physical appearance only a girl gives her own desires priority over social and economical concerns. The latter find their

advocate in the girl's brother, who realizes that the husband doesn't work and therefore cannot sustain a family.

Another version of that type of story was told by a woman of about 60 years<sup>3</sup>. The husband in that version is an elephant. He asks the girl whether she wants to marry him. Both she and her family agree. This husband says that he never eats salted food. In the beginning the wife and her family respect his request but after some time the mother of the wife rebels and puts salt in his food. He eats it without realizing that it is salted. After supper he goes to sleep with his wife. A short time later she comes running out of her house crying that her husband has changed into a monstrous thing. Everybody runs to see it. Really, there is an elephant lying on the bed sleeping. He awakes and rises, thereby demolishing the roof of the house. He disappears in the bush.

In this story the female narrator doesn't refer explicitly to the girl's shortcomings. That she doesn't accept normal men is understood by the members of the audience because they have heard so many versions of the story. Still it is significant that the narrator doesn't explicitly blame the girl for her wrong choice of a partner. Another detail is that it is not the brother, but the girl's mother who unmasks the husband. It is evident that the narrator identifies with that story-participant, since she is in the same phase of life as herself. The same could be shown for the narrator of the preceding story where the narrator identified with the brother in the story.

It must be pointed out that the Mwera also have stories of the woman who is married to an ogre who wants to kill and eat her. In these stories the wife after some time of marriage goes with her husband to his home place to live there. Her younger and awful brother follows them despite his sister's refusal to take him with her because of her fear that he might be a disgrace to her. It is he who then discovers that his brother-in-law is an ogre who together with his fellows wants to kill and eat his sister. He warns her and also organizes their escape on a magic flying object. Back at home the woman abjures her haughtiness and promises never to forget from now on that her brother is her sole guardian. In the stories of this kind there is no reference made to the process of choosing a husband. The conflict clearly arises from the dual loyalty of the wife towards her brother and her husband. The female protagonist is not depicted as the difficult girl but as the haughty sister who despises her malformed brother. Thus the matrilineal Mwera have two types of tales where in patrilineal contexts these are moulded into one. A girl's choosing of a partner is not of such great significance in a culture where husbands are "detachable". That's why the consequences in mwera stories about the difficult girl are not severe. But in the social system of the Mwera a sister's loyalty towards her brother is central. Thus the stories with a bad outcome for the woman emphasise the conflicting dual loyalty to her brother and her husband. The bad outcome makes the warning more effective.

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<sup>3</sup> It was recorded in 1987 at another occasion. The audience was predominantly female.

## STORIES OF THE YOUNG MAN WHO CREATES HIMSELF A WIFE

The Mwera do not only tell stories about the unmarried young girl but also about her male counterpart. Men are the active part in the process of wooing. According to traditional rules the maternal cross cousin should be the preferred partner and the men have to live with her at her home place. In the stories of the unmarried man the acquisition of a wife differs considerably from reality. The husband doesn't woo but in contrast creates a wife exclusively for himself with the help of a supernatural power. In my collection of narratives these stories were predominantly narrated by men. The following story was told by an old man of about 70 years in 1987. He together with another man had come to my house to tell some stories.

There was once a man. That man had no wife and so he carved a woman from the trunk of a tree. He put it into a clay pot and covered it. After ten days he opened the pot and found a very nice girl in it. Aaah! Okay, he bought her clothes and dressed her. Now, when she was passing [in the village] some young men thought: "Aah, that girl, I will take her away from him." And they persuaded her until she agreed to go away with one of them. And so [the young man] had taken away his wife. That man said: "Aah, to take my wife of me whom I myself have carved, that's impossible." Aah! He beat the drum and there assembled the antelope, the elephant and the guinea fowl. He [the man] said: "People, I have summoned you because I want someone to bring me back my clothes from my wife, and my things. I want to send someone so that he should claim them there where she is married." [The animals answered:] "Yes." [He called the antelope:] "Now, you, Antelope." [The antelope said in his natural voice:] "kwa, kwa, iba." [The man said:] "Aah, she [the wife] will run away because of fear. You go back. Now, Elephant!" [The elephant said:] "woo, woo." He [the man] said: "You will hit everything. You, Lion!" The lion said: "mmm, mmm." He said: "Aaah, she will be afraid. Now who could go?" He said: "You, Pigeon." "kuukuu, kuukuu." He said: "You shall go." The pigeon sang:

