

**MIFUMI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BRIDE PRICE**  
**Sub Theme: Religious and cultural perspectives on bride price**

**Topic: Beyond the Cows-The Real Deal**  
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**Organisation: 104.1 Power FM Kampala**

**The Song That Died**

If my father had seen beyond the cows and into my heart  
If my father had listened to the words I did not say  
When I nodded my head and smiled  
At the money that was put to my pride  
If my father had opened his ears to my heart  
And opened his eyes to my soul  
Then he would have heard that the song of my life had died.  
When that price was put to my childlike pride  
The song of my life died out

If my father had seen beyond the cows  
And listened beyond the laughter over beer  
If he had looked beyond  
Not to the horizon  
But right at his feet where I sat  
Waiting for my summons  
To leave

Not only did I leave my homestead  
But I left the song of my life  
The song that died after a price tag was put to my pride

Daddy, what does a bride do at twelve?  
How does she breastfeed at thirteen?  
Does she take her child to the same school?  
Can she still cry?  
At her child's great grandmother's feet?  
Can she?

**Bride price: What is it?**

Bride price is one of the most common cultural practices related to love and affection in Africa and Asia. Its origins relate as far back as the biblical times and the Ancient times of the Egyptians, Romans and Greeks. Bride price is paid in a form of exchange between the family of a bride and a groom whereby gifts in cash or in kind are given to the bride's family in return for giving away the bride. It is quite similar to dowry, where in India for example, payment in cash or in kind is paid by the bride's family to the groom's family along with the giving away of the bride (Kanya-dana).

**Bride price: Where it began.**

- (i) One of the strongest held beliefs is the biblical one. The story of Rebekah and how she became Isaac's wife. Isaac sent his servant to look for a wife for him and after giving him clear instructions, the servant set off. The servant met Rebekah and her family and told him of his mission of finding a wife for his master explaining clearly who Isaac was. After the introductions, the servant then gave Rebekah and her family gifts of jewels of silver, gold and fine garments. After her parents asked her

if she wanted to go with the servant and she replied that yes it was her desire for her to do so, she left with the servant. On approaching, she saw Isaac at a distance and covered her veil to conceal herself. The same negotiations for bride price exist today in Uganda especially. The groom's family sends an entourage to the bride's family and similar negotiations take place until gifts are exchanged and the bride is finally allowed to leave to be with her groom.

- (ii) Ancient Egypt is another good example where bride price existed as a form of economic union. While many questions were raised like; What guarantee is there that the groom will not change his mind between the betrothal and the wedding? one's faith was put to task to accept the sum of money as a gesture of sincerity. The husband was the usual head of the household in the Ancient world.
  - (iii) In Athens, no woman could own anything more than her own clothing, jewellery and personal slave. When she was ready to marry, her father or guardian would choose a potential husband and negotiate with him the size of the dowry. The size of the dowry was a determining factor to the wealth of the husband to be.

### **Religion and Bride Price: The Real Deal**

- (i) The marriage of Rebekah and Isaac in the bible is truly one of the most peaceful and blissful holy matrimonies the world has ever heard. Unlike modern day where a couple get to know each other for some time before they get married, Isaac's was purely placed on divine intervention. The presenter of this paper states firmly and clearly at this point that bride price and marriage create perfect harmonious results at divine intervention only. That divine intervention must not be man-made i.e. from performance of sacrificial rituals, manipulative charms or self-inflicting harmful practices but from a purity and chastity that desires to see an end full of bliss for that generation and the next. This is what the biblical story is about; Pure chastity.
- (ii) Rebekah was old enough to know when the right time for marriage had come her way. When her parents asked her if she was ready to go, she immediately replied in the affirmative. One other important thing to note here is that her parents first asked her because they valued her opinion and desires. They realized that marriage should start from an affirmation of the heart before the response from the mouth.
- (iii) Bride price based on true spiritual values is a right gesture because it does not inflict harm, it does not create psychological abuse, there is no defilement involved and it is respectful and sincere.
- (iv) There is an indescribably beauty of knowing that sexual union is for the pleasure of both the man and woman, which is what spiritual value attaches to marriage. A woman grows up whole both on the outside and inside with deep respect and love for her husband contrary to fear and helplessness.

**NB:** Most bride price practices do not attach value to the spiritual core of the negotiations and that is why a man often beats up his wife because he is still nursing the sores from debt.

### **Cultural values attached to bride price:**

- (i) The money is paid as a gesture of sincerity. That is the only symbol of faithfulness to the marriage, which is similar to the wedding and engagement rings used today.
- (ii) Because of the religious value added to it, there is a spiritual bond that the woman values to it.
- (iii) The Bride price provides a financial gain for the Bride's family in terms of gifts in cash and kind.
- (iv) A man will never be respected if he fails to pay bride price.
- (v) A woman is expected to live under the dominance of her husband if bride price is paid. This does not mean that the man will respect her. In many cases, he will own her as a piece of property.

