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Caroline Jones

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Women's Worth: A Western Misconception

Caroline Jones

Abstract: Focusing on gender relations and dominance within the Gusii of Kenya, Tombema, Kaihsienkung, and India cultures this paper will focus on bridewealth and dowry, specifically what it means in terms of "women's value" or status within these cultural groups. The dominance of the male perspective in academics is one cause for women's domestic or 'secondary' subsistence work being given lower status. Women's contributions to subsistence especially domestically (in the home) are great. This paper will focus on two points. First is the lack of research done on the subject of bridewealth and dowry; the second point is to look at recent research that is appreciating and acknowledging women's domestic contributions in more than just a reproductive capacity. Bridewealth and dowry are very fascinating topics since they are so variable between societies. Bridewealth and dowry should be considered further and in contemporary society, in how women are being valued in relation to their contribution to male's production in society.

Introduction

Marriage is complex and varied in all societies. Previous research on the subject of marriage and the customs surrounding it (bridewealth, dowry, etc.), have almost exclusively been looked at from a male perspective. Women have been almost entirely left out of the ethnographic research, which is problematic since they make up approximately half the population. This paper will look at the effects of bridewealth and dowry on women in Gusii, Nuer, Tombema, Kaihsienkung, India, and contemporary Western culture. The main intent of this analysis is to see if bridewealth and dowry have resulted in the marginalization of women.

Feminist scholars focus on the marginalization of women and the inequality present between the different genders. There is much debate within this field as to what 'equality' and 'status' mean and how they are defined. Penny Sanday (1973:1682) terms female status as "the number of economic and political rights which accrue to women." While there may be many

variables to consider when analyzing the role of women, the two I will look at in this paper are bridewealth and dowry.

The first section defines common terminology associated with marriage and marriage transactions, the origin of these definitions and the controversies surrounding them. The next section will address the theories and hypotheses surrounding the study of bridewealth and dowry. This section is brief because it is not fully developed in the literature and is an area that needs further research. The continuing section will compare how the cultures mentioned above practice bridewealth and dowry. This will include an analysis of their subsistence, marriage, and economic practices. This will help in understanding the role of women in these particular societies and if bridewealth and dowry have any impact on this view and the relative value it places on women. The last section of this paper will look at bridewealth and dowry today, and the literature on the subject. This will include a brief look at the western conception of bridewealth in engagement rings. Bridewealth and dowry are extensive subjects, where many aspects could be looked at. This paper takes a broad look at bridewealth and dowry tracing it from its historical conception in Western anthropological academia and understanding the effects this has had on possible misconceptions of the marginalization of women in non-western societies.

Terminology

Establishing definitions in ethnographic studies is important because terminology can differ between cultures and it is important to use the same definition in order to obtain consistent results. Since bridewealth and dowry are marriage transactions it is important to define what marriage is. The most general definition of marriage is:

a publicly recognized union established between one man and one or more women, or between two women, or between a woman and one or more men, *in accordance with the defining rules of a society or social stratum*...given legal status by the society and enjoys protected rights, privileges, and obligations by virtue of having been established according to recognized rules [Ogbu 1978:243;emphasis added].

While this definition may look narrow in terms of who is recognized in a marriage (men or women), it is very broad in that it can be applied to almost

any society. Marriage must be publicly accepted and there must be obligations, rights and privileges associated with it. Ceremonies and transactions that occur in conjunction with a marriage are varied between societies, but some terms can be applied to several practices.

The debate over the terms “bridewealth” and “brideprice” are mostly over the economic implications of the terms. This debate has helped lay the foundation for many of our current understandings of marriage terminology. According to Dalton (1966:732), “[t]o use the term ‘brideprice’ is to imply that payment at marriage is a market or commercial transaction and therefore that marriage entails a commercial purchase of rights or services.” Evans-Pritchard (1946) discusses his position as seeing many functions of bridewealth such as legitimization of children, solidifying bonds of marriage, and to compensate the girls’ family for loss of services. However he sees it as better “to use a neutral term, one that does not single out one of these functions, the ‘economic,’ as *the* most important” (Dalton 1966:732). This happens when focus is placed on the similarities between the transfer of women as wives to the way “other economic commodities are transferred in the same societies” (Dalton 1966:733). Dalton (1966) argues that the controversy over the terminology stems from a lack of understanding the African economic system. This paper looks to see how women are valued paying particular attention to rights they might gain from their marriage and the transaction of property. Women in societies that practice bridewealth or dowry are many times kept out of the major economic activities of their community, and their work is viewed from a Westernized lens as ‘secondary’; this is where the marginalization of women is most prominent.

