

THE HUMAN AND ECONOMIC COSTS OF BRIDE PRICE IN BUGANDA

A Paper Presented to the International Conference, Organized by MIFUMI on
Bride Price and Development from the 16th –18th February 2004
At Makerere University, Kampala – Uganda

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Introduction:

In this presentation I wish to discuss with you how the concept of bride price has evolved from a marriage gift of appreciation to an economic gain, business and a competitive show. As a matter of fact it has been turned away from its original good purpose it formally symbolized.

Bride price had a good meaning and cause to the institution of marriage. It gave value and importance to the wife to be (the bride). It also brought honour, value and respect to the husband to be, (the groom). However, it is now being misused for exploitative purposes as a quick method to enrich others.

Background:

Traditionally a girl was not allowed or expected to go to a man's house for marriage before the two contracting parties negotiated a bride price or value befitting the girl/daughter intending to get married. These initial meetings involved putting a price label on the girl by the so called, 'selling' family. The interested parties would bargain in order for the selling family to reduce or compromise the bride price and other conditions demanded by the girl's family and relatives. During those olden days the boy's family (the groom), would be expected to help with their son's bride price since the couples were comparatively young and economically poor and undeveloped. The boys were depending on their parents' wealth to buy a wife. In most cases the boys continued to live with their parents on the same compound although in different houses, (huts). Most of the time these marriages were pre-arranged whereby a girl's input was not considered. Today we can say that pre-arranged marriages violated the rights of many women.

A girl would see the so-called "visitors" branching off to her family's homestead. Her role would be to welcome them and immediately return to the kitchen after greeting them. The visitors and the parents of the girl would be preoccupied with business, discussing their own "things". The girl would later on be called in after the discussions to be introduced to the visitors as a wife-to-be to one of them or to their son left at home.

The more girls one family had the more visitors would be seen trying to make their selections and bargains like in a market place. Many girls were married off in this manner against their conviction and wish. Many were as young as 13 years old. The best rich son-in-law took the girl for a wife whether one liked it or not. You can easily say that with bride price there has always been a kind of coercion and the marriages can be seen as a result of convenience rather than conviction.

Generally, as the economic conditions have changed face, cultures and various traditions are adopting to new modern demands responding to new social and cultural approaches. There is no doubt that MIFUMI is here to stay because it is lobbying for the right cause.

The Politics behind Bride Price:

Bride Price was supposed to be a symbol or a token of appreciation to the family of the girl to be married off (the bride). It was not meant to dehumanize women as property to be owned, sold and bought off in order to satisfy men's selfish desires and egos.

Bride Price is being misused to abuse girls and women. Men tend to think that after paying the bride price

women become our goods, services and personal property to be owned, mistreated and dumped when they have outlived their purpose and use.

Bride price should not be looked at as a symbol of ownership, nor a seal of (enslavement). A woman or a girl whose suitor has paid off her bride price is not to be co-owned by another man. It is not uncommon to find a man who has paid bride price for several women. (*This should not be taken as an attack on some religious beliefs*). However, several poor women are expected to be owned by one man. Even the Domestic Relations Bill has turned a blind eye on this issue. I suggest that women also should be allowed to ask their husbands to have other men. Will a man who has paid bride price ever allow his wife to be co-owned with another man? This is the Politics men use to control women.

Previously bride price used to be within the reach of every peasant before it was politicized as an economic investment in girls. These days people have gone to the extent of stealing in order to make historical impressive introductions in the name of expensive bride price presents.

We are told that in the olden days bride price would be returned in case of adultery. This was easy because bride wealth gifts and presents were affordable and manageable to be compensated by the girl's family. However, these days bride price has been excessively capitalized and commercialized in the name of modernization. This pompous behaviour of showing off wealth in paying off the bride price has left many would be couples to be senior bachelors for fear of making a poor show. This is enough to explain the everlasting presence and existence of the night girls on the streets. Women feel that it is unfair to be sold like slaves and goods to men.

Extravagant Introduction Ceremonies:

Besides the initial meetings and negotiations between the interested parties before marriage, the first phase of bride price is sealed on the day when the girl introduces her husband to the parents and the entire family. Expensive Marriage presents of various values are offered to the girl's parents. This is supposed to be the bride price.

Some parents have been reported to have mistreated their son in laws delegations for not giving enough bride price in exchange for their daughters. Presents are no longer limited to a "cock", a goat or bark clothes in lieu of obtaining a wife.

You can imagine a human being to be exchanged for a price value of cows, and chicken, which costs 3,500/= (Three Thousand Five hundred Shillings only). Without presents like a chicken and a bulging envelope one may fail to get a wife.

The Political Economy in modern bride price:

Historically bride price was intended to express appreciation to the parents and a fulfilment of cultural obligations; to create stability of the family and to seal the bond between the woman (bride), and the man (groom), who had paid the bride price.

Bride price inspired girls to be disciplined before marriage and after marriage. It persuaded them to hope for marriage in order to please their parents who would economically benefit from their so-called sale. Girls feared to elope with men before they had introduced them officially as their husbands. Such men would have no respect for their wives because they had no economic value attached to them.

In modern times, paying off bride price has been over exaggerated by expensive Introductions. It is like enslaving the girl for life because you have the so called legal cultural ownership over her. On the other hand the man tended to think that he has economic power over his wife. This is psychological satisfaction which is very false. It may not be easy for some poor families to repay the bride price to the Bride's family in case there was any gross mistreatment and violation of ones' rights.

After the man has impressed the girl's family the woman finds it hard and unbelievable to return home let alone to convince her parents that their son in law is bad. In such marriages the children if any have to suffer the consequences because their mother is an economic slave, not loved. The parents are always reminding their daughter not to divorce the man. They usually look at this as shame. In such a situation the man sees himself as a businessman who has invested money in his wife whom he paid for exorbitantly.

Besides making a name in the paid bride price some couples suffer from economic and psychological tortures after the expensive introductions and weddings. Money, which would have been used to empower and develop the young couple in their new home, is lavishly spent on bride price. After the memorable bride price functions the couples start in a vicious circle of poverty in order to settle their debts. The woman has to work hard in order to pay back the money, which bought her.

Bride price in some parts of our country is supposed to be an ongoing process. This exposes the young couple to a number of problems and economic constraints from the side of the wife forgetting to solve their own problems.

The love of wealth in terms of bride price has tempted many parents especially men to marry off their daughters at a tender age to meet the family's financial needs. This has deprived many girls of going to school and a better future. Their rights and decision making is abused.

At times young girls are exposed to HIV/AIDS after being married off to older men probably widowers who pay a handsome bride price. In such cases you can't rule out defilement cases, which go on unreported. Others die in child labour because they are too young to cope with such experience at a tender age. At times you end up having girl child mothers incapable of managing their babies.

Some parents are seeing marrying off their daughters as business after they are paid huge sums of money as bride price/wealth in exchange for their daughters.
It is high time this kind of practice stopped.

We call upon all people of good will to join hands with MIFUMI and other Human Rights Activists the World over in order to save our girls and women from this cultural menace and mess of bride price.

The Way Forward:

- ❖ There is need for a multi-sectional approach intervention and to register all cultural marriages as a way of curbing down on forced marriages, which are encouraged by bride price.
- ❖ Bride price should involve the girls' input. She should be free to say NO to marriage proposals antagonizing her future. To me this is what the age of consent should mean.
- ❖ Compensation for bride price should be abolished because it makes women suffer silently as slaves.

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