### **Bride Price: What goes on.**

In Uganda, when a man wants to marry a woman, a delegation of about ten men go to the woman's home. On arrival at the woman's home, there is another delegation awaiting them. This involves close friends and family. The spokesman from the man's side informs the spokesman from the woman's side the purpose of the visit and then the negotiations begin. It is a formal arrangement with both parties dressed in elegant wear. The speaker from the woman's side mentions exactly how much their bride is worth be it in cows, vegetables, cash or any other form of payment. Traditionally, no food is given until both sides have agreed on the payment.

The occasion ends with festivity. The groom and bride eat together with the close relatives and silently the groom leaves with his bride.

### **The key figures in the practice**

Women are the main cause of bride price. A man needs to make payment in order to attain his bride. A woman has a price attached to her, which has to be paid. Many individuals express their discontentment at this practice because it involves haggling and bargaining.

Children too often suffer similar fate. In rural areas especially where education is not a priority for families, the fathers, in an attempt to get rich quick, marry off their daughters to as young as nine years old. This is common in Asia and Africa. Because of the cows and cash involved, this is a common practice.

The men are important too in this negotiation for a woman. It is because of a man's desire to get married that he looks for all possible means to attain his woman. Many men marry for sexual pleasure and that is why it is not uncommon to find one man with several women and lots of children besides some whose names he may not even know.

The bride's family who in most cultures, are the main beneficiaries. Predominantly, they receive a heavy cash donation as well as gifts of all kinds. In Uganda, the gifts can surmount to a cow, a goat, twenty crates of soda. Fifty baskets of groceries and fine garments made from satin or silk for the bride and her family.

The groom's family is a minority. Apart from bearing the burden of delivering the merchandise they are put to considerable humiliation before the bride is accepted to leave with her groom. The family has to put up a brave front during the negotiations, which are often interjected with humiliating remarks.

Close friends are also a part of this occasion especially in places where the extended family is highly respected.

### **Beyond the Cows- The Real Deal:**

In essence, if a man saw beyond the cows and beyond a wad of notes and into the window of his child's soul, maybe he would leave her to be a child. In special reference to girl children that are married off for money, a man should see what lies beyond his wealth. Greed makes men so short sighted that their eyes and ears merge into one big lustful bank account. In rural Asia and Africa many girl children still suffer. Taslima Nasrin, who was imprisoned for her book *Lajja, Shame*, because of her bold approach to the discrimination against women, writes about the secret yearnings of a woman from inside. Bride Price does not leave creative space for a child to discover her heart on her own body. Bride price does not leave room for a child to blossom and experience a few thorns in her life and allow the rain to seep through her and let her grow. A price tag on a child is the same as putting a price tag on someone's dreams, desires and passions. How can anyone put tags on an untrodden gem of a child's heart? How can anyone put a tag on an egg that is about to hatch and spread its wings and fly? If fathers saw beyond the cows, they would leave their young girl

children to grow and discover life from the strength of their hearts and not from the strength of money.

### **Bride Price: What nobody sees**

- (i) Sometimes the man is made to borrow a lot of money to pay bride price and as a result he is financially incapacitated during the first year or so of marriage. This results in him beating his wife as a payback method.
- (ii) The wife cannot run away from her new home because the man has paid quite a sum for her.
- (iii) Emotional torture at the subjection to an unwanted marriage.
- (iv) Emotional imprisonment. The woman is detached from the joy of falling in love and receiving strength from her heart to allow her to live desirably with her husband.
- (v) Lack of true spiritual value consequentially brings about hidden disasters of identity crisis, loneliness, inner weakness, yearning for peace.
- (vi) A child will grow up with a distorted knowledge of men. Her father will appear like a monstrous dictator and her husband a slave driver. She will grow up unaware of the true pleasures that a sexual union can bring and her knowledge of sex will be reduced to procreation only and satisfying her husband.

### **Religion: What it really does**

- (i) Religion is indiscriminate. It holds the strength of the whole world just from the love of one individual.
- (ii) It creates an inner strength that spreads its tentacles to the outside world.
- (iii) It allows an individual to see what the eyes cannot just from its simple truth.
- (iv) It allows a girl to sing an unsung song.

### **The Unsung Song**

Let me sing my unsung song  
Just listen  
Let me sing the song of my life  
Listen

Do not interrupt me with your lust for attention  
Let me sing

Listen to the tune of my desires  
I want to fall in love  
With the man who knows the verses of my heart

Where is the man who plays the guitar?  
Do not send him away.  
My unsung song must be sung  
Our unsung lives must be lived.

My unsung heart must be loved  
The man who plays the guitar knows the tune  
Because he is the tune  
To my unsung song  
Listen to us sing