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Telesia Kathini Musili

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Ndwaengone mwaitu: A Postmodern Cultural Phenomenon of Dowry among the Akamba and its influence on Spousal Violence

By Telesia Kathini Musili¹

Abstract

Dowry, also referred to as bride wealth or bride price, is a consultative, amicable, and quantifiable summation of goods exchanged between the groom's and bride's families. Traditionally, dowry (*ngasya*) payment among the Akamba was an obligation for the parents-in-law (husband's parents), but that has in the recent past transitioned to the husband paying the dowry himself. An emerging trend is, however, catching up with married women budding together and opting to pay the dowry for themselves, which is not only a cultural shock and an empowering paradigm shift but also a ceremony that could be riddled and clouded with rifts amongst spouses. "*Ndwaengone mwaitu*" literally translated to mean "Let us visit my mother," is a ceremony that is becoming popular among Kenyans from different tribes. The ceremony is organized by one who goes to see his or her biological mother, accompanied by friends of the same age. This paper examines "*Ndwaengone mwaitu*" as an emerging postmodern cultural phenomenon in dowry honourship and its relation to spousal violence by analysing couples' life narratives. The article employs Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's notion of snail-sense feminism to examine the viability of realizing fair and humanistic co-existence for couples after "*Ndwaengone mwaitu*" disguised for dowry honourship. Snail-Sense feminism espouses the pattern of the snail to 'negotiate' or 'dialogue' within its milieu to get around impediments with a 'well-lubricated tongue.' This theory is adopted as it offers women tactical strategies for achieving emancipation from cultural norms and men's domination that perpetuate gender-based violence. The paper employed a qualitative design, utilizing interview schedules and focus group discussions to elicit experiential data from men and women attending "*Ndwaengone mwaitu*" ceremonies in various parts of Ukambani in Kitui County in Kenya. The article affirms the value of cultural identity, respect, and negotiating power and space that one attains after meeting the societal expectations that come along with the practice, cementing the value of marriage and dowry customs among the Akamba. As such, dowry honourship, even though contested in the contemporary space, is a cultural practice that both men and women ought to navigate tactfully, thus, averting spousal violence.

Keywords: Akamba, Dowry, Gender-based violence, Narratives, Snail-sense feminism,

Introduction

Traditionally, the payment of dowry in African societies is a cultural practice that is mandatory for cementing a marriage. Dowry, also referred to as bride wealth or bride price, is a consultative, amicable, and quantifiable summation of goods exchanged between the groom's and bride's families. In most cultures, particularly in Kenya, the exchange flows from the groom's family to the bride's father. This cultural practice, according to Anderson,

¹ Telesia Kathini Musili is a lecturer at the department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master of Arts degree in Religious Studies from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium; and a PhD from the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Kenyatta University (KU). Besides, Musili holds a Master's degree in Bioethics from Atlantic International University, USA. Her research interests revolve around religion and media, ethics, and religion, focusing on the response to contemporary issues affecting women and society. Email: telesia.musili@uonbi.ac.ke. Her ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9448-7571>.

is dominant in societies that are “monogamous, patrilineal, and endogamous” (Anderson, 2003, p. 271). Though his observations can be termed as those of an outsider, I affirm that it is a practice that dominates in patrilineal kinship traditions. It is, culturally, a symbolic sign that puts two families together. Symbols are drivers of cultural values that are embedded and socialized through and through generations. Dowry is a symbol of social status, identity, acceptance, and affection from the groom’s family, according to a feminist cultural hermeneutic (Kanyoro, 2002, pp. 158-180). Contested as it may be, upholding positive cultural elements is paramount to one’s being and being-ness.

Conscious of multiple studies that have faulted the symbol as repressing, demeaning, and disempowering women, the foregoing perceptions rightly flow from the various names that the practice has received over the years. Dowry payment, bride wealth, and bride price, for example, evoke conceptualizations that not only objectify women as commodities for trade but also place them in precarious situations in the hands of their husbands, who believe they have the right to do whatever they want with them (Atekyereza, 2001, pp. 360-384; Kinuthia, Wathika, & Yakobo, 2015, pp. 135-146; Mbaye & Wagner, 2017, pp. 891-910). In most instances, failure to perform the practices and the rituals that accompany dowry celebrations “is linked to local discourses of abuse, torture, homicide, and suicide of young wives” (Doubleday & Adams, 2020, p. 2). This jeopardizes the lives, health, and well-being of women and young girls (Doubleday & Adams, 2020, p. 2). Sexual and gender-based violence, intimate partner/spousal violence and domestic violence are other ills that have resulted from the perceptions of ownership of women (Kameri-mbote, 2000, pp. 1-32; Kimuna & Djamba, 2008).

