

**BRIDE PRICE AND PARTICIPATION OF THE YOUTH AMONG
THE LUO IN KENYA**
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The issues in the institution of marriage invoke keen and critical focus especially now when human relations are substantially influenced by the socio economic and technological changes. The process of actualizing marriage is as significant as the institution. Bride price and other related marriage gifts or traditional negotiable tokens offered to and by parents occupy strategic positions within the realm of traditional processes in African marriages. For the youth, their position and role in this process remains scantily explored and explained. The justification of the youth's involvement and the resultant impacts outlined on their lives are more of assumptions and raises significant questions about their participation.

This paper attempts to examine the position that the female and the male youth occupy and the roles they perform during this process, considering the fact that such forum acts as learning grounds for those yet to marry, especially among the Luo in Kenya. The paper further explores these positions and roles at different stages of the price like, preparation, reception, negotiations, and payment of bride price and delivery of the price and the participation of the youth.

The paper concludes by examining the impact of their involvement in the exercise with particular attention on how it affects them psychologically, materially and socially.

For purposes of this discussion, bride price is seen as the traditional negotiable tokens offered to the parents of a girl set to be married, through the boy and his company, by the family of the boy. Among the Luo in Kenya, the boy and his companions on the bride price entourage are viewed as messengers of their respective families. They are messengers with some items to offer and also authorized to negotiate on behalf of their families what the in laws on what they would want in addition to what has been carried or taken.

The youth in this context, mean those boys and girls of upper primary school age and secondary education school age, particularly those not married, even when they have children.

Bride price process among the Luo is accomplished in two vital stages, which can be executed simultaneously or separately depending on preparations and circumstances prevailing for the involved families.

The first stage is called "Tero Ayie" (seeking consent of the girls parents). In this stage the boy having met the girl elsewhere or through a go-between arrangement, makes an appointment to visit the girl in her parent's home, purposefully to introduce themselves and seek the consent of the parents. The visit that normally lasts only hours within daybreak, involves the girl being asked in front of her visitors whether she knows the visitors and whether she accepts the purpose of their visit to their home.

If she consents to both (Oyie), then the visitors offer a financial token to her mother or one in her position at the moment. The amount is not standard but varies depending on the socio economic status the family of the boy. The "ayie" is not negotiable and its handed over by one member of the entourage to the mother. Lately, other monies of less amounts are distributed to the cooks who includes all the girls in the home who

participated in the ushering, welcoming, cooking and serving; also a little amount to the boys in the home, a little more to the male and female elders and those the girl calls her aunties and uncles. This is not counted as bride price. Should there arise a need to refund the bride price, only the amount given to the mother will form part of the price to be refunded. Those other financial offers are considered as generousities of the visiting entourage to the ceremony. Many times, they are contributions made by those who accompany the boy.

The second stage is called “nyombo” meaning delivering or paying the price to the girls parents. In this occasion the boy set to marry and his company, visit their in laws home for a second time to deliver the token in the form of cattle and one or few goats. *We are yet to establish what determines the number of the companions and the number of cattle and goats.* The visitors then engage the girl’s family in negotiation. *What influences the outcomes is an area that require exploration, for key considerations, key players, nature of game of wits and power play that ensue have not been documented.* The agreed number of cattle is normally expected to be paid in instalments. *The purpose of this instalment arrangement in the Luo community is another area that requires further inquiry for this instalment has implications whenever there are disputes in the family and sometimes when the girl dies leaving the husband and children. The other implications which are not clear are whether it makes the potential husband and the wife respectable in the eyes of the two families and friends or whether it’s the individual behaviour that counts.* After the bride price has been agreed on, the entourage announce the number of cattle they came with, the ones they are yet to deliver based on the agreement and the amount they carried to give the father, there are also other moneys for the cooks, boys, aunts and uncles and the elderly just like during the ‘ayie stage. *More inquiries need to be directed to establish what determines the amount and those to be offered the other monies.* The payment of bride price after these arrangements is normally a formality conducted by one older member of the boy’s entourage and he invites other members of his entourage to take turns in passing envelopes of money to various category of persons receiving the money including the father. The exception is the boy marrying who sits and observes the entire process without being engaged verbally. After the formality, its time for more eating, drinking and dancing until next morning when guests take breakfast and leave for their home leaving the girl behind to follow later on her own or to be escorted by other girls to her new home. *The reasons for leaving the girl behind are various but also require further inquiry since it has implication in terms of the teachings she receives and how she establishes herself in her new role as a wife and daughter in law in her new environment.*

