

# **CATTLE TO CASH: CHANGING MARRIAGE PRACTICES AMONG DISPLACED PEOPLE IN BENTIU, SOUTH SUDAN**

## **ABSTRACT**

Even during armed conflict and displacement, weddings continue, as people enter into marriage and adapt the processes and rituals associated with this milestone. In this paper, we trace the changes to marriage practices in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians site and adjacent areas of Rubkona and Bentiu towns in South Sudan's Unity State. Specifically, we ask how, in the context of armed conflict and displacement, the shift from a cattle-based economy to one entailing greater use of cash has affected the meanings and processes of marriages. We highlight changes to bridewealth, and corresponding shifts in the engagement of relatives, community members and social networks in the rite and process of marriage. We argue that these changes both challenge social norms around the ties and broader connections that result from marriages *and* potentially highlight opportunities of agency for those entering a marriage during displacement. This analysis contributes to a growing body of literature that adopts a relational understanding of survival during displacement and underscores the importance of taking social connectedness seriously in the study of armed conflict.

**Key words:** South Sudan, displacement, conflict, marriage, bridewealth, social capital

## INTRODUCTION

Weddings and other life events continue during armed conflict and displacement. Rather than foregoing rituals of celebration, people adapt pre-conflict practices in response to the precarious realities of displacement (Grabska 2010; Falge 1999). Based on fieldwork conducted between December 2018 and March 2019, this article examines changes in the nature of marriages and wedding processes among displaced people in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians (PoC) site<sup>1</sup> and adjacent areas of Rubkona and Bentiu towns in South Sudan's Unity State.

In the context of armed conflict and displacement, entering into a marriage can have significant implications for the livelihoods and social networks of not only the marrying couple, but also their kin and broader social networks (Hutchinson 1992; Sommers and Schwartz 2011). It is to these dimensions that we turn our attention in this paper. We ask: How has the shift from a cattle-based economy to one entailing greater use of cash in the context of armed conflict and displacement affected the meanings of marriages and the processes associated with them? In response, we examine changes to bridewealth and corresponding shifts in the engagement of relatives, community members, and social networks in the rite and process of marriage.

We argue that these changes highlight opportunities and moments of agency for those entering a marriage during displacement, and simultaneously challenge some of the norms governing weddings, marriages, and community engagement in these rituals. Specifically, the

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<sup>1</sup> Protection of civilian (PoC) sites underwent a status and name change following a phased transition in 2020-2021 when the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) handed control of the PoCs over to the South Sudanese government. They are now referred to as internally displaced person (IDP) camps. We use the term PoC throughout this article in line with the nomenclature at the time of data collection.

shift towards bridewealth payments in cash weakened the nature of social ties that result from marriage, decreased the economic benefits and time horizon of bridewealth exchanges, and affected who is able (and unable) to marry. At the same time, these shifts allowed some key stakeholders in marriage, such as young people and women, to exercise more agency over this process. The simultaneity of these realities is crucial to our argument. As the narratives of the research participants at the heart of this analysis suggest, the shift from cattle to cash in the context of armed conflict and displacement, and the implications of this shift for rituals and social connection, are marked by both possibility and a sense of loss. People of different genders, ages, and social positions offered a range of views on the extent to which these developments were welcome or detrimental. We seek to reflect this diversity of perspectives in the analysis.

This analysis contributes to a growing body of literature on the role of social connections in enabling survival and coping during displacement, highlighting the significance of a relational (rather than individualistic) approach to understanding armed conflict. We further seek to extend feminist analyses of marriage during conflict beyond the important discussions surrounding forced or early marriage, towards a gender analysis that also examines processes, rituals, assets, and relationships. We endeavor to bring together bodies of scholarly literature and practitioner knowledge that often sit apart, such as combining feminist anthropological examinations of marriage and bridewealth in this region with recent analyses of humanitarian cash and the shift towards market economies in conflict and displacement.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows: first, we define key concepts of our analysis, summarize the literature that has informed this discussion, and articulate our contributions to it.

Subsequently, we briefly discuss the context and setting of our research, before summarizing our methods. Next, we discuss the process of marriage prior to the latest outbreak of armed conflict in South Sudan, and provide some brief background on the shift to cash bridewealth payments. The analysis section is organized around the nature of changes that resulted from this shift, including (a) changes to the social connections that result from marriages, including changes to the economic dimensions of bridewealth exchanges; (b) who is able (and unable) to marry; (c) attitudes towards the possibilities of agency and positive developments that have resulted from these shifts.

