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IMPLICATIONS AND COMPLICATIONS OF BRIDE PRICE PAYMENT AMONG THE SHONA AND NDEBELE OF ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is an institution that exists in all human societies. For most African cultures, it involves the bridegroom paying bride price to the bride's family, what is known in Ndebele and Shona as amalobolo and roora respectively. The payment is made in 'order to legalize the marriage' and any marriage that does not involve the payment of the bride price 'looks like casual sex or prostitution'. Bride price payment also exists in other non-African societies, but not all societies demand the payment. Hence, payment of bride price is not a universal human practice. This paper seeks to show the controversy that surrounds the payment of bride price in contemporary thinking. We seek to demonstrate how in most cases the noble idea of starting a new family is defeated by the various implications of the payment. We shall also explore the various uncompromising positions that women find themselves in the payment or non – payment of the bride price. Also in the renewed interest of women empowerment and emancipation, we argue that the payment of roora or amaloblolo is one of the hindrances of the women's quest for freedom and emancipation. Payment of bride price is one of the traditional beliefs that in many ways encourage the violation of women's human rights.

Keywords: Bride price, Empowerment, Complexities, Traditional, Women's rights

Man is nothing without woman and woman is nothing without man. Both are nothing if the child is not the center of the family created by a man and woman

INTRODUCTION

This paper is one of the papers that were presented at the 1st Africana Womanism Conference in Harare from 27 – 29 October 2010. Most of the papers presented at the conference reiterated the need to identify the positive aspects of African culture regarding to the position of women. Though unstated, one could not miss the need for Africans to be defensive in the face of feminist thinking



and the change it brought for many black women. However, our position in this paper is that there is need to go beyond all those positive attributes women have in African culture and demonstrate visible hindrances in our culture. Africana Womanism is Afrocentric in its approach to gender issues. As Molefi Asante demonstrates, “it should be clear that Afrocentrists too have recognized the inherent problems in ... patriarchy” among other theoretical underpinnings that include Structuralism, Capitalism and Marxism (2007: 34). In light of this, our paper discusses bride price as one of the aspects that have spiraled out of the control of culture. Bride price payment is one of the features that mark Africans from the rest of the world; however, in this paper we discuss the implications and complications that are associated with it in contemporary time space.

Marriage is an institution that exists in all human societies. There are two types of marriage: heterosexual and homosexual. What is acceptable in the Zimbabwean society is the heterosexual type. For most African cultures, marriage involves the bridegroom paying bride price to the bride’s family, what is known in Ndebele and Shona as *lobola* and *roora* respectively. The payment is made in ‘order to legalize the marriage’ (Bourdillon, 1997). Any marriage that does not involve the payment of the bride price ‘looks like casual sex or prostitution’ (*ibid*). A traditional marriage ceremony depends on payment of bride price to be valid. As demonstrated by Bourdillon, bride price payment also exists in other non-African societies, but not all societies demand the payment. In other cases, it is even possible to have proper marriages taking place without the payments (*op cit*). Hence, payment of bride price is not a universal human practice. In other societies like India, there is an existence of the diametric opposite of bride price in the form of dowry. In the USA, there is neither dowry nor bride price, but Americans marry and establish families.

Traditionally in both Ndebele and Shona customs, what the bridegroom pays is supposed to be a token of appreciation and a sign of commitment. As Andifasi explains, *roora/lobola* is ‘... an outward manifestation of the young man’s love for his fiancé and is a safeguard against groundless divorce’ (1970: 28). In a way, attaching a value to the woman was a way of according status. The bride price value also surpassed the outward expression of gratitude by the son in law; it generally compensated for the loss of a productive daughter. In present day, it becomes ‘a compensation for the economic costs incurred in bringing up a daughter’ (Bourdillon, 1997). Sibanda summarizes some of the values behind the payment of *lobola* with particular reference to Ndebele customs. *Lobola* had both emotional and spiritual connotations; it was used to express a feeling yet at the same time, it cemented ties between the children and their maternal ancestors through for instance, the payment of *inkomo yohlanga* (cow given to the mother of the wife). In Shona culture, this cow is known as *mombe yeumai*. Sibanda gives three reasons for *lobola* in traditional Ndebele societies, which are:

1. *kuyisibongo somkhwenyana ethakazelela imuli aselayo ngenxa yabakwaboza*. (It is a thank you from the son in law appreciating the family that he now has courtesy of the in-laws)



