

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF BRIDE PRICE

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Introduction:

According to the Advanced Learners Dictionary “a bride is a woman on her wedding day or just before or after”. It also defines price as “ the amount of money that you have to pay for something”. Bride price is then ideally the amount of money a man has to pay to secure a girl or a woman into marriage. In the days of yore in our traditional African society, bride-price was paid at the time of marriage. Though what was paid was strictly not money so as to constitute price, nonetheless we shall assume it to be so since money economy had not yet entered traditional society. When talking about African society I cannot claim to speak for the whole of African let alone the whole of the Ugandan society. My area will be mainly the society that lives in Tororo District and those that live within their neighbourhood.

The political social and economic state of African societies before the coming of the explorers, missionaries and colonialists was different. Politically some societies like the Baganda, Banyoro, Batoro and Banyankole lived under kings. The kings were powerful and governed under a centralized system. They appointed Chiefs to assist in administering their kingdoms under their directives. That is why we heard of positions of Saza, Gombola and Muluka etc. being held by chiefs at different hierarchies. All the positions of governance were held by men. They were rich and powerful as the kings appropriated to them large tracts of land and other properties. In other egalitarian societies like the Jopadhola and the Iteso, leadership was through elders in the clans. The roles of the clan leaders were mainly to settle disputes but most of the other issues were handled at family levels. All leadership positions within the clans and families were also held by men only. Disagreements within the clan gave rise to splinter groups.

Socially men were at a higher status vis-a-vie the women. Men determined the dos and don't s in society and biasness was tilted in favour of the men. Splitting firewood, cooking, collecting water from a well and sweeping a house etc. was considered too demeaning for a man. Women had very little say in society especially in public affairs. Women were supposed to be submissive especially to their husbands. They were expected to greet the men while kneeling or sitting down. During social gatherings they were to find seats on mats or grass as chairs and stools were a preserve for the men. Women were barred from eating such nutritious food such as chicken, eggs, pork or some parts of the carcass of a cow or a goat.

Economically a woman owned no property of her own except perhaps her clothes. Whatever she contributed during her married life belonged to the family but the husband had a final say over it. Girls were disinherited from the property of their fathers. A woman's role was in the garden to provide family labour, to cook food for the family, produce and raise children, take care of the family, train young girls in preparation for marriage and ensure that she kept to the rules and regulations and customs governing her society as set up by the men elders.

The traditional society was and is still patrilineal. Marriage meant re-allocation to the homestead of the man. A man could marry many wives and if he also had many children then he was considered wealthy and powerful. His homestead would be referred to as “a large home”. With an army of children and wives he had a bigger area of control and dominance and was therefore socially upgraded, secure and economically sound. His big family could provide farm labour to produce a lot of food and was secure in case it was necessary to physically settle it out with his neighbours.

Lastly the African believed that after death a person resurrected through his progeny and it was therefore important to marry a wife to fulfil this desire.

Bride price as a social identity:

As stated earlier on, prior to the coming of the colonialists and missionaries, church and state marriages were unheard of. The societies had evolved their own means of dealing with this matter. As people got into marriages so as to sustain posterity, the question was where was the marriage to be consummated! The patrilineal nature of the society required that the bride re-allocate to the homestead of the groom and be under his care otherwise how would everyone else recognize that the young woman was now the wife of so and so?

Among the Jopadhola and the Iteso marriage was arranged among families. The “bride and bride groom” were identified at an age as early as about 8 years. In the search for a wife family values were looked at. This inter-alia, was being well to do, hard-working, free from criminal background and devoid of chronic diseases such as leprosy etc. Soon after both parents agreed, the “bride” received a copper bangle (atego) from family of the “groom” which was put on the hands of the “bride” as a sign of engagement. When the girl matured and was taken in marriage, her parents received cowry shells and some traditional hoes “kwe nyamusa”. These were, merely gifts of appreciation. The issue of animals or money did not arise.