According to Kasebwe Kabongo, “commercialization of bride price” and its subsequent demand to “pay” is a major challenge not only to the young men aspiring to marry but also to the morality of society (Kabongo, 2020, p. 6). Dowry negotiations and honouring of the agreed-upon summation amongst most societies were a communal affair with immediate clan members from the groom’s side under the leadership of the groom’s father taking up the responsibility. Following swift changes in the socio-economic standing of current times and ages, it is now solely the responsibility of the groom to honour the dowry agreements after the elders are done with their duty. It, therefore, follows that a man who honours dowry negotiations and agreements, is respected, and recognized in the bride’s family. Those who fail to honour it are ridiculed and called names that hurt their egos. Balancing this sole responsibility in dire economic times has left young men with tight options such as cohabiting (Kabongo, 2020, pp. 1–7) and taking and servicing bank loans (Onyango, 2016) that strain marital relationships.

Nevertheless, as a culturally symbolic gesture that is rooted in cementing the most treasured basic unit of society, (marriage), dowry negotiations and exchange rituals and celebrations will not fade into thin air. Men treasure the respect and recognition that come along with honouring societal expectations. Women also keep up with the expectations due to several reasons, which include respect, pride in owning a home, entitlement to land ownership, and a sense of acceptance and belonging in a “foreign family.” The honour cements the being and being-ness of both men and women, giving them an identity and a permanent belonging in their community circles and beyond. When a dowry is not honoured, women live in a betwixt situation of being settled neither there nor here. You neither belong to your own family nor do you belong to your husband’s family. Dowry honourship is thus an entrenched symbolic custom that gives both men’s and women’s lives meaning, respect, and a sense of belonging. Kenya’s constitution of 2010 article 45, section 4 (a) recognizes the legality of unions contracted under customary law once sealed by honouring the dowry expectations.

Cultural shifts and trajectories have emerged and gravitated towards a mutual understanding of this important relational exercise. Sommer and Schwartz (2011) put the problem into perspective with an assertion that,

[...] Widespread economic dependence on dowry and the objectification of women often leaves female youth with limited control over their lives. [...] Paying dowry for a woman is like slavery. You have no voice before your husband if he pays your dowry for you. Arranged marriages for young girls, moreover, remain common. (Sommer & Schwartz, 2011 p. 5)

Emily Onyango (2016) faults the term “bride-price” as it brings about a connotation “of a purchase or financial transaction” (Onyango, 2016). Women are, as a result, seen as property, which leads to their enslavement, being dehumanized, and being perceived as inferior. Daughters are culturally perceived as investments, which, in a way, spearheads forced and early girl-child marriages. This compounding scenario creates a fertile ground for marital conflict, gender-based violence, and family conflicts resulting in the loss of life either through suicide or homicide.

Though compounded by multiple vulnerabilities, dowry negotiations and execution remain a powerful cultural practice among the Akamba. Traditionally, dowry (*ngasya*) payment among the Akamba was an obligation for the parents-in-law (husband’s parents), which in the recent past has transitioned to the husband paying the dowry himself. Due to the identity-forming and respectful standing that dowry ceremonies and rituals provide, the practice thrives even as it adopts different paradigms that are foreign to the ancient culture. One such paradigm is *Ndwaengone mwaitu* translated to mean “Let’s go visit my mother” ceremony. The ceremony is common among women of the same age group who organize themselves to visit their biological mothers. From these visits, it has become clear that women are using the money they get from working together to pay their own dowries, which goes against the rules of the custom.

This paper examines *ndwaengone mwaitu* as an emerging postmodern cultural phenomenon in relation to spousal violence by analysing the couple’s experiential narratives using snail-sense feminism. Qualitative data was analysed to depict the implications of the *ndwaengone mwaitu* ceremony for spousal violence given its liberative prompt entrance to a normative cultural event. The article affirms the value of identity, respect, and negotiating space that one attains after meeting the societal expectations that come along with the practice, cementing the value of marriage and dowry custom among the Akamba. Mbiti further corroborates his assertion that marriage is understood and institutionalized within the context of community, as fulfilling an obligation and a custom of partnership and forbearance of children (Mbiti, 1987, pp. 31-43). Kyalo also supports the argument with his assertion that “marriage among the Akamba was a must and every adult and normal Mũkamba had to marry” (Kyalo, 2011, p. 5). These assertions reflect a culture that has been here for ages.