Defining the different types of marriage transactions is necessary and a first step in understanding what makes bridewealth and dowry the prominent forms of marriage transaction seen today in some societies. Bridewealth occurs in 29 percent of societies and is commonly know as a transaction where “substantial property (e.g., animals, money) which the groom or his relative give to the bride’s kin” (Pasternak et al. 1997:153). According to Schlegel and Eloul (1988:291), bridewealth and brideservice are seen as compensation for removing the bride from her home. This could be a viable explanation in strong agricultural communities where women have a large role in production. However this explanation may not suffice in other communities where women do not contribute a large portion to the agricultural economics but bridewealth and brideservice still occur.

Token bridewealth, said to occur in 4 percent of societies, is very similar to bridewealth except that gifts are symbolic (Pasternak et al. 1997:153). Brideservice is also very similar to bridewealth and token

bridewealth except it “involves a transfer of labor (rather than goods) to the bride’s family” (Pasternak et al. 1997:153). This occurs in about 15 percent of societies but it can sometimes be hard to distinguish between service and goods, especially if there is sometimes a combination of the two given in bridewealth (Pasternak et al. 1997:153). Gift exchange and sister exchange can also occur in eight and five percent of societies respectively. It has been considered by researchers that, “bride wealth, bride service, and woman exchange [are] compensation for loss of the daughter’s labor and reproductive powers” (Pasternak et al. 1997:154). This is seen as in contrast to dowry, but that is not exactly correct.

Dowry in its simplest form is “the passage of goods to the bride from her family, [it] keeps goods with a family member as she moves to a new household” (Schlegel and Eloul 1988:292). It is sometimes called diverging devolution which is a “bilateral transmission...by which parental property devolves vertically on both sexes” (Tambiah et al. 1989:419). Schlegel and Eloul (1988) see dowry as a way for families to enhance their own personal prestige and that of the spouse that is entering the marriage. This of course is contingent upon the value of the dowry and the parents following through with a timely payment. Another feature of dowry is that it concentrates property rather than circulates it, which is seen in bridewealth (Schlegel and Eloul 1988:154). Dowry is meant to stay with the bride upon entering marriage so it is kept within a kinship. Dowry also varies according to culture, but in general “large dowries are found where there is community-wide stratification by wealth, and small or no dowries are found where this is absent” (Schlegel and Eloul 1988:300). In general, societies that practice dowry are described as monogamous, patrilineal and endogamous (Anderson 2003:271). This is most noticeable in India, which will be discussed in detail.

There is also a marriage transaction called indirect dowry, practiced in ten percent of societies. It is described as being a mix between dowry and bridewealth where gifts from the groom’s kin are given to the bride or her father; the father will in turn pass it along to his daughter as dowry (Pasternak et al. 1997:154). An unusual, but interesting aspect of dowry concerns client son-in-law where the “in-marrying sons-in-law bring dowry with them” to the marriage (Pasternak et al. 1997:155). Evidence of this is most common in China and will also be discussed in detail. Researchers view this as evidence that the reason behind dowry for both men and women is to “preserve or enhance prestige” (Schlegel and Eloul 1988:302). In trying to understand the functionality or reasons for practicing dowry and bridewealth, some researchers have developed theories or hypotheses to explain these marriage transactions.