kuukuu kuukuu  
you somebody, you Mwera  
give me my clothes  
and I was sent

Aah, that man who had caused the wife to run away, he said [to her]: "Give him his clothes." Now that girl went and took off the clothes and gave them to the pigeon. The pigeon brought them back and said: "There." And that man said: "You have to go again."

kuukuu kuukuu  
you, pigeon, go, pigeon  
give him his things  
he sent me  
give him his things

[The new husband said to the wife:] "Take off, take off, take off for him all the bracelets you are wearing, and give him the necklace too." The pigeon went and gave it to the man.

He said: "There is still something." The pigeon said: "Now what has been left behind?" He said: "There is still my tree which I carved. Go and bring it to me."

kuukuu kuukuu  
you, Mwera, give him his tree  
he has ordered me

[The new husband said to his wife:] "Aaah, give him [the tree]." But then he was startled: The wife wasn't there any more. Aah, she was a tree-trunk. This is the end. The moral is that there is no gain in leaving each other. If you are married, there comes another one and takes away your partner. This is no good. The outcome is this [like in the story].

The way the man in the story gets himself a wife is pure wishful thinking. With the help of some supernatural power he creates a wife of his own. This wife has no relatives with whom he would have to bother. Furthermore the carved wife lives with her husband virilocally and that means that he doesn't have to leave his home. All the fundamental difficulties which the "matrilineal puzzle" present to a husband can thus be avoided. Furthermore, the man doesn't have to ask the girl but just makes her his wife. By doing so he also avoids the risk of being rejected by a girl. In another version the man's share in the creation of the wife is diminished. In that version he finds a white and wonderful smooth stone which he puts in a clay pot. There it is turned into a beautiful girl by a supernatural power. Not only does the white and smooth stone remind us of an egg, this opening sequence of the story also very much resembles another tale-type of the Mwera the subject of which is sterility of a woman or a couple. In some of the versions of that type the woman puts some fruits into a clay pot where they are turned into children. In the stories about sterility and the "magic birth" of children, the woman loses them in the end by announcing their origin which she had to keep a secret. It is in just the same way that the man loses his wife in the above-mentioned version of the story of the unmarried man. The similarity of plot and symbolism in these two stories with different topics points to a similar conception concerning the problem of childlessness of a woman and the unmarried state of a man by the Mwera. In that respect it is interesting that the story of the unmarried man was told immediately after an old woman had narrated a story of the childless woman<sup>4</sup>. Obviously the narrator was inspired by that preceding story.

In all versions of that type the man loses his wife at the end, as is the case in the stories of the difficult girl. The reason either being that he gives away the secret of her origin or that she is seduced and taken away by another man. In the end the wife becomes what she had been before. Thus the story shows that such an abnormal marriage cannot last. To indulge into this sort of marriages in fantasy nevertheless provides an outlet for the frustrations of normal marriage.

<sup>4</sup> The stories were narrated in 1991 as the last two in a series of twelve.



There is another story of the unmarried man which runs parallel to the stories of the difficult girl in that the partner chosen is an animal<sup>5</sup>. An unmarried man catches a female baboon in his trap. He cuts her tail and she turns into a woman. He gives her the name Fatuma and makes her his wife. Then he sends her to the fields to guard them against the plundering baboons. But Fatuma recognises the baboons as her matrilineal kin. With a song she invites them to come to the field and eat. The baboons follow her invitation. This goes on for several days. Eventually Fatuma tells the baboons that she would like to live with them again. They advise her to start a quarrel with her husband so that he will send her away. By following the advice she tells him that she has failed as guardian of the field and accuses herself of not being a good wife. She says he'd better send her away. But he is not inclined to do so and tells her that she wouldn't even know her home to which she could return to. He thinks that she has forgotten her origins. In the end Fatuma's mother's brother finds her tail and gives it back to her the next time they meet at the field. Now she turns in a baboon again. The group of baboons disappears in the wood while the husband who had followed his wife this time stays behind crying.