***NdwaengoneMwaitu* (“Let’s go visit mum”)**

Amidst dowry inflation, demands, and its foregoing negative consequences, there is no doubt that dowry is a contemporary social evil. However, as it permeates a core rite of passage in most cultures, specifically among the Akamba, it is intriguing to understand how to negotiate and hold tensions within the custom in a manner that upholds peace and social cohesion. Driven by patriarchal ideologies, it is a custom compounded by power differentials that ought to be negotiated. According to Kanyoro, one’s identity is a result of a complex cultural negotiation to find one’s value (Kanyoro, 2001, pp. 158-180). It is in this spirit of complex cultural negotiation and the “call for women to arise” (Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 2005)

that *Ndwae ngone Mwaitu* initiated to make sense and tactfully combat the violence that befalls women in the hands of men, as fuelled by the dowry custom.

Ndwae ngone Mwaitu is a female bonding type of friendship that is composed of individual women of the same age bracket for “purposes of supporting each other for a common good” (Udoette, 2019, p. 68). Female bonding is defined as “the formation of a close personal relationship between women, and in general, usage to describe patterns of friendship, attachment, and cooperation in women” (Valen, 2010: p.30). The group meets every month, where they contribute money to support each other in various social life aspects. According to Udoette (2019), female bonding necessitates the concepts of female liberation, collective female consciousness, and female empowerment, all of which contribute to redefining the woman’s place in society (Udoette 2019, pp. 65-72). The solidarity of women is a powerful tool for negotiating the power imbalances that define most societies.

One of the outstanding objectives of these groups is to visit their mothers, who are often neglected when one marries and starts her own family. The purpose of such visits is to appreciate her for preparing one for marriage, raising them up and at the same time seeking blessings from her as she ages. The visits are usually elaborate, with song and dance, feasting and merrymaking, convoys of vehicles, classic dress and traditional blessings coupled with splashing and showering one’s mother with gifts, sweet words of appreciation and money. Aunties, uncles, grandmothers, sisters, brothers, and the entire clan witness and celebrate the power of a woman in nurturing a hardworking girl turned woman and wife. It is usually a visit characterized by pomp and colour. As the women’s groups continued to hold grip and celebrate their mothers, their husbands started tagging along. It is of late becoming a group of girlfriends accompanied by their husbands and friends to honour their parents and receive blessings, which is mutually possible when the dowry has been honoured. The changing dynamics have impacted the sole objective of appreciating mothers to honour dowry negotiated to claim respect from the girl’s husband from her clan and extended family. The shift has not been devoid of challenges and tensions, that women as change-makers have embraced boldly to renegotiate their space in this male-dominated custom.

Snail-Sense Feminism Theory

The Snail-sense feminism theory as advanced by AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo (2001) guided the arguments in this paper. In her writings, she embraces story-telling methodology emanating from one’s lived experiences to examine and navigate themes such as patriarchy and cultural traditions as the major deterrents to women’s liberation. Renowned African women theologians such as Kanyoro (2001) and Oduyoye (1989) have argued that the oppression of women as reinforced in most African societies is culturally created. This means that culture constructs a woman and attaches stereotypical roles to her, and these roles subject her to men’s headship. It is this stereotypical construction that was reinforced by the advent of Christianity, a fact that AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo (2001) strongly highlights in her works. She approaches the stories of traditional women from the position of capability in societal development, before the coming of colonial masters and their religion, Christianity. AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo (2001) notes that women were conscious of their notable place in society; they were strongly assertive, independent, and capable of making their own decisions. It is the burden brought about by colonization and Christianity that women have battled with to date. In *House of Symbols* (2001), she advocates for sisterhood, solidarity, and female bonding as powerful tools to navigate traditional patriarchal dominance and negative cultural traditions to regain women’s liberation from demeaning cultural traditions and religions.

AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo developed Snail-Sense Feminism theory as a calculative model for countering hegemonic discourses that continue to permeate most African societies

to the detriment of women's autonomy and freedom. The study adopts the sisterhood, solidarity, and female bonding aspects of Snail Sense feminism as tools that necessitate the liberation of women. African scholars of diverse sociological disciplines have continuously insisted on the need to appreciate African culture and see to it that the integrity of African culture is upheld (Maseno, 2021, pp. 6-14). A challenge, however, looms as repressing drivers embedded in positive aspects of African cultures, such as dowry, and its implications for women are not addressed. Snail-Sense feminism espouses the pattern of the snail to "negotiate" or "dialogue" within its milieu to get around impediments with a "well-lubricated tongue." This theory offers women tactical strategies for achieving emancipation from cultural norms and men's domination that perpetuate gender-based violence.

It is in this spirit that this paper negotiates this cultural tradition by situating women at the centre for the sake of their identity, respect, and sense of belonging through mutual dowry honours.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Kitui County, Kenya. This is a rural county, with Kitui Town being its capital and the largest urban town, followed by Mwingi Town. These towns depict a peri-urban life. According to the Kenya Bureau of Statistics (2019) report on population, the county houses a total population of 1,136,187, of which 549,003 are males, 587,151 are females, and 33 are intersex persons. There are 262,942 households with an average household size of 4.3 people per household. Owing to the sporadic rainfall characteristic of the area, its economy is based on subsistence farming, which has seen its people transition to non-agricultural industries (About Kitui, 2018). It is, therefore, fathomable why appreciation visits and honouring dowries are crucial.