2. *kulobugugu bakho kunxa zonke zobudlelwano. Kothethweyo lasebazalini bakhe yisibonakaliso sothando, kwenza indoda ingamthathi kalula umkayo.* (It is precious to both sides of the relationship. It is a sign of love to the wife and her parents; it ensures the husband respects his wife)
3. *kufaka abantwana emasikweni abogogo bakanina . bangena emasikweni lawo ngenkomo yohlanga (inkomo yamalobolo ephiwa unina wentombi)*
(It puts the children in the ways of their mother's grandmothers. They get into these customs through a cow given to the mother of the wife) (1998:109)

From the above discussion, paying of *lobola/roora* for both the Shona and the Ndebele had significance. The institution of *lobola/roora* was a noble thing for both the Shona and the Ndebele. It was the first step in the formation of every family and was a cultural requirement for the establishment of every family. The position that we are going to take in this paper is that despite the cultural significance of the system, there are elements that we feel are no longer compatible in the new world. Not to say that we embrace everything that modernity means to Africans, but it is a way of demonstrating that some of our traditional customs have been corrupted. We also argue that the paying of *lobola/roora* is one of the ways in which patriarchy asserts its power over women in many respects. In most cases, men are in control of the proceedings. This control is a vital feature of gender relations in patriarchies.

On the 50th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, many organizations working on gender and women issues highlighted the endemic violence against women that continues to exist in countries throughout the world (Sweetman *et al*, 2001). This could have been the situation twelve years back, but the truth in that position applies in many present day societies. This paper proceeds by demonstrating how the cultural paying of *lobola/roora* remains a contested undertaking characterized by violations of certain human rights. Discussing bride price payment simply as a war between sexes is an oversimplification of the problem. It would be ridiculous to assume that every Zimbabwean man unconditionally colludes with the hegemonic model of masculinity that in many cases uses the paying of *lobola/roora* as an opportunity to subvert the position of women.

Roora/Lobola in Old Times

Time framing 'old times' is a difficult and almost futile exercise. This is largely so because every society undergoes changes every now and then. Here we are using the phrase to refer to the Shona and Ndebele societies before major changes that were a result of mainly external influences, in the form of the colonial encounter. In old days, for both the Shona and Ndebele people, marriage was a cultural institution that every man and woman was expected to respect. The legalization of marriage was done through the payment of bride price. Starting up a new family was communal in nature. As such, the bridegroom did not pay *roora / lobola* per se, but his family paid it to the bride's family. The bride price cattle were paid not to the herd of the girl's family but 'to the family group and were normally reserved for the marriage exchanges of the young men in the group'



(Bourdillon, 1982). This substantiates the idea that, ‘for both the Shona and the Ndebele marriage was a transaction between two families’ (May, 1983).

In the olden times for the Shonas, payment of *roora* was made in form of one/two cows, and a few bags of maize or rapoko. Some suitors either would work in the fields or simply gave in hunted game as payment of *roora* (Janhi, 1970: 33). The bride price was always in two payments, namely *rutsambo* and *roora*. *Rutsambo* was the initial payment associated with the girl’s sexual rights. The payment conferred on the husband ‘exclusive sexual rights’ over his wife and that is one of the reasons why adultery with a married woman was and is still punishable (Bourdillon, 1982). We however have problems with Bourdillon’s proposition that *rutsambo* was only payable when the bride was a virgin. From our experiences, this payment was made with or without virginity. However, the Ndebele people had a way of compensating for non-virgin brides. Ndebele traditional society demanded that the father of a non-virgin bride pay a beast to make up for her daughter, protecting her from stigma, and abuse. The second *roora* payment was ‘a substantial payment in cattle ... and was associated with rights over children born to the woman’ (Bourdillon, 1982). This particular payment bestowed child ownership on the father. These children inherited their father’s name and totem. This is the patrilineal nature of the Zimbabwean society.

On the other hand, in traditional Ndebele marriage, before the children were born, the girl’s father paid more than the boy’s father did, in the establishment of the new family. For example, he gave his daughter a beast to take to her new home. The beast was a sign to the groom’s family that the bride was serious with marriage. This beast became the foundation of the home as it multiplied. It also protected the dignity of her family and hers throughout marriage. So many other rituals were carried out in the process of the legalisation of marriage. However, the Ndebele people had a system in place that on face value seems to be the Shona equivalent of *kupereka*. The bride had to bid her relatives farewell, who in turn gave her gifts as a sign of their participation in the marriage process. The gifts that the bride was given mostly included household goods. In essence, for both the Shona and the Ndebele, a man was nothing without woman and a woman was nothing without a man. In addition, both were nothing if the child was not the center of the family created by the man and the woman. All payments were done in the establishment of a new family. Generally, the whole process was perceived as an effort to accord women status. This state of things has however gone through so many changes.

Payment of Lobola/Roora in Contemporary Zimbabwe

There have been radical changes in the life of both the Shona and the Ndebele over the past so many years. It would not be proper to assume that what was permissible those hundred years or so back still obtains today. Mainly the changes witnessed were due to external influences. These changes can be seen in a number of respects. The communal nature of the payment of bride price obtained before our society transformed into a capitalist one. When the communities became capitalist, an individualistic outlook slowly replaced the communal aspect. Eventually, this meant



that the family is no longer obliged in any way to pay the bride price on behalf of the marrying man. It also means that the father, and not the family of the bride, stands to be the sole receiver of the payment. In turn, the father is not expected to keep the payment for future use when his sons also get married. The transformation from a communal to a private transaction is one of the many signs that payment of bride price has spiraled out of the control of culture.

As highlighted earlier on, bride price payment was mainly made in cattle form, but when both the Shona and Ndebele communities became capitalist, money became the modest form of payment. It is however absurd to see how the bride price is usually stated in terms of cows when the payments are usually made in cash. The main requirements of bride price have been maintained; it still consists of *rutsambo* and *roora* for the Shona people. However, some elements have been added, these include grocery requirements. The following charges have also become part of *roora*; *vhuramuromo*, *matekenyandebvu*, *pwanyazhowa*, *mafukudzadumbu*, *mafidyongo amai* and others depending on where the proceedings are taking place. Some in – laws are reportedly asking for such items as cell phones and even cars as part of bride price payment. Some Shona communities now have a separate charge for a girl who gets married soon after University graduation. This particular girl attracts a high charge because she possesses what is called *chitupa chinyoro*; whci can be loosely translated into “a fresh educational certificate’.

The transition from communalism to capitalism, from traditional to modern, has seen the payment system also adopting exploitative tendencies. In this regard we are forced to accept May’s proposition that: “Such a system is, of course, liable to abuse in an increasingly commercial society. Fathers demand unduly high amounts for educated daughters as a recompense for the money they have invested in educating their girls”. (1984:48). An educated girl attracts more money for two reasons; it’s a compensation for the money invested in her education and it is believed that she would be of more value to the husband than an uneducated one. In the old times, there was a facility to cater for the poor. Those who had no way of raising the needed payment could arrange to work for the father in law instead of paying *roora* (May, 1983). We have so many poor men around Zimbabwe and we are yet to see a facility for them in this modern society in terms of payment of bride price. As a result, the poor city dwellers have mostly put aside traditional payment of bride price. Since they do not have the means, they simply have families without the troubles of bride price payment (May, 1983).

It has been observed that so many families are cropping up without the payment of bride price being made mandatory. There are so many cases of cohabitation and living ins around the country. People start up a family and have kids and yet no effort is made to “legalize” the marriage, yet they have become a family. In cases where the world has shrunk into “a global village”, boys and girls get married to people from other cultures that do not necessarily value bride price payment. Even the concept of marriage itself seems to be losing its traditional value. Some may decide simply to have kids and raise them as single parents. Women can be mothers without necessarily having men



around them as husbands. Though it is still fiercely taboo in our society, others may simply decide to be homosexuals. Insisting on bride price payment is now quite difficult. As a society, we have moved far away from the village set up where it is easy to regulate its payment. Both boys and girls have acquired a great deal of freedom of movement out of the village to the urban set up. In that freedom, parents cannot easily control especially the sexual behavior of the grown up boys and girls.

Implications and Complications of *Roora/Lobola*

We may want to insist that the payment system remains one of the things that culturally mark the African off from the rest of the world, but there are so many negative implications in this system. Traditionally the payment of bride price was a way of according women some form of 'status'. Such a manner of showing a woman's status is what we think is questionable. In what way does a human being become respected in any society because of being paid for? We believe that the payment actually reduces the woman to an object of sale and hence commoditize her. Charging *lobola/roora* involves putting a price on what is charged; which in this case is, unfortunately a woman. The dictionary of business and management defines a charge as "a legal interest in land or property created in favor of a creditor to ensure that the amount owing is paid off (2003:64).