Like the pig in the story of the difficult girl the baboon who was turned into a woman isn't concerned with the need of securing food for the family. It is the special irony of this story that in spite of her transformation into a human being the woman recognises her maternal kin and behaves loyal to them. The pig in the story of the difficult girl also made reference to his mother and father when he sang the song which facilitated his transformation into a pig. I believe that this is an expression of the antagonism between one's own matrilineal kin and the affinal relatives in mwera society.

In my collection there is one single version of the story of the unmarried man which was narrated by a woman and which stresses a detail which indicates her female perspective. In the opening sequence she refers to what the unmarried state of the man implies for his sisters. The protagonist of the story who is not yet married is urged by his sisters' husbands to marry since they are tired that their wives still have to cook food for him. The mother of the unmarried man supports the request of her sons-in-law. She asks them not to give food to her son anymore. This special accentuation of details in the story comments on a woman's work-load which the narrator knows from her own experience. Food and eating also are metaphors of power and thus the sharing of food from the same pot points to the rivalry between the husband and the brother of a woman. This shows that the problems of every-day life as well as fundamental cultural issues are equally reflected in folk narratives.

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<sup>5</sup> This story was narrated in 1987 by a man of about 50 years

## CONCLUSION

There are two types of mwera narratives which deal with choosing a partner by women and men respectively. These must be interpreted in the frame of the matrilineal descent of this people and their practise of uxorilocal residence. Marriage is a complicated issue for the individual because it puts him or her right into the “matrilineal puzzle”. Since reality is so difficult in respect to marriage the narratives are used to express the feelings about it symbolically. Individual desires as well as fears concerning the dangers of marriage are represented in the stories.

The Mwera tell stories about the acquisition of a partner by women as well as men. The common feature of the stories concerning the marriage of women is the difficult girl who rejects ordinary men and is eventually duped by a wild animal. The stories about the unmarried man are characterised by his creating a wife by himself with varying degrees of support by a supernatural power. In both types the partner in the end is lost for different reasons. The stories warn women not to overemphasise personal desires but to consider social demands when choosing a partner. The stories which centre around the unmarried man express his desire to avoid the descent group of his wife as well as uxorilocal residence. But the man’s efforts in these stories proof to be futile.

Stories of both types are narrated by women as well as men. It could be shown that the narrators comment on the stories stressing or neglecting details of the plot. They can also speak through a story-participant as did the narrator of the first story. By their accentuation of details they also comment on problems of every-day life. This accentuation depends on factors like gender and age.

The mwera stories of the difficult girl differ from the West African versions of the same type. The young wife’s journey with her husband to his home where she runs into danger is integral to the West-African stories but not part of the mwera stories. This adventure has developed a specific type of story of it’s own in mwera orature. The stories of the difficult girl do not have too drastic consequences for her. This corresponds to the feature of the “detachable husband” in mwera culture. The stories where the woman is humiliated concentrate on the wife’s conflict of loyalty between her brother and husband. They form a type of their own which resembles that part of the West-African stories of the difficult girl which begins with the journey of the newly married couple.