The target population was both men and women attending *ndwae ngone mwaitu* ceremonies within Kitui town. The study employed a purposive sample of three *ndwae ngone mwaitu* ceremonies, where women within the group and their husbands were scheduled for an informal interview. A focus group discussion was conducted with one *ndwae ngone mwaitu* group to elicit in-depth information on how they negotiated and balanced the intrusion into a very patriarchal, male-dominated custom. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative studies share a naturalistic and situated concern as the foundation of inquiry as they seek to study natural phenomena through a subjective personal perspective while paying attention to their context of origin. One Focus Group discussion (FGD) was conducted among eight women belonging to one *ndwae ngone mwaitu* group while preparing for their next visit. Since data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic wave, the researcher ensured that face masks and social distancing preventive measures were maintained. Notes and recordings were made and transcribed for analysis, whereby during the analysis the focus group discussion was labelled as FGDW with numbers 1–8. Interviews were conducted between men and women attending *ndwae ngone mwaitu* ceremonies, where respondents were labelled as M for men (1-5) and W for women (1–7). A total of 5 men and 7 women were interviewed separately, to get a description of their understanding of women's participation in dowry honourship and its implications for their marital relations. The researcher acted deliberately to match the respondents to their spouses. Of the seven (7) women interviewed, five (5) were married, one (1) was widowed, and the other one (1) was single and had never married.

Findings and Discussion

Data was sought on *Ndwae ngone mwaitu* as an emerging postmodern cultural phenomenon, as dowry honourship among the Akamba was in the past a responsibility of the

groom's parents that was taken up by the groom. However, owing to challenging economic times that have pushed couples into a hefty financial crisis, women have stepped up to assist in conforming to the societal expectation of honouring dowry. Their involvement in this patriarchal space has not only raised eyebrows amongst the men-clan but has also fuelled spousal violence within the institution of marriage. Nevertheless, negotiated, and mutual consensus to partner in dowry honourship among consenting married contemporaries is a guarantee that *ndwae ngone mwaitu* will not only change the emerging negative perspective of dowry honourship, but also function as a driver of embracing our cultural identity. These and other sentiments are discussed thematically as they emerge from the qualitative data collected.

***Ndwae ngone Mwaitu* an Emerging Postmodern Cultural Phenomenon**

Poverty is a major deterrent to women's progress in all areas of their lives. Cognizant of this challenge, women tend to organize themselves into groups for any form of support, be it financial, spiritual, psychological, social, or physical, as a survival strategy given the magnitude of their unpaid work. In acknowledging women's unpaid work, United Nations women plead for redistribution of unpaid work with an assertion that,

[...] From cooking and cleaning, to fetching water and firewood or taking care of children and the elderly, women carry out at least two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men. As a result, they have less time to engage in paid labour, or work longer hours, combining paid and unpaid labour. Women's unpaid work subsidizes the cost of care that sustains families, supports economies, and often fills in for the lack of social services (UN Women, 2017).

The grouping of women into welfare organizations for their support is laudable. It is a clear demonstration that women are resilient and firm in their struggles. They have risen and braved themselves to navigate the toughest of spaces while respecting societal expectations. One woman affirmed that the *Ndwae ngone mwaitu* group was founded.

[...] it is easier to visit my mother when I am with a group of other women friends. Alone you cannot because, where do you get all the money to buy her gifts like we have done today? We have children in school who are demanding school fees. We have to eat and meet other needs. It is only the 'mzee' (husband) who is working. Visiting your mother is not a priority. But with the little I get from him and my small business, put together with other women, we could visit her (F3, May 8, 2020).

Sisterhood forms laudable solidarity where support is guaranteed. It is not only the support but also a shared understanding that enables the prioritizing of what is of importance to them without being prejudiced. Once married, the Akamba men do not encourage their wives to keep on visiting their parents, especially mothers, for no apparent reason. The grouping as necessitated by *ndwae ngone mwaitu* makes this possible. In *House of Symbols* (2001), AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo praises this prominent way of navigating patriarchal dictates as tactful, non-aggressive, and subtle. In one of her interviews with *Encomium Magazine* (2015), AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo reiterated that "I don't believe in confrontation and unnecessary aggression, or one being opinionated about everything" but she urges brilliant negotiation.

Socio-economic challenges such as poverty, the excessive cost of living, and lack of education, among others, were the major deterrents to honouring dowry, especially on the part of men. However, honourship is an important cultural symbol of extending friendship

and being ‘born’ in another home. Commercialization of dowry, where expected animals and items were converted to market monetary rates and values, was another challenge that has made it difficult to honour the expectation, given other demanding responsibilities. As such, the coming together of women was lauded, as it paved the way for not only visiting the bride’s parents in search of blessings but also honouring dowry expectations.

[...] it (referring to *ndwaë ngone mwaitu*) is a good thing. At least once, when it was my wife’s turn, I got a chance to visit my in-laws and get blessings too. They (women) collect and save good money that cannot result in ridicule or embarrassment. You know you cannot go to your in-laws’ empty-handed. But since it’s difficult to do it alone, I get an opportunity to throw in what I have, and I accompany them. That way, I get a chance to visit respectfully (M1, May 8, 2021).

The respondent attests to the importance of women’s solidarity and sisterhood. When women come together, they empower each other, not only economically but also socially, physically, and psychologically. As the men ride on their innovative solidarity, they pool resources together that enable them to mutually honour the expected dowry. Subtle as it may seem, other women still hold on to the perception that it is the groom and his family who are culturally mandated to honour the dowry. The men reported their women bashing them after they used their *Ndwaë ngone mwaitu* collections to honour the dowry.

[...] as a man, when you use ‘their money’ to honour dowry, you have no say at all in your house or over her! This affects our (men) ego, you either beat her thoroughly or you just leave and hook up with another woman, for the sake of peace, provided you don’t go to her parents as the dowry piles up (M4, May 8, 2021).

In such instances, spouses turn against each other, leading to separation and escalating extra-marital relations, also known as “*mpango wa kando*’ relations. As a deterrent to break-ups and separations that hurt families, most women embraced the mutual honouring of dowry since they also benefited from it. As Kanyoro (2002), argues, culture is a double-edged sword, it can affirm (giving one identity) and it can also destroy (in this case, objectifying women) (Kanyoro, 2002, pp. 158-180). Dowry honour has mixed consequences for both the groom and the bride, as discussed in the following section.

Dowry, Honourship, and Respect among the Akamba of Kitui

Marriage among the Akamba is only valid if the *ntheo* is respected. The celebration follows the agreement of both families that their children (groom and bride) are ready to marry. Upon agreement, the groom’s family brings the four goats to the bride’s family, that is, two she-goats and two he-goats. One of the he-goats is slaughtered by the groom, and blood is poured by the kitchen (three-stone) as a sign of commitment to their daughter. The remaining he-goat and the two female goats symbolize regeneration. The bride’s father then accepts the gesture and makes welcome pronouncements to the son-to-be, while handing over his daughter to the groom. *Ntheo* is the bare minimum requirement for marriage among the Akamba. It signifies that the two families have now entered a relationship. The groom is welcomed in the bride’s home as a son, while the daughter is received in the groom’s home as a daughter and a wife to the groom. The *Ntheo* ceremony is so important among the Akamba for both men and women. A woman whose *ntheo* had not been paid could not receive *ntheo* for her daughter. If a woman dies and the husband has not paid the goats to his in-laws, he is not allowed to bury her until *Ntheo* is paid. If they failed to honour *Ntheo*, then the parents of the woman buried her, though not in their homestead but by a roadside fence. It

is believed that it is a bad omen for the other unmarried girls as they may get married to disrespectful families like their sister. The Akamba believed that the deceased could find a “spiritual husband” as she lay by the roadside fence, who would spiritually take away the shame from her family.

As such, the man and his clan are ridiculed by the neighbours and their in-laws for failing to honour societal expectations. After the burial, the families meet and agree that the bride’s family should give a black he-goat to the groom’s family known as *mbui ya ulee* (rejection goat) if there were children borne from the marriage. The bride’s family are allowed to take their daughter’s children. If the groom allows this procedure to happen, it becomes difficult for him to remarry, as word goes around that he and his family are poor and disrespectful to in-laws. In most cases, the groom’s family accepts giving the four goats for *ntheo*, to avoid the shame and ridicule. They would later plan to honour the dowry just to maintain their respect. Shaming is as a caveat to honour societal expectations among the Akamba. For one to earn himself/herself respect, one had to ensure that traditional societal expectations, were honoured at the bare minimum.

After the *Ntheo* ceremony, the groom, and his family honour the dowry as negotiated by the elders and clan’s men. Dowry among the Akamba legitimizes marriage. Traditionally, dowry was in the form of livestock (goats and cows) and farm produce (maize, beans, and honey). Initially, dowry among the Akamba was thirty-six goats, six bulls, and three heifers regardless of whether you had received formal education or not and was honoured with friendliness over a prolonged period. Over the years, it was revised to include two drums of honey, popularly known as *ithembe*, two blankets, two-bed sheets, 48 goats, three bulls, and 8 heifers (Mutua, 2012). Currently, dowry is converted into cash, where the market price of the commodities, including goats, bulls, and heifers, is calculated, and expected from the groom. Initially, there was no time limit to honour the dowry, a trend that has changed owing to the commercialization of the symbol. Currently, the bride’s parents demand the dowry mostly after their daughter has sired a minimum of two children. Inasmuch as it puts pressure on the couple, they still held on to the importance of their culture in matters of dowry honourship.

