

In the Shadow - #4

Rwandans love cows. Certainly that's one of the reasons I love these people, if only subconsciously. Though not to the level of worship or idolatry, there is clearly a deeply enshrined honor of bovines in the culture. The traditional Rwandan breed has huge horns. The bigger the better! Most of the cattle seen around the country today though, are the result of several generations of artificial insemination with European breeds such as Holstein and Jersey. They look very similar to what we're accustomed to seeing in the US, albeit somewhat smaller and thinner. I could go on for a while about the local dairy business, but that will be a subject for another day. For now I want to talk about cows and weddings. Yes, the two topics are related.

When a couple plans to be married, the groom's family gives a dowry to the bride's family. The ancient tradition is for a cow(s) to be given during an elaborate ceremony. Since many families no longer live in the more rural areas and don't own cows (though virtually everyone has at least a large vegetable garden), money is given instead of cows. Grace and I were privileged to attend one of these ceremonies here in Gisenyi.

It was held on a Saturday morning, the wedding to take place in the afternoon. For me and my "let's get this thing over with" mentality the service was entirely too tedious, but fascinating nonetheless. It was held in a large meeting room. We sat around for an hour or so as folks filtered in. The bride and groom's fathers talked back and forth. There were exchanges of small gifts, then "the cow" was given. Much to my disappointment, the only cow present was a recording of mooing. At this point bottles of water, soft drinks and beer were brought around to all of us. To put you all at ease, I drank an orange Fanta, and Grace, who doesn't take sugar, had the water.

Finally, after much ado. The wedding party paraded in with lots of ceremony, music and dancing. After some more exchange between the two families everyone went to the buffet table for a plate of food. We proceeded to load up with potatoes, rice, vegetables and fruit (all of the locally grown fresh produce is awesome), then we were given a small piece of beef. Servers came around once more with drinks and soon it was time to go. The wedding ceremony was later held at the Catholic church, which we didn't attend.

Though I don't care much for a lot of pomp and circumstance, I think it's important to keep and appreciate long-held cultural traditions. There is a continuity and connection with the past, present and future. Dowry ceremonies might not be my thing, but in the end I thought it was pretty cool.

For the Master, Chris Elliott with the Church of the Brethren Rwanda.