#### **CONCEPTS, ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOLARSHIP, AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

Scholarship across disciplines has highlighted a number of approaches to analyzing marriages and weddings during and after conflict and displacement worldwide. An important body of work examines forced marriage (Amony 2015; Baines 2014; Scott et al. 2014), discussing the complicated co-existence of force, consent, and tactical agency in marriages during armed conflict. Relatedly, there is growing attention to the practices of early marriage, its gendered dimensions, and its implications for the lives and livelihoods of youth, their households, and their communities (Madut 2020; Buchanan 2019). While our own analysis is not primarily focused on the ‘forced’, ‘voluntary’ or ‘early’ nature of marriage, it has benefitted from the ways in which this scholarship has highlighted that marriage can be connected to a range of emotions, symbols, and meanings (Akurugu, Domapielle, and Jatoe 2021; Adhiambo Onyango and Mott 2011; Suarez and Baines 2021).

This analysis of weddings and marriages is situated within the growing literature on social connectedness during armed conflict and displacement. We rely on the term ‘social connectedness,’ rather than ‘social capital,’ despite the fact that the latter has been the subject of extensive study that has informed this discussion (Aldrich 2012; Coleman 1988; Authors 2021). As Maxwell et al. write, ‘the notion of social ‘capital’ suggests something directly fungible that could be counted, saved up, or called in; economic rather than social aspects are usually emphasized’ (2016: 66). By contrast, social connectedness refers to the sum of people’s social linkages, including the social networks on which they draw, the extent and strength of those networks, and the obligations, presumed reciprocity, collective risk, and mutual support that such networks carry (Maxwell et al. 2016). In this article, we focus on economic *and* social aspects in exploring the effects of the shift from cash to cattle on weddings and marriages. Central to this framing is the recognition that the wedding and the marriage itself ‘often structure systems of exchange’ and ‘allow for the formation of social ties’ in ways that are worthy of examining (Thomas 2019, 41).

In exploring the formation of social ties *during displacement*, we echo Grabska’s acknowledgment that displacement can be a ‘catalyst for social change’ (2013, 1136). Understanding social change in this domain requires us to analyze not only the social bonds fractured through the processes of forced migration, but also the ones that are formed through the establishment and maintenance of new relationships during displacement [citation redacted]. We aim to contribute to a growing body of work that treats these social connections as sites of both agency and constraint. This contribution, in turn, is part of evolving scholarly conversations on the need to pay attention to how displaced people experience life milestones and adapt rituals

while still ‘on the move’ [citation redacted], acknowledging that being ‘on the move’ can be protracted and with significant emotional, symbolic, and material impacts. We posit that an analysis of weddings and marriages as vectors of social connectedness is crucial for understanding the strategies and relationships that allow people to survive and cope during armed conflict and displacement.

The significance of this contribution is not only theoretical and scholarly, but also applied and practical. As Thomas notes in his recent study of cash, commodification, and conflict in South Sudan (2019, 13), policymakers can rely on information about how people organize their socioeconomic lives ‘in order to plan interventions in livelihoods and understand the impacts of humanitarian aid.’ The authors’ experience at the intersection of humanitarian/development scholarship and practice underscores Thomas’ point, and further suggests that understanding how people form new bonds and adapt rituals during conflict is crucial for not inadvertently undermining these connections through formal aid interventions [citation redacted].

Gender analysis is essential for exploring these systems of exchange, rituals, and social ties, as well as the processes of displacement and marriage more broadly (Pike, Mojola, and Kabiru 2018; Grabska 2010). Echoing the feminist scholar Carol Cohn, we treat gender as a ‘structural power relation [...] which rests upon a central set of distinctions between different categories of people, valorizes some over others, and organizes access to resources, rights, responsibilities, authority, and life options along the lines demarcating these groups’ (2013, 4). This gender analysis presented here is, therefore, not focused exclusively on the narratives of women and girls (or only on the narratives of individual people of any and all genders), but on

the processes, exchanges, (dis-)connections between different actors, and meanings associated with marriages. We deliberately disaggregate and analyze interview responses by gender in order to highlight how experiences of and attitudes to changes in marriage practices may have varied depending on the respondents' positioning.

Given the expansiveness of the dimensions that a thorough gender analysis can bring to light, it is unsurprising that marriages in southern Sudan (pre-independence), South Sudan, and other countries and regions of Africa have received much scholarly attention. Key anthropological texts emphasized the social significance of marriage for different groups in this region over time (Evans-Pritchard 1951; Deng 1972). Explicitly feminist analyses of the meanings and processes of weddings and marriages have explored the cross-border dimensions and changes to these forms of connectedness (Grabska 2010, 2014), the role of polygyny in creating and sometimes rupturing social connections (Beswick 2001), the importance of marriage as a gendered rite of passage (Pike, Mojola, and Kabiru 2018), and the gendered nature of the processes of selecting when and whom to marry, and organizing the associated rituals (Stern 2011). Though these works present different attitudes to marriage, they broadly agree that 'the marriage process [...] was critical for forging new and old community bonds, (re)creating landscapes of communities, social relations and finding oneself within them' (Grabska 2014c, 187–88). In this sense, our work builds on scholarship that proposes a relational conception of agency and survival during violence and in its aftermath (Schulz and Kreft 2022; Burkitt 2016).