The amount charged is usually large, which is not paid in a one-off payment; this has introduced credit facility type of *lobola* payments. When you cannot pay the amount owing once you negotiate terms of payment, the terms of payment are a *lobola* charge account, which is a credit account on the man who is marrying. Although the practice of bride price payment gives both the Shona and the Ndebele a sense of pride and is also practiced in many other African states, it has assumed the proportion of a challenge to the forces of modernity and change. A tradition, which originally elevated the status of a woman, has transformed into a way of disempowering her. The commercialization of *lobola* has stripped it of its symbolism and reduced it to yet another way of controlling women's reproductive rights.

If we agree that men should also participate in the uplifting of the vulnerable in society and women are among these, insisting on the payment of *roora/lobola* defeats the whole process. This is mainly so because the position of men in the process is a complex and an influential one. They do the 'paying' and the 'charging'. Both activities undertaken by men serve to show the difficult positions that women find themselves in. Men determine women's 'price' for *lobola* factoring in costs like education, clothing, food, medication and other expenses that parents would have spent on their daughter. They also pay the *lobola* and at times impose on the women as a repayment of *lobola*. Women repay the price through their services as wives. These services include child bearing as well as sexually fulfilling their husbands; the interesting part is that though they also benefit from the sexual activities, the children that they bear traditionally belong to their husbands. On the other hand, women as mothers minimally benefit from their daughters' bride price. Of all the payments that are made; the mother of the bride gets a mother's cow (*inkomo yohlanga/mombe*



yehumai), *mapfukudza dumbu* and clothes. The position where mothers are not expected to receive *roora* for their daughters becomes more complicated in two scenarios: In case of a father who has died and when the mother raises the daughter as a single parent. In the first scenario culturally, the father's brothers or the sons should receive the *roora* even though the mother is still alive. In all earnest, the mother has every right here to benefit but what disqualifies her from benefitting is her womanhood. In cases where the mother single handedly raised the child, if *roora / lobola* is a way of recovering the costs of raising a daughter, this particular father incurred zero costs and as such he should get nothing from the payment. However, from time to time families insist that the absent and irresponsible father is the owner of the child and as such should receive the payment. At what point does the irresponsible father become the owner of the child? Is it from birth or at the point of *lobola* payment? We are aware that the father is expected to pay *Chiredzwa/isondlo* to compensate for the raising of the child, but still it is not enough. Why can't he just be removed from the negotiation process? The two incidents highlighted above obtain from the payment of "*roora/danga*" that translates the 'ownership' of children to the father. Such a payment removes the mothers from participating in the decision processes that ultimately affect children that are rightly theirs as well.

One other disturbing trend is that *lobola/ roora* now seems to be controlled by market forces. A market has been created due to the transformation of *lobola*, creating a commodity out of women, which has seen the enslavement of women by their husbands, brothers, fathers and male relatives. Traditionally *lobola* could not be used as an excuse to abuse women partly because it was a social and spiritual institution. Wives are abused if they do not want to do what the man paid for, duties such as washing, cooking, cleaning, pregnancy, sex and working in the fields. Many women have been abused for using family planning methods because money was paid for them to bear children. Some men beat their wives for suggesting that they use condoms as they think the condom disturbs what the man rightfully owns.

There is a strong feeling that a situation where women are exchanged for money is not far from the practice of prostitution. Prostitution is a situation where a man pays for sex with a woman. It is very difficult to separate the act from the *rutsambo* amount that gives a man sexual rights over his wife. The only notable difference is that a husband is expected to pay once and then enjoys sex until death or separation. In case of prostitution, the concerned woman receives the payment and then in marriage, the parents of the woman stand to benefit. Nevertheless, both are characterized by an economic transaction that reduces the woman to an object. Since *Lobola* now exposes women to abuse just like child marriage, it should also be regulated by article 1 of the 1956 supplementary convention on the abolition of slavery. (Mikhail, 2002) notes that Article 1 (of the convention) states that the institutions and practices similar to slavery where, a woman, without the right to refuse, is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents or guardian family are prohibited. With child marriage and prostitution, a third party, and not the girl herself most frequently receive payments. The same applies to *lobola*, the father



charges and the husband pays; the father then spends the money usually in ways that do not benefit the girl's mother. When the woman is chased away by her husband the father cannot accept her back as the transaction was complete and the money spent. The father cannot protect his daughter from abuse by the husband because he cannot pay back the huge *lobola* amounts.