As the country got into money economy, people began to attach economic value to what was previously offered as gifts to the girls parents and hence the issue of animals and other items were introduced. The exact number of what was to be paid was now subject of negotiation among the families. A chief’s daughter would be worth much more than that of an ordinary peasant because it was believed she was of a higher social status. Though ordinarily marriages were arranged by the parents, some were through abductions. Either way no consent of the bride and bridegroom were sought. Nonetheless bride price had to be paid. Once this was done it was now conclusive that a marriage contract had been entered into. Socially the society would now take the couple as husband and wife.

If for some reason the marriage broke, the girl’s parents were obliged to refund the bride price they had received. Normally one would be expected to pay back exactly what he received though consideration would be taken for the number of years she had spent in marriage and the number of children she bore. The refund of the bride price would be a social indicator of the end of the marriage and the woman was free to remarry. Though marriages are now celebrated in churches, mosques or in state, traditional marriages are recognized in law. Even in church or state marriages bride price blends very well with other requirements.

Bride price also played a key role in a man’s social standing. Many people, who had no means of raising the bride price demanded, remained bachelors. Such persons’ social standing was very low because in African traditional society, a man who remained unmarried was nothing. He usually lived in the homestead of other well to do men where he would be performing household chores like splitting firewood, collecting water and herding cattle, brewing alcoholic drinks, etc. but without any payment in return. He would not be given any responsibility within the family or clan. If he were to accidentally enter into some marital relationship, it could be through inheriting a widow of a brother or a close relative. In this case, he was not required to pay bride price since the woman would be staying in the matrimonial home. On the other hand a man who had the means to pay bride price and could acquire many wives and produce many children was socially respected. Such persons were given leadership positions within the clans.

Bride price was considered a stabilizing factor in marriage. Once the bride price was paid the couple now felt that they had a home and became settled. Since they had fulfilled societal expectations they were bound to gain social recognition and respectability. The man could gain social standing since he had quit bachelorhood and could be given responsibilities such as heir-ship. A woman was given her respect as a wife and later as a mother within her circles; otherwise she would be considered as a mere friend of the man. She now felt she had a strong foothold in the home and some even became domineering and assertive. Both the man and the woman would of course wish to maintain this relationship. If she was barren but well-behaved, the bridegrooms family would request for her younger sister to be brought in as co-wife. But in this case no extra bride price would be asked.

The economic factor:

As already stated bride-price was initially a gift of appreciation in a form of cowry shells and traditional hoes. When the money economy set in with the advent of colonial rule, bride-price was transformed into an

item of economic value. Among the communities in the then Bukedi District (bigger Tororo) wealth was associated with cattle. In this way bride-price became principally cattle. Other material requirements were secondary.

Why did parents begin demanding bride wealth for their daughters?

This can be answered by looking at the gender roles in the society. At the parents homes the girls were involved in the following tasks on day to day basis.

1. Producing food stuff from the garden
2. Collecting firewood and water
3. General food preparation
4. Taking care of young brothers and sisters
5. Tending to other household chores like sweeping the house and washing clothes etc.

As a girl left home for marriage, it was obvious that the parents would be deprived of all the contributions she was making in the home.

These benefits would definitely be transferred to the home of the bridegroom for the many years of her life there. She was like an item "bought and owned". Even upon the death of her husband she was supposed to remain in the home and be inherited by a family member. If she chose to go away, her parents had to return the bride-price.

Her other attributes looked to as wealth were the children she would produce. The children belonged to their father and hence expanded the clan. There was also the belief that people resurrected through their children. Her importance in this area cannot be overemphasized.

The determination of the bride price to be paid usually turned out into a hard bargain between the family of the bride and the groom. The team leaders in these exercise were normally the uncles on both the paternal and maternal sides. The uncles of the bride were of necessity also beneficiaries of the bargain and were usually uncompromising.