Bride price occasions are not a nuclear family affair in Luo community, they are occasions conducted with the consent and in the full presence of the wider family including grandparents, uncles, aunties, cousins and friends including church people. The gender balance spreads from male and female elders, male and female adults, male and female youth and male and female children.

The position of the male and female youth in such occasions defines their participation levels in the bride price process. Bride price process has stages, which include preparation, reception, negotiations, payment of bride price, and delivery of the price after the price ritual and departure of the boy’s entourage. The position and participation of the youth, those from the family of the boy marrying and the girl being married are perhaps limited to two levels. That of being facilitators of logistics and learners through participant-observation.

As helpers or facilitators, the boys engage in helping with clearing and cleaning the host compound, preparing outdoor sheds, trimming fences and running errands like being sent to buy food and drinks, passing messages to relatives and friends of the family about the impending occasion, while the female youth help with cleaning of house, clothes, utensils, cooking and in-house decorations. The youth position as facilitators extends rather feebly to the reception stage where the male youths role is diminishing noticeably while the female youth participates in the ushering in of guests, welcomes them and ensures they are seated in the correct room or place in the house or compound.

The female youth is encourage by the family members to inquire from the guests what types of soft drinks

they may wish to take for a start. *The dynamics including the specific players, specific roles and considerations on who will play these roles are areas that need to be explored further, since it may have a negative implication in the socialization process of self-esteem of girls during this stage of bride price. For the boys the psychological and social implication of excluding them during reception is yet to be understood with regard to how they later perceive themselves in the process of Bride price at this stage.*

During negotiations, the male and female youth are totally excluded and even one or any who accompany the marrying entourage is reduced to just watching after introducing themselves. Earlier, the position of the youth at this stage is that of an observer expected to learn informally, the process of negotiation. *The implications of these exclusions are yet to be understood on the youth.* Incidentally, the boy marrying sits through it and the girl is locked out. *Could this be part of the cause of later marital problems of poor communication between the two on crucial issues touching on decision-making process?* The same exclusion of the youth is observed when the price is being handed over. They are expected to remain quiet and observe.

Having gone through this process, it is only fair to ask whether the youth do have any feelings, opinions and perceptions of their experiences. Their expectations, fears, immediate gains and experiences must be examined. Starting with expectations, it emerges that most male youth expect some little token from the guests (mar yawuoyi). *Studies have not revealed where this expectations emanates from?* While the girls also expect (mar jotedo) for the cooks. The youth of both sexes expect a lot of food and drinks and dancing during the 'nyombo' stage when the guests normally spend a night in the host compound. The male youth expect that peace must prevail during such occasion and are expected to intervene even physically to restore order should some other youth attempt to intrude and be disorderly.

The fears that linger on in the minds of the youth about and during this occasion gravitate heavily on impending permanent loss of a member of the family in the case of a girl, or the impending arrival of a stranger in the family, in the case of a boy bringing home a bride. The fear is mainly about characters, personality and behaviour. The youth tend to worry about the safety of their sisters being married away or tend to be anxious about the character of the incoming bride in the home.

In conclusion the experiences of the youth in the bride price occasions are both formal and informal. The formal experiences are observed from the systematic flow of traditions as they are practiced on such occasions, while the informal experience are interactions with manners, dressing, courtesy, conversations etc. It is a highly interactive environment of group dynamics in which each moment is unique and precious and experienced differently by all including the youth. *As it stands, it is not clear which agents of socialization present in the bride price occasion impact more meaningfully on the youth; whether it is the parents, the peers or the family at large or even the guests?*