Theories and Hypotheses

Trying to understand the reasons behind a society's choice of marriage transaction is very complicated because it is so varied between societies. Schlegel and Eloul (1988) have done extensive research on the subject and developed several hypotheses to explain the reasoning behind marriage transactions. The property hypothesis sees the relationship between the group and their property as the means behind marriage transactions (Schlegel and Eloul 1988). In this case, the means of production, or how women contribute to that production, determines the type of marriage transaction used. Their findings show that a majority of horticulture groups practice bridewealth, since women are seen to make a large contribution to their families' household and the families are compensated for that loss upon marriage. Agriculturalists mostly practice dowry or indirect dowry since women are seen to make less of an economic contribution. However these findings are not very reliable since as Schlegel and Eloul (1988:295) state, there is no "measure of property relations" currently available. They do however try to substitute subsistence economy as a means to test different kinds of property relations; alternatively they use social classes. These tests find that most informal classes practice either bridewealth or brideservice (Schlegel and Eloul 1988). The bride removal argument tests the hypothesis by looking at the practices of bridewealth, women exchange, and brideservice where postmarital residence is patrilocal or avunculocal, or in other words, away from the bride's kinship. All of these practices result in "the bride's family [being] compensated for her removal" (Schlegel and Eloul 1988:297). This argument however does not include dowry or indirect dowry in its calculations, and therefore is not useful.

Another argument examined is wife-removal, which is conceptually determined to be unconvincing because the majority of societies practicing dowry are patrilocal meaning that the "women's family pays to have her removed" (Schlegel and Eloul 1988:297). A second hypothesis looks at societies with high women contribution to production resulting in a higher rate of bridewealth marriage transactions. This explains that dowry and indirect dowry would be expected in societies where women contribute less to production. These hypotheses and theories may hold true, but only in an economic sense and only for a select few societies.

There is another theory to explain dowry called the female-competition model (Gaulin and Boster 1990). This model is based off the frequent finds of bridewealth and the low instances of dowry in societies meaning that, "men frequently compete for wives, whereas competition

among women for husbands is seldom of equal intensity” (Gaulin and Boster 1990:995). They state that the choice for mate comes down to greater reproductive success. Reproductive success in societies varies. Generally speaking monogamous societies promote greater reproductive success for females because the wife receives “the bulk of [her husband’s] resources for her offspring” (Gaulin and Boster 1990:997). In polygynous societies, men enjoy greater reproductive success since their chances for producing offspring are greatly enhanced with each wife they have. If reproductive success is the main goal for women in monogamous societies, then dowry should be interpreted “as a means of female competition for desirable (that is wealthy) husbands” (Gaulin and Boster 1990:997). The theory also posits that dowry does not occur in most societies because there must be institutions set up in order for it to function. These institutions include:

a geographically delimited set of state- and near-state-level societies...stratified, nonpolygynous societies...plow agriculture, low female contribution to subsistence...inheritance rules that minimize male bias...and are more or less restricted to the western, southern, and eastern margins of Eurasia [Gaulin and Boster 1990:1002].

These examples still do not give a complete understanding of how dowry is performed. Areas of study that need to be further explored include “other possible forms of female competition for mates” and “societies where alternative forms of female competition for mates are unavailable” (Gaulin and Boster 1990:1002). These theories are a great place to start looking but they are not complete. They cannot be applied universally which means there must be other explanations for the occurrence of bridewealth and dowry.

John Ogbu’s (1978) article “African bridewealth and women’s status” tries to explain the shortcomings of previous research done in Africa on bridewealth and shows that bridewealth functions in legitimating marriage and ultimately benefiting women. Ogbu looked at sixty societies in Africa with varying descent patterns to understand the function of bridewealth. The previous research on African women as “exchange commodity” is said to have started with missionaries and carried over into anthropological studies of cultures where bridewealth has been viewed as a way to control or own women in marriage. This, according to Ogbu, is the wrong stance to take since bridewealth legitimizes marriage. It does this through entailing certain rights, responsibilities and obligations that both the *husband* and *wife* must