What was paid for a girl varied from home to home. A rich man or a chief's daughter fetched more bride price than that of an ordinary peasant. The more educated a girl, the more she had to be paid for because people believed that she had acquired more knowledge and was more worthy. A medical doctor was more valued than a primary teacher because her earnings were expected to be higher and besides the parents spent more on her during the course of her education. This trend is to be seen even in the marriages of to-day. The bride-price not only now includes cattle but also clothes, meat, chicken, lamps, sugar, salt, soap, paraffin- in other words essential commodities and sometimes even beer. Often without being asked a family of the bridegroom would shower the brides family with so many other gifts as show of ostentation.

Bride-price has therefore become wealth to most parents who would not let their daughters go until the price they have tagged on her has been paid. Instances can be cited where bride-price is demanded even upon the death of the bride. This matter has caused delayed burials or some times fights at the funerals. One must also state that in the rare cases one finds a parent willing to let the daughter marry without demanding bride-price. This scenario is normally to be found in the homes of educated parents or those subscribing to certain religious beliefs.

Political factor:

Not much contribution can be made in this area as the societies I am referring to did not have a recognized political set up to legislate on bride-price. We only see bride-price as a traditional norm and practice. Even during the colonial Government the governors let each community determine its own way on this matter.

As I stated earlier on that bride-price was through negotiations, the trend has been towards making this bride-wealth with families making outrageous demands thus making it difficult for people to get wives. Bukedi District then came out with a bye-Law 1954 to standardize the bride-price to what was considered reasonable. The bye-law fixed the bride-price at 5 cows and 22 shillings. The current debate on the Domestic Relations Bill is yet to come into law where I believe this matter will be addressed.

It is apparent that there are many lobbyists especially women Members of Parliament recommending its

abolition because it undermines the dignity of women.

Conclusion

Bride-price in my traditional society was initially a token of appreciation. When the money economy set in economic value was attached to the bride-price. Bride-price turned into bride-wealth and those with girls were looked at as potential rich men. Some people encouraged their young daughters to get married early with these goals in mind.

The higher, the status of the girl either educationally or in social standing, the more bride-price she fetched. This was because it was envisaged that the bride was transferring all her worth to the bridegrooms family. These transactions, however, have tended to keep the girl in perpetual bondage.

Socially bride-price was a means of identifying married couples and a “legal” bond. It also played a great part in stabilizing marriages as the couple felt socially responsible and settled.

Not much politics could be attached to bride-price at that time except in my District the councillors tried to standardize it through passing a bye-law. Recent lobbying against it by human rights activist and parliamentarians have led into the Domestic Relations Bill which is yet to come into law.

Though some people have reasoned that payment of bride price stabilizes the family nonetheless it has its other negative effects:

1. The women could be forced to live in a loveless marriage because the parents cannot afford to refund the bride-price in case she divorced.
2. The family of the woman may view the returning of bride-price as loss since their daughter may be old and no longer marketable.
3. Looking at bride-price as wealth a number of parents may encourage their young daughters to marry at a young age thus cutting short their education or endangering their reproductive life.
4. The young girls being forced into marriages to some polygamous men would stand the risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS.
5. The transaction undermined the dignity of women as it equated them to commodities on sale. Some people, however, argue that this practice is a mere display of culture as you cannot say a woman is worth only 5 cows and 5 goats. Besides there is no ownership as the parents still have a say over the lady and there is a safety valve for divorce. Some men even don't demand back bride price.
6. Poor men were denied opportunity to marry girls of their choices.
7. Sometimes a person was forced to sell off his only asset, land, in order to raise money for buying cattle to be paid for or refunded as bride-price.

Some elders, however, have argued that the bride-price should be maintained as cultural norm and abolishing it would destroy the uniqueness of the culture as imposed from outside. They further argue that many people live happily together to old age in spite of the fact that bride-price was paid to the parents of the wife. They also cite domestic violence in cultures where bride price is non existent but they recommend that bride price could perhaps be relegated to a gift which one does not have to refund.