Respondents reiterated the importance of both ceremonies, especially regarding their respect, sense of belonging, and identity. Most of the men interviewed noted that honouring *ntheo* and dowry was a respectful gesture to their in-laws who had given them their daughters. Daughters, who in turn became mothers to their children,

[...] this is our culture. It is a must that I honour what was agreed on. It is a sign of appreciation and respect to my in-laws. They will also respect me, I am not cheap, I can afford to take care of their daughter (Personal communication, May 8, 2021)

Another opined that,

[...] it is the prudent thing to do. These women give us children, families, and also respect. I will also expect to get something from my daughter. So, if I do not pay what I was told to pay, then I and the mother will not get anything either (M2, June 19, 2021).

As much as the men chose to honour their culture through meeting the societal expectations of both *ntheo* and dowry, it is still evident that they still view dowry as a ‘payment.’ The concept of ‘bride price’ is ingrained and socialized through the very purpose of the symbol, which signifies mutuality in a new relationship. The commercialization of the dowry paves the way for such thinking, where a woman’s monetary worth is placed on her. Mentally, one feels equated either to livestock or thousands of shillings, a concept that brings about

ownership and objectification of women and girls. So, men think they have the right to treat women however they want, especially if they pay the dowry.

Women differed in their sentiments on dowry honourship, on whether it should be honoured at all, and on whether their involvement was of any importance. Most women affirmed that *ndwaengone mwaitu* is a commendable empowering grouping that has enabled them to attain greater respect and honour. Interesting discussions on whether dowry should be honoured at all revolved around objectification, parental demands, respect, a sense of belonging, and the commercialization of the ceremony. One FGD respondent argued,

[...] when a man pays dowry, he feels like he has bought you. He gives you demands of what to do, where to go, even when to go to visit your parents...it is not a must that he pays (FGDW2, June 17, 2021).

Concerns about the implication of dowry honourship are still a thorny debate, even among women. The objectification and entitlement that result after the ceremony create a fertile ground for spousal violence. However, other women held on to the importance of the ceremony. One woman noted that “payment of dowry is important. I left my parents and I now help his parents, and I have sired their children. My parents deserve some cows” (FGDW4, June 17, 2021).

A woman who sired children for her in-laws is highly respected, and the only way they can show gratitude is by honouring the dowry. Among the Akamba, children belong to the father and his clan. To lay a claim on them, dowry honourship guarantees him respect from the bride’s parents and the entire clan, and the women respondents approved of the claim. One respondent asserted,

[...] Yes, the children are theirs, and so, in exchange, they need to pay my dowry. You know if your husband pays dowry, he is respected by your clan, parents, and immediate family. You are also respected because it means you were accepted there; you are well-behaved [...]. It is a gesture of telling you now you are ours. You belong. Your people also think that you have now established a home, you are a grown woman (FGDW6, June 17, 2021).

When the Akamba honour dowry, it raises the status of both the groom and the bride within the clan and among their peers.

Further, the concept of exchanging a bride for reproductive goals permeated women’s mentality. Children among the Akamba are valued, and barrenness is shunned (Ngila, 2012). Even though the Akamba allowed barren women to marry *iweto*, another woman who would sire children on her behalf, the ridicule of being barren lives on. Kamba men marry a second wife without medical confirmation of barrenness (Baloyi, 2017), a practice that should be discouraged, especially in modern times.

AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo (1998) challenges women in her novel *The Last of the Strong Ones*, to rise beyond the socialized meaning of motherhood and reproach of barrenness. She persuades women to deconstruct the patriarchal meaning of motherhood by being economically empowered and independent. AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo (1998) uses one of her characters, Flora Nwapa, to deconstruct motherhood as defined solely by having children to a more accommodating and inclusive definition of motherhood, all through women’s economic stability and independence (Ezeigbo, 1998). While focusing on Chieme, another character in the same novel, AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo (1998) highlights how Chieme navigates and overcomes barrenness with her productivity in other sectors that are beneficial to society (Ezeigbo, 1998).