adhere to (Ogbu 1978:242). He provides two kinds of evidence to support his claims of legitimization through bridewealth: penalties for violations of conjugal rights only in cases in which bridewealth has been paid; [and] bridewealth paid at marriage is returned, subject to specified conditions, when a marriage is terminated (Ogbu 1978:246). The first point theorizes that a marriage is only legitimate after payment is made. This point however depends on societal norms, which differ between societies. As will be discussed later, with shifts in economic climate, norms in communities are changing to fit new subsistence strategies. In many cases women do not benefit if a marriage is not legitimate, but men can since they still have control of property and resources. If bridewealth is returned it can also be harmful to women. If the woman does not have another man to support her she may be ostracized from her family since they had to pay back an expensive bridewealth. Ogbu's article reports that if either party violates or fails to uphold their obligations, both spouses have every right to ask for divorce. It is also noted that most women only divorce when they are planning on marrying another man. In this case it can be argued that women really do not have control because they have to have a man financially support them in all of their endeavors. The article presses the need for studying other variables "before generalizing about the determinants of the status of African women in marriage and domestic life" (Ogbu 1978:257). This statement is correct and much more research needs to be done and a good place to start is with good ethnographic research.

Cultural Groups

Bridewealth Among the Gusii

The Gusii live in western Kenya in a fertile agricultural area with a population estimated to be 1.3 million (Hakansson and Beirerle 2007). Women on average have nine children and infant mortality is low, which accounts for the Gusii having the most rapid growth in the world (Hakansson and Beirerle 2007). In pre-colonial times, the Gusii were agriculturalists. This has not changed but the types of foods they cultivate have. Pre-colonial times seem to have shown an equal distribution of labor with the women performing much of the cultivation and domestic work, while men performed the hunting and herding. This changed by the end of the 1990s with men performing far fewer duties than before and women performing more, but generally in the same areas (Hakansson and Beirerle 2007).

This group is of particular interest because "[m]arriage can be established only through the payment of bride-wealth, in the form of

livestock and money” (Hakansson and Beirerle 2007). Bridewealth is central to women’s identity in this society because women “have no formally accepted status as daughters or sisters with respect to kinship rights and obligations” (Hakansson 1988:49). This means that their identity stems from their husbands; they are not identified with their birth parents or siblings. If bridewealth is not paid then a marriage is “without social and legal sanction” just as discussed early in the article by John Ogbu (Hakansson and Beirerle 2007). If the marriage is not legal then women have no right to land, but within a marriage women “can accumulate wealth” (Hakansson 1988:56). The kind of wealth they accumulate is still dependent upon their husbands and sons, but they have more rights than if they are unmarried. Bridewealth is also important in establishing strong kinship connections. The Gusii are an exogamous, patrilineal society. Brothers benefit from their sisters bridewealth because they can in turn use it for their marriage. While it is assumed that women are cut off completely from their biological kin through patrilineal residence, when they enter into marriage “bridewealth...builds a bridge between sons and daughters” (Hakansson 1988:207).

In the 1960s there was an increase in elopements due to a decline in demand for wives and the economic demands of bridewealth. Over the decades, cohabitation and an extreme delay in bridewealth payment has increased and in turn caused problems, particularly for women. Brett Shadle (2003) reports in his article *Bridewealth and Female Consent: Marriage Disputes in African Courts* that one of the main problems with bridewealth is that women can be forced into marriages and cannot leave unhappy marriages. According to the many court cases presented, brides’ fathers were upset when their daughters eloped because custom dictates that acceptance of bridewealth is a way for fathers to give consent to a marriage (Shadle 2003).

Today the value of bridewealth has decreased in Gusii, especially for peasant women, whereas women who are nurses and lawyers are a much larger ‘payment’ in the form of cash or cows (Hakansson and Beirerle 2007). While polygyny was popular in pre-colonial times, it has declined in recent times and now most households are ‘nuclear’ consisting of a husband, wife and their unmarried children. With drought and the loss of land and cattle in the area, and an increase in urban employment, bridewealth is currently not so common (Hakansson 1988). While agriculture is still practiced many people also take jobs locally or in urban areas in order to sustain their family. Bridewealth in this cultural group seems to be exclusively linked to the economic climate of the area. Now that the economy is favoring urban development, education is prestigious and other cultural and economic values

are being considered in understanding the value of bridewealth among the Gusii.

This cultural group is unique in many aspects. Bridewealth has been discussed and analyzed since pre-colonial times, so there is a general understanding of the evolution of marriage transactions in the area. Recently post-colonial studies have been looking at court cases to see how women have been treated legally and what rights they have under law as individuals, not wives. Another perspective on bridewealth is provided by Evans-Pritchard in his ethnographies of the Nuer.