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## ABSTRACT

Between 1987 and 1991 some series of folk narratives of the Mwera In Southeast-Tanzania were recorded. Approximately ten percent of the narratives deal with the looking for a spouse by men and women. They are interpreted against the cultural background of matrilineal descent, cross cousin marriage and uxorial residence of the Mwera. These cultural features cause a difficult relationship between the family of a woman and her husband which Richards (1950: 246) called the "matrilineal puzzle". This refers to the fact that a man has authority over his sister's children while at the same time he must stay at his wife's village and has little influence on his own children. The resulting conflicts for the individual in finding a spouse feature in many folk narratives of the Mwera. Their frequency points to the importance of the topic. The stories about a girl's choice depict the girls as insisting in a physically attractive partner. The unmarried men create themselves a wife with the help of a supernatural power. Both, women and men loose their partners in the end. Stories of both types are interpreted in comparison to each other. They are seen as the expression of individual desires conflicting with social demands. Their rendering by female and male narrators differs from each other in the accentuation of details of the plot. Comparison is drawn also with the stories of the difficult girl from patrilineal contexts in West-Africa.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Zwischen 1987 und 1991 wurden mehrere Folgen von Erzählungen bei den Mwera in Südost-Tansania aufgenommen. Knapp zehn Prozent dieser Erzählungen behandeln die Partnersuche von Frauen und Männern. Diese Erzählungen werden auf dem Hintergrund der matrilinearen Deszendenz, Kreuzkusinenheirat und uxorialer Residenz der Mwera interpretiert. Die genannten kulturellen Merkmale bedingen ein schwieriges Verhältnis zwischen der Familie einer Frau und ihrem Ehemann, das von Richards (1950: 246) treffend als "matrilineal puzzle" bezeichnet wurde. Das Grundproblem besteht darin, daß ein Mann Autorität über die Kinder seiner Schwester ausübt, jedoch mit seiner Frau in deren Dorf leben muß. Daraus resultieren Konflikte der Partnerfindung, die die Mwera in ihren Erzählungen bearbeiten. Nach dem Kriterium der Erzählfrequenz ist dies ein wichtiges Thema. Die Erzählungen von der Partnerwahl der Frau und des Mannes bilden einen je eigenen Typ. Erzählungen von der Partnerwahl der Frau stellen die Frau als schwieriges Mädchen dar, die auf einem besonders attraktiven Ehemann besteht. In den Erzählungen vom unverheirateten Mann stellt sich dieser mit der Unterstützung durch eine übernatürliche Macht

seine Frau selbst her. Bei beiden wird der Ehepartner am Ende verloren. Die beiden Typen werden vergleichend interpretiert. Sie werden als Ausdruck des Konflikts zwischen individuellen Wünschen und gesellschaftlichen Ansprüchen aufgefaßt. Beide Typen werden von Männern und Frauen vorgetragen, doch sie unterscheiden sich in ihren Akzentuierungen. Die Erzählungen vom schwierigen Mädchen werden außerdem mit westafrikanischen Erzählungen von ähnlichem Typ verglichen.

## RESUMO

Entre 1987 e 1991 recolhemos algumas séries de narrativas populares dos Mweras no sudoeste da Tanzânia. Cerca de dez por cento dessas narrativas dizem respeito à procura de um cônjuge. Neste artigo, interpretamo-las à luz da filiação matrilinear, casamento entre primos cruzados e residência uxorilocal dos Mweras. Estas características culturais dão lugar entre a família da mulher e o seu marido, a que Richards (1950:246) chamou “*puzzle* matrilinear”, o facto de um homem ter autoridade sobre os filhos da sua irmã, tendo ao mesmo tempo que ficar na aldeia da sua mulher, com pouca influência sobre os seus próprios filhos. Daí que muitos contos dos Mweras refiram as dificuldades com que um indivíduo se depara para encontrar um cônjuge. A sua frequência denota a importância dada a este tema. As histórias em que uma rapariga escolhe apresentam as raparigas insistindo num parceiro fisicamente atraente. Os homens solteiros arranjam uma mulher com ajuda sobrenatural. Quer os homens quer as mulheres perdem o seu cônjuge no final. Interpretamos ambos os tipos de histórias, comparando-os, e concluimos que são expressões do conflito entre desejos individuais e requisitos sociais. Os contos reflectem o sexo dos narradores pela diferente ênfase dada aos detalhes da intriga. Estabelecemos também uma comparação com os contos da rapariga difícil pertencentes a contextos patrilineares da África Ocidental.