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, childless herself, bore her identity proudly within a patriarchal society that was foreign to her, having been brought up in a matrilineal society. Having negotiated the contours of patriarchy, she recognized as the mother of African Women's theology that has thousands of followers across Africa. She is the mother of 'the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,' a network of women theologians across Africa. As a true deconstruction of 'motherhood,' the network, in the spirit of 'mama Mercy' is anchored on mentoring the next generation of African women theologians to empower African women in negotiating patriarchal hindrances within religion and culture. Just like AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1995), in one of her books *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* postulates that change will come about only when the "daughters of Anowa" confront tactfully the realities of culture and religion in propagating patriarchal oppression and "work to realize the goal of a new woman in a new Africa" (Oduyoye, 1995, pp. 441-449). Women are encouraged to find new ways to deal with cultural norms that get in the way of their overall well-being in their daily lives.

Ndwae Ngone Mwaitu Dowry honourship and its implications on Spousal Violence

Spousal violence, also known as intimate partner violence, continues to take root amongst couples. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2012) defines intimate partner violence as one of the many forms of violence against women that includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse coupled with controlling behaviours by an intimate partner who is in a privileged position of power. The overwhelming burden of spousal violence is born majorly by women (Bramhankar & Reshmi, 2021, pp. 1–9), meaning that oftentimes, it is men who are in a position of power. As sexual gender-based violence surged during COVID-19 lockdowns, deaths, divorces, and separations were reported amongst spouses in Kenya. The worrying situation manifested during COVID-19 lockdowns attests to the existence of power dynamics within marital relations, be they economic, relational, or traditional household headship. Socio-relational dynamics within married couples are worth investigating if the government or any other agency is to succeed in countering gender-based violence. Dowry honourship, as a good example of a socio-relational component, is examined over and against mutual honourship of the custom and its implications for spousal violence.

It emerged from the study findings that women who contributed towards their dowry honourship accrued feelings of entitlement, a sense of ownership and belonging to their marital home. Most of the female respondents argued that their husbands, their in-laws, and their peers respected them. It was further, proof that they could not only inherit their husband's property but also enjoy the dowry of their daughters as well as secure a respectful burial space. Affirming the findings, one woman in the FGD noted that,

[...] this group helped me attain respect from my in-laws. When we went to pay my dowry, we invited my parents-in-law to accompany us. They were excited about handing my parents the envelop full of money. They now regard me with respect. My name has even changed, now they call me after my first-born son (FGDW3, June 17, 2021).

Naming is a powerful rite of passage among the Akamba. The firstborn son is named after the groom's father, who is the head of the entire household. "When your father-in-law calls you *mwaitu*, my mother is a testament that you now belong to his son, to the entire household," one woman opined (FGDW 5, June 17, 2021). The men, on the other hand, attain respect from the bride's family and clan as well as from their peers.

The mutual consensus to pool resources together and honour dowry is not devoid of problems. Oftentimes, spousal violence results after the intention to contribute towards

honouring one's dowry on the part of women, or even after it has been honoured. At the time of conducting this study, one man had committed suicide after word spread that his wife had paid her own dowry. Such unfortunate deaths have been blamed on psychological distress because of shame and ridicule. Wife battering, emotional abuse, and homicides have resulted from dowry honourship under *ndwaengone mwaitu*. Women, however, held strong defensive opinions, especially after they contributed towards the dowry honourship. One asserted,

[...] he has failed to pay the dowry for me, I cannot be buried by the fence as I watch; I am a big woman I have to respect myself. I cannot stand being laughed at by my own people. When I suggested that I would assist him pay it using my *ndwaengone mwaitu* turn, he welcomed it. He is happy and I am happy we did it. (FGDW 1, June 17, 2021)

Differing perceptions, however, emanated from the men interviewed. Some men underscored that after women assisted them in honouring their dowry, they became unruly and disrespectful. They could no longer obey their husbands as they used to before the dowry honourship. Though they still lauded the project, their plea was that their wives still respected them and should be quiet about who paid the dowry! "For a man, it is a shame when other people know that your wife paid her own dowry. You will be laughed at. I wish they could just be silent on it, one man begged" (M5, June 19, 2021). Others reported hopping into alcohol to help them live through the shame. One man noted, "on the day my wife gave me hundred thousand Kenya shillings for her parents as dowry, I was excited at first, but accompanying them to my in-laws knowing I had contributed nothing was shameful [...]. I went there drunk" (M1, June 19, 2021). Most men evade the situation through excessive drinking, which might lead to aggressive behaviour, discord, and conflict with their wives. Alcoholism has been attributed to personality factors such as feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, stress, depression, suicide, aggressive behaviours, or antisocial personality disorders; factors that are linked to spousal violence (Patel et al., 2020).

Even though one widowed woman in the group had managed to honour her dowry with the help of the group, the men had no problem with that since, they argued that the people would understand. The widow, however, opined that, "I had to invite my husband's senior brother to give my people the money. If I do not pay on their behalf, I cannot inherit my husband's land or even marry off my daughters" (F3, May 8, 2021). A single woman in the group also went to see her parents so that her brothers would let her build on their property. Respect and opening an opportunity for inheriting land were components that correlated with dowry honourship amongst the respondents, both men and women.

Probing on whether mutual consensus on honouring dowry for purposes of cohesion and appreciating their culture could be pursued as a positive, women agreed that it was important to exercise prudence and diligence in participating in this male ascribed obligation. They advanced on how the group had empowered them not only financially but also in gaining respect from their husbands. The women argued that being poor denied them a chance to discuss household matters. It emerged that women who were working either as primary school teachers or nurses within the group were respected more by their in-laws and husbands because they had economic power. As such, poverty plays a role in fuelling spousal violence as one party, mostly the man, might feel financially strained and opt to vent his anger on the wife. Women are most vulnerable to abuse by their spouses in circumstances when economic inequalities between spouses exist, rigid gender roles are resoundingly grounded, and there are cultural norms that support the husband's right to perpetrate violence on the wife.

However, applying snail-sense feminism as advanced by AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo encourages women to take advantage of the socio-relational component of *ndwae ngone mwaitu* to cultivate the virtues of negotiation, being tolerant, and always opting for compromise and balance in marital talks. As *ndwae ngone mwaitu* creates a platform for engaging positively with a purely patriarchal obligation, women ought to adopt the behaviour of a snail to negotiate or dialogue with its environment, getting around obstacles, or closing in when the circumstances are not favourable. Snail-sense feminism advises women not to be aggressive in their relationship with men, but to be conscientious. In one of her famous interviews with *Encomium Magazine* (2015), AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo argued that her feminism promotes a balance in women's lives and their relationships with men, but at the same time calls on women "to have an independent mind and do what they want to do but not to the detriment of other people around them" (Udoette, 2019, p. 65).

The sisterhood in *ndwae ngone mwaitu* is lauded in snail-sense feminism as it encourages female bonding, which expands to cultivate values of solidarity, support, and concern. In her interview, AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo postulated the importance of bonding and integration as important to a woman's self-expression. She noted that "in a society, a woman should be able to tolerate others, work with others, and maintain a very humble attitude towards others, but at the same time be herself" (Ezeigbo, 2015). In reference to her novel, *House of Symbols*, she portrays Eagle Woman as a character who shows individual and collective solidarity. As Kamba women gain respect and a sense of belonging from dowry honourship, their concentration on this purpose would go a long way in averting spousal violence that would emanate from feelings of low esteem from economically challenged/strained men. This concept integrates mutual unity based on shared interests, objectives, standards, and sympathies as defined by one's marital situation.

The Eagle woman represents the *ndwae ngone mwaitu* women group who have created a sense of communality, friendship, and concern among women to generate societal development. A sense of development that is not only monetary but also one that appreciates the sanctity of the marriage institution and its dissolution. The snail sense feminism of AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo advances values of love, unity, and oneness among women as the main driver of female solidarity regardless of their age or class. For instance, in *House of Symbols*, the Eagle woman is presented as being concerned about other women's well-being by being "anxious as well about her old friends, the matriarchs, who are poor and have no wood to warm themselves" in addition to being cognizant "mentally that the old women will receive wood from her before the end of the day" (Ezeigbo, 2001, p. 113). AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo recreates a women's communal society whose interactions and support are outstanding markers for resisting oppressive tendencies emanating either from culture or religion.

Conclusion

The article employed snail-sense feminism that encourages one to be tolerant to embrace the virtues of negotiation that bring about compromise and balance. *Ndwae ngone mwaitu*, a Kamba women welfare group, whose objective is to visit one's parents and seek blessings was used as an emerging postmodern cultural phenomenon in dowry honourship. *Ndwae ngone mwaitu* creates opportunities for women to negotiate tactfully in the male dominated culture of dowry honourship. Mutual participation in dowry honourship deconstructs women's objectification and entitlement by men within patriarchal frameworks and paves way for appreciation of the culture of dowry honourship that has received sizeable backlash among contemporaries.

The paper argues that mutual agreement and involvement of women in dowry honourship averts spousal violence that has been highlighted as a public health concern. It

calls on women to arise in oneness and embrace values of communality, sisterhood, and solidarity as a strategy of empowerment. It affirms that women have the capability of breaking patriarchal barriers through compromise, negotiation, power-sharing by virtue of being accommodative and concerned of the other women's welfare, regardless of their age. As such, demeaning terms like bride wealth, bride price, dowry payment among others would be diminished if women embraced the skill of tactful dialogue and negotiation as advanced by AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo. Her liberating ideology for gender discourse is rightly lauded as being "capable of ensuring a sustainable, context-friendly strategy for women's emancipation" (Ezenwanebe, 2015, p.274).

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