Traditional *lobola* ensured that both families contributed to the establishment of the new home, minimizing potential abuse. *Lobola* today is so capitalistic that the money paid determines the woman's condition in marriage. Communalism made mutual contributions possible; however, capitalism benefits the one who pays to abuse the one who does not. The centrality of bride price translates marriage into an economic union. After paying for the raw certificate (*chitupa chinyoro*), the man normally assumes economic authority over his working wife. This new scenario defeats the current efforts to emancipate women economically. As long as the husband pays for the woman's educational qualifications, it would always mean that she has been robbed off her acquired economic freedom.

Traditional *lobola* also practiced in modern day Zimbabwe, can be equated to Christian offerings to God; people are not charged offerings but give depending on their blessings. As Christians cannot hold God at ransom because they gave offerings, men should not do the same to women because they paid *lobola*. In other cases what moves people to pay *roora* is not that they believe in its value. What pushes some people is the fear of what will happen in cases of sudden death of the wife. Therefore, it is fear and not respect for the custom that pushes many men into partially paying the bride price. The fear of an avenging spirit has regulated how people may comply with *lobola/roora* payments especially among the Shona.

The Direction that payment of Bride Price is Taking

The MFUMI N.G.O tried making the payment of bride price unconstitutional in Kampala and failed. The fact that banning bride price payment in Uganda failed does not make it right, but the insight from the court hearing could be useful. The Court Judges defended the payment of bride price arguing that in the face of divergent cultural beliefs the court had no powers of denying any group of its values and beliefs. The judges insisted that there was need to check the role women played in the tradition and casted doubt on whether the majority of women feel negatively about bride price payment. This insight could be useful in our own case. Advocating the banning of bride price could fail because of a number of reasons. It is unconstitutional, because various marriage customs are allowable. We however, feel that the constitution is manmade and can be changed any time. Still there is need to carry out an assessment of how women feel about the payment, and the constitution can be revised to suit their needs.

Customs such as bride price payment are part of African traditional religions. In a new African world that could have started with colonialism, Africans started having options in religious beliefs. Christianity is one of the major options. Christianity became part of the African realities through



the unfortunate colonial encounter between the continent and Europe. It however has become part of the African religious systems and so many Zimbabweans are part of it. We cannot dispute this reality even if we insist on being Afrocentric. There is a way in which it is possible to be a Christian in the African sense; this may start from the interpretation of the bible to the methods of worship that have an African flavor. In contemporary Zimbabwean society, there is a relationship between bride price payment and Christianity.

However, the above relationship makes the discussion of the centrality of African culture in postcolonial Africa not an easy one. Christianity is non-homogenous. We have protestant as well as mainstream churches, and African Independent churches. Protestant churches do not respect bride price payment and they insist that couples can get married even without it. "Some pastors go ahead to officiate at weddings while parents of either the bride or groom have reservations" (Cox, *ibid*: 119). These reservations are mainly to do with bride price nonpayment. We argue that such cultural realities should be a sign that some elements of a people's way of life can slowly be eroded with time. Earlier on, we highlighted that some circles of our society no longer passionately value the institution of marriage. Banning bride price payment may seem difficult as well as regulating it. Our position is if nothing is done, eventually it would die a very slow natural death given that it's already weakened. Alternatively, possibly it would keep being reformed and will eventually have a new face.

CONCLUSION

In Zimbabwe, for both the Shona and the Ndebele, payment of bride price is steeped in tradition. However, as highlighted in the above discussion, it disturbs the family concept whose basis it should be. The disturbance is mainly seen when bride price payment condemns women to a kind of marital enslavement. The enslavement denies them control over decision-making processes, family resources, their children and their own sexuality. In some cases, it takes away their economic freedom they might have acquired through education; especially in cases where the father demands compensation for educating the girl. If we agree, that bride price humiliates and dehumanizes women, then something ought to be done. Various options can be explored in an effort to curb the negative influence that the payment of bride price has on the efforts to emancipate women.

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