Bridewealth Among the Nuer

The Nuer are located within South Sudan near the Nile River in swamps and open savanna areas. There is a large cultural divide within Sudan with Northerners “self-identified as Arabs and are Muslims while Southerners identify themselves as black, African, and increasingly Christian” (Madut Jok and Skoggard 2001:). This cultural divide has caused many civil wars and conflict in the area. This struggle has also had an effect on the census data for the area with Nuer populations ranging from as low as 200,000 to as high as 500,000 people (Madut Jok and Skoggard 2001). Cattle are central to the Nuer economic and religious life. The Nuer are primarily pastoralists although they may practice horticulture and fishing among other things for subsistence. Much of the labor is shared among the sexes such as agriculture, but women perform many of the domestic duties and men perform the pastoralist and herding activities.

Patrilineal descent is common but people consider themselves “related equally to other kin through both the mother’s and the father’s side” (Madut Jok and Skoggard 2001). Polygyny and exogamy are also common and cross-group marriages are strongly encouraged, if not demanded. These cross-cultural marriages help when a family is in need of pastoral lands for herding since they can call on their in-laws for help (Madut Jok and Skoggard 2001).

Bridewealth is given in the form of cattle, since it is the main commodity. Included with the transaction is a “series of ceremonial acts” (Evans-Pritchard 1946:247). One thing that differentiates this culture from others is that the marriage is not considered complete until the couple has a child. Evans-Pritchard’s (1946:248) description of the bridewealth distribution among the Nuer states that the cattle are ‘ideally’ distributed first, equally between the bride’s parents and secondly in “fixed proportions between three families: the bride’s own family, her father’s family, and her mother’s family.” This is important because bridewealth is not just about the

bride and the groom in this culture; it involves the extended family. Divorce is also unique in this culture since both sides of the family have invested and gained much from the union “[d]ecisions regarding divorce are usually subjected to the scrutiny of both sides” (Madut Jok and Skoggard 2001).

Bridewealth in New Guinea

The Tombema are a society of about 12,000 people who live in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea (Feil 1981). They are horticulturalists, but their most important assets are their pigs, which are their main form of trade in bridewealth. The Tombema have a very intricate system of trade and exchange. Bridewealth, also known as *tee*, is one of the main ways in which “all kinds of debts are both incurred and reciprocated” (Feil 1981:64). These debts in turn affect bride selection and “a man’s need to balance directionally his *tee* partners” (Feil 1981:65). The important aspect in this community and what makes it unique is that “bridewealth contribution is a payment to the bride rather than a contribution to the groom” (Feil 1981:66). This transaction does have value to the groom as well, since this transaction “validates the transfer of exclusive sexual rights to the husband” meaning that all children the wife has in this marriage will be recognized as a member of his clan (Feil 1981:74). This is not an uncommon finding in bridewealth studies, and is one reason given by many researchers for the continued practice today. This study differs slightly from the one on the Gusii. In both places the bridewealth must be paid in order for the marriage to be seen as valid. Feil’s (1981) article states that women in Tombema are adamant about payments being made; whereas among the Gusii it seems, only the bride’s father cares about the payment. This must be mostly due to the fact that women in Tombema receive the bridewealth and can use it how they wish; they have a higher stake in it. Women in Gusii do not see the bridewealth, their fathers do, so it is not in their interest to worry about it.

The Gusii, Nuer and Tombema all practice bridewealth, although they have many differences in the application of the practice. This is important in understanding that bridewealth is very complex and varies between cultures. It also shows that bridewealth alone is not a determinant of women’s status in society.