In pastoral and agro-pastoralist contexts, the story of marriage is often told alongside the story of assets. In his analysis of livestock and livelihoods in South Sudan, Catley emphasizes

that ‘for poorer households with few or no livestock, their access to livestock milk and other foods partly depends on their social networks and connectedness, which in turn, depends on livestock transfer during events such as marriage’ (2018, 6). Catley’s insight underscores the importance of analyzing marriage and other aspects of social connectedness through an economic *and* social perspective. Hutchinson highlighted the significance of such an analysis in her well-known study of wealth among the Nuer, tracing the evolution of the socio-economic meanings associated with the asset exchanges that weddings and marriages facilitate (1992). Grabska (2014) illustrated how some Nuer refugees returning to southern Sudan in the early 2000s used marriage to ‘settle in’ to the local communities from which they had long been absent and how marital expectations could allow people of both genders to demonstrate their adherence to the local (non-displaced) cultural and gender roles (though a number of young women in particular chafed against conforming to these more traditional roles). Over the past two decades, from Zimbabwe to Eritrea and beyond, numerous scholars have explored how the meanings, rituals, and processes associated with the exchange of bridewealth have changed due to economic shocks, conflict, displacement, and return after forced migration (Leonardi 2011; Dekker and Hoozeveld 2002; Falge 1999).

This wealth of knowledge at the intersection of gender analysis, assets, and marriage has influenced our analysis in two important ways. First, the scholarship cited above cautions against ‘exceptionalizing’ the developments in Bentiu PoC, the surrounding towns, or South Sudan more broadly. While the shift from cattle to cash in the context of displacement has profoundly affected the lives of our research participants in the ways we document below, shifts in the availability, meaning of, and reliance on cattle have taken place before in this and other contexts.



What makes our analysis interesting is not its uniqueness, but its situatedness within these broader debates on the links between adaptation of rituals, monetization, and markets during conflict.

Finally, a key contribution of this discussion is to bring together bodies of scholarly literature and practitioner knowledge that often sit apart. In recent years, scholars and practitioners across sectors and disciplines have written extensively about the role of cash in humanitarian and development interventions (Bailey and Harvey 2015; Buchanan-Smith and Jaspars 2007). It is not the intention of this article to engage with the complex debates on whether humanitarian cash is desirable or detrimental. However, we suggest that the interdisciplinary literature on marriages, social connectedness, and assets cited herein is applicable to humanitarian and development scholars and practitioners considering the effects of cash. The effects of the shift towards cash in humanitarian settings are not only observable in individual and household livelihood outcomes, but also in rituals (like those associated with weddings), relationships of community and kinship, and the symbolic meanings that accompany them. Weddings and marriages provide a useful lens for examining how social networks absorb assets—such as cash—or respond to the loss of capital, primarily in the form of cattle. Engaging with these multiple meanings beyond the individual or household level and beyond the economic realm allows a richer, more relational picture of survival during conflict and displacement to emerge.

**CONTEXT: DISPLACEMENT DURING CONFLICT IN SOUTH SUDAN AND LIFE IN BENTIU POC**

In January 2005, over two decades of violent conflict between the Sudanese state and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) culminated in the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Naivasha, Kenya. Central to the CPA was an agreement that six years later, southern Sudanese would be afforded an opportunity to vote in an independence referendum. In January 2011, over 98% of referendum voters backed succession from Sudan. Six months later, South Sudan officially became an independent state.

In December 2013, optimism about the prospects for peace in South Sudan evaporated when conflict broke out in Juba between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Vice President Riek Machar. The fighting rapidly spread beyond the capital, and, while political in origin, was fought primarily along ethnic lines. The ensuing civil war killed over 400,000 people, displaced approximately 4.5 million both internally and across international borders (Checchi et al. 2018), and was accompanied by widespread human rights (Office of High Commission of Human Rights (OHCHR) 2018). After six years of civil war, Machar and Kiir signed the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018, and in February 2020, the two leaders formed a unity government in Juba. While the political agreement ushered in a marked reduction in armed conflict, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 1.6 million South Sudanese people remained internally displaced as of September 2020 (IOM 2021).

The vast majority of the 1.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in South Sudan reside in host communities in rural parts of the country (IOM, 2021). However, as of February 2021, approximately 170,000 IDPs lived in six Protection of Civilian sites (PoCs) located in, or

nearby the towns of Juba, Bor, Wau, Malakal, and Bentiu (Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) 2021). The PoC sites were established in the first days of the civil war, as fighting drove thousands of civilians to seek protection within the confines of existing peacekeeping bases operated by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). The protection of IDPs within the PoC sites fit within UNMISS's mandate, which was first articulated in 2011 when UNMISS was founded to help facilitate South Sudan's transition to independence. That mandate includes protecting civilians and creating conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and has been renewed annually by the United Nations Security Council (United Nations Security Council 2021). Notably, in September 2020, citing reductions in political violence and associated protection risks, UNMISS announced intentions to gradually withdraw peacekeepers from the PoC sites, which would be 're-designated as more conventional camps for the internally displaced under the sovereign control of South Sudan' (Mold 2020).

As of early 2021 the Bentiu site remains home to approximately 96,000 residents, making it by far the largest of the PoCs (Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) 2021). The Bentiu PoC is populated by numerous Nuer clans and sub-clans, as well as a small Shilluk population; some of these different groups are living in direct proximity for the first time. Experiences of displacement and continued violence within the PoC, including instances of gender-based violence, revenge killing, inter-clan disputes, and gang attacks, have both disrupted and reconfigured bases of social organization and connectedness (Ibreck and Pendle 2017). This article focuses on how marriages and weddings are situated within the social fabric of the PoC and the extending area.

## **METHODS: RESEARCHING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS IN BENTIU**

Three South Sudanese researchers and four foreign national researchers spoke with a total of 133 people in 33 semi-structured in-depth interviews and 14 focus group discussions (FGDs) between December 2018 and March 2019 in the Bentiu PoC and in nearby Bentiu Town and Rubkona Town.<sup>2</sup> Both the in-depth interviews and the FGDs focused on various dimensions of social connectedness, including how people built new relationships during the most recent experience of displacement (2014 onwards), how they maintained connections with those from whom they were separated, how they resolved conflicts, and how they adapted their lives and livelihoods to the realities of the PoC.<sup>3</sup>

Research participants were recruited via snowball sampling. They included men and women of diverse ages and livelihoods in an effort to document varying perspectives and experiences. Interviews were conducted in Nuer or in English via translation, transcribed, and

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<sup>2</sup> [Redacted university] received permission to collaborate on this research with [redacted INGO] through the [redacted university] Institutional Review Board. Researchers were careful to assure participants that their responses would be kept confidential and would have no bearing on the receipt of assistance from [redacted INGO] or any other humanitarian agencies. The INGO team members involved in analysing and writing up data, including in the co-authorship of this piece, did not have access to identifying information for research participants. As other scholars working in similar PoC contexts in South Sudan note (see, indicatively, Paddon Rhoads and Sutton 2020), the PoC is an ever evolving, sensitive site at which to conduct research. The partnership between academics with extensive experience in researching violence and livelihood adaptations and practitioners well-versed in the specific context was essential for ensuring adherence to best ethical and methodological practices. For more on academic-practitioner partnerships in humanitarian and/or development contexts, see Lewis et al. 2019; Krystalli et al. 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Respondents often compared their current realities to those of a time 'before,' given the focus of our discussions, we generally understood 'before' to mean prior to the most recent round of civil conflict which reached Bentiu in 2014. It is certainly possible that some respondents were referencing a more distant past or reflecting upon earlier rounds of displacements.

analyzed through an iterative process of inductive coding. The names of research participants have been changed in this article in order to ensure anonymity.

This research took place in communities that are predominantly ethnically Nuer, and many of the narratives are deeply rooted in this unique context. The Nuer are a Nilotic people making up South Sudan's second largest ethnic group (after the majority Dinka) and have a historical tradition deeply entwined with cattle-keeping (Hutchinson 1996; Falge 1999; Evans-Pritchard 1940), although some scholars are careful to emphasize the greater diversity in Nuer culture and livelihoods (Thomas 2019). Important differences exist among the Nuer along clan, urban/rural, and wealth lines; a discussion of these differences is beyond the scope of this article, which entails a small qualitative study and does not seek to be representative of the experiences of any one ethnic group or location, but rather to allow for reflection and examination of specific patterns in this context.

The data discussed here are one component of conversations conducted within a broader, multi-year study on changes to social connectedness during displacement. This research was funded by [funder redacted] as a partnership between [academic institution redacted] and [international NGO in humanitarian/development practice redacted].

## **WEDDING RITUALS AND MARRIAGES BEFORE THE SHIFT TO CASH**

Marriage in many African cultures is both an institution and a process (Meekers 1992). Research participants discussed the extensive process of marriage that exