

Bride Price: The case for Malawi

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A Daughter for Loan was the award-winning article in the 2002 MISA competition that earned one of the local journalists' recognition for his ability to use the pen to highlight the rights of women/daughters. The article titled "A daughter for loan " gives insights on the extent of Bride Price in Malawi.

Malawi is one of the African countries that some people stick to cultural norms and what they think are values as far as marriage practices are concerned. Patrilineal and Matrilineal are the two systems that tribes across the country practice. It is the patrilineal system that pays much emphasis on the importance of paying a Bride Price or *Lobola*. Patrilineal societies cannot even allow their daughters to get married without the man/suitor paying something in exchange. The practice is common in almost all the tribes in the Northern Region of Malawi. In Karonga district for example, *Nyakyusa* tradition provides a practice that if a family is poor and low in status, it can go to a rich man to ask for loan of a cow or money in exchange for their daughter. This practice is called *Kupimbira*. A girl child is therefore used as surety. This tradition does not recognize the rights of daughters until she turns into adulthood. Such a daughter is therefore at a mercy of a rich man who can decide to sleep with her at any point in her life as long as the loan is still outstanding. In most cases such a loan is not paid back with economic status of Malawi.

On the other hand, Christianity brought some relief so that the normal bride price for some good families has been reduced to a token fee of cattle heads. However, it is also within the same that some abuse of the Human Rights is done when divorces turn nasty.

The main cause of bride price is poverty. Daughters are a symbol of wealth in most patrilineal societies and sons are viewed as people who own and spend the wealth of a family.

Kuhaha / Kuhala or Chokolo wife inheritance is another practice common in patrilineal society. It is viewed that because a man paid bride price to have the wife, the woman remains the property of the husband's family relations even in the event of death. It is therefore made sure that another suitor is identified among the husband's family relations to take over the property of the deceased including the wife. This, though done as a way of protecting the family, takes away the freedoms and rights that women must enjoy. Culture here is used as a justification tool to oppress the plight of women.

In other areas, for example Nsanje District, widows are only released after they are cleansed as they are regarded as dirty when the husband dies. However, when the wife dies, the husband does not go through the ritual of cleansing. The cleansing ritual demands that the woman sleeps with another man to cast away evil spirits. We are trying to get funding for a major campaign for the 8th march International day of Women/ 16 Days of Activism.

With the situation of HIV/AIDS in Africa and Malawi in particular, these practices contribute a lot to the spread of the virus. Women therefore continue to suffer in silence in the name of culture.