Dowry in Kaihsienkung, China

Kaihsienkung village is located in the Lower Yangtze region near several urban centers. They are very strong economically, mostly through agriculture but also through other industries as well. While it is economically prosperous, it holds a large peasant community. This is a fairly poor

community and agricultural production is prominent part of community life. The society is mainly patrilineal and patrilocal and the practice of dowry is common in marriage (Hsiao-tung 1982:7). The groom is responsible for providing housing, while the bride is responsible for furnishing it. She can do this from funds given to her from her new husband, called a 'li-jin', or from the dowry. It is important to note that in this community "the bride's economic status determines the proportion of contributions from her side" (Hsiao-tung 1982:7). If the groom cannot provide for the living arrangements he must then move into his bride's home including "adopt[ing] her family name: the system then becomes matrilineal and matrilocal" (Hsiao-tung 1982:7). According to Hsiao-tung (1982), girls are valued very highly by their parents because there are so few girls in the village and they are lavished with large and expensive dowries.

Hsiao-tung's (1982) article however, does not shed light on whether women contribute to agricultural production. For such a poor community it can be assumed they have some involvement, though the extent is undetermined. The contributions of men and women in this community seem to be fairly equal in terms of marriage transactions where men provide housing and women provide furnishings. While not complete, this article shows how a difference in social class can affect the use of dowry.

Dowry and Caste in India

Dowry cannot be talked about without bringing India into the conversation. Many places in India still practice dowry today, even though it has been illegal since 1961. In contrast to Kaihsienkung, China, Anderson (2003:271) finds that "the wealth of the bridal family is an insignificant determinant of dowry payments" and uses this argument to show that the current inflation in dowry is not caused by an increase in personal wealth. This dowry inflation is said to have detrimental effects on the lives of women from infanticide to bride burning and dowry death. The latter two extreme cases are seen most often when dowry is not paid in a timely fashion to the groom's family. One well-known example of this is from 1979 when a young Delhi woman was killed by her in-laws "because her parents could not meet their dowry demands" (Keck and Sikkink 1998:181).

The caste system in India has been cited as one reason for the predominate use of dowry. While this practice has been outlawed, many rural communities still use it. Through the caste system a very interesting market economy has developed for determining dowry price. The groom can be measured on two levels, wealth and caste but inflation occurs "when wealth becomes more heterogeneous within groups" (Anderson 2003:274). With an

increase in access to education for all levels of society the dowry inflation should subside. Access to and attainability of education are two different things, and should be discussed when trying to end dowry inflation.

Bhat and Halli's (1999) article takes a different look at dowry in India. Bridewealth was primarily practiced in India before dowry. The article gives three main reasons for the switch. The first one is the common notion that "dowry is a compensation paid to a groom's household for accepting an 'unproductive' member" (Bhat and Halli 1999:130). An opposing theory is that families are "paying higher groomprices because they desire to marry their daughters into families where they do not have to perform manual labour" (Bhat and Halli 1999:130-131). The second view comes from the notion of "diverging devolution" mentioned previously, but is "associated with the creation of surplus in the economy and accumulation of private property" (Bhat and Halli 1999:131). So the new explanation for dowry rise in India is due to an "increased accumulation of wealth, along with a preference for making this transfer at the time of the daughter's marriage rather than at death" (Bhat and Halli 1999:131). This explanation is in the woman's advantage because she may use this dowry; it is not just inherited to her husband or sons upon her death. The female competition model is the third reason given for the increase. This seems to be a good explanation for changes to dowry in India, especially due to the caste system. Parents want their daughters to be well off, so there is competition for a good mate.

Bridewealth and Dowry Today

While many of the studies on marriage transactions have taken place in countries such as Africa and India, Cronk and Dunham (2007) looks at the practice in western society with the exchange of engagement rings and the relationship it has to dowry, bridewealth, and mate selection in general. While this preliminary research study only looked at two variables, income and age, it provides a valuable insight into the marriage transactions of western cultures. Dowry, bridewealth and engagement rings are all under the pressure of quality since they are seen to "correlate with the aspects of male mate quality" or in the case of dowry, "mate's control of resources" (Cronk and Dunham 2007:329). This case study was a small sample of a Midwest, United States town. If this study was expanded and developed further it could be a great resource for understanding modern dowry and bridewealth in the West. It is also noted in the Ogbu (1978:257) article that in Western society female inferiority "is still symbolized at church weddings by the act of 'giving away' the bride" and in the not too distant past, a "woman could not be married without the consent of her male guardian." Women rarely have

ownership of land, unless in special circumstances; generally men have control of land and resources.

Dowry is currently the most controversial form of marriage transaction. Dowry deaths are considered one of the top forms of violence against women, particularly in India, where the practice continues today, and recent deaths are evidence of this. However, the current research on dowry is very limited. It is very difficult to find a comprehensive study on dowry. It is mostly mentioned in passing when discussing marriage in cultural groups. Even in these cases it is defined broadly and not examined. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that “bridewealth is common and dowry is rare” so research is hard to come by (Gaulin and Boster 1990:994).

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the common terminology for marriage transactions along with some of the problems and oversights in these definitions. Bridewealth is now the common term for ‘brideprice’, however the stereotype of ‘paying for a wife’ did not end with the name change. Dowry is not the opposite of bridewealth; it has its own structure and functions. There are many alternatives and variables to bridewealth and dowry, but they are not often used. Bridewealth and dowry can also be used in combination with other marriage transactions, which makes it hard to clearly distinguish one practice from another. Marriage transactions are sometimes used as the explanation for women’s marginalization and lower status, but it is more complex than this.

A few theories and hypotheses have been formed to try and understand what makes a society practice certain marriage transactions. They look for common subsistence strategies (hunters and gatherers, pastoralists, agriculturalists), marriage union types (polygynous, monogamous), and descent groups (patrilocal, matrilineal) in trying to understand similarities and differences in practice. There have been generalized similarities found such as dowry being mostly found in monogamous, patrilocal, stratified societies; but not all societies that fit this description practice dowry. This is where theory and academics seem to hit a wall. There is no current explanation for why societies of similar types do not practice the same kind of marriage transaction.

Different cultural examples spanning the decade are examined in trying to understand what variables within a culture determine the kind of marriage transaction. Each group discussed above is similar, in that their practices are all very complex. In-depth ethnographic studies, such as Evans-

Pritchard's work on the Nuer, have shown how complex these systems can be when understood in context of the entire family unit. The shortcomings in ethnographic work on bridewealth and dowry stem from shallow analyses. Ethnographers generalize about who gives gifts, money, or service to whom and that is generally all that is covered. Examining how these items are dispersed through the extended kinship and not just the bride and groom will lead to a more thorough understanding of the value of bridewealth and dowry.

Women's subordinate position in society is not caused by bridewealth and dowry; there are other factors in society that reinforce the presumption that women are inferior. Early ethnographers being predominately men, led to a male dominated view of the world where women have, in large part, been left out of the picture or viewed from a subordinate position. The historical records of many of the first encounters with different societies do not focus on women's work, and if they do mention them it is in referring to the 'secondary' subsistence strategies. This view continues today but it is not because of marriage transactions that women's domestic work is marginalized; it is the historical record that has paved the way for the continued stereotypes of women's work. Many researchers are working to correct this misperception, while many activists are fighting for women's equality and rights. This work can be seen today in India with many women's activist groups working to combat gender violence, particularly focusing on "rape, dowry deaths, wife-beating...[and] female foeticide" (Katzenstein 1989:53).

Women in societies that practice bridewealth or dowry are many times kept out of the major economic activities of their community, and their work is viewed from a Westernized lens as 'secondary' and this is where the marginalization of women is most prominent. Marriage has always, and will always be a fascinating topic because of its variation between cultures. Due to the historical significance and westernized view of men being 'head of the household' women, once married, are seen as having less status.

It is important to remember the historical background in order to further the study of bridewealth and dowry. Instead of trying to narrow the definition of bridewealth and dowry, we need to expand the definitions to include many variables. Interdisciplinary work is integral to understanding women's status in the world. Gender Studies is constantly looking at different variables such as education and security as well as economic opportunities when discussing women's status. Applying these variables to ethnographic research will help with cross-cultural comparisons.

Women's status worldwide is not valued as high as men's, but with more opportunities for women to advance their education and obtain economic opportunities the inequalities may diminish with time. From the studies and ethnographies done so far, it is not fair to say that bridewealth and dowry are the main reasons for women's low status in many countries today; there are many other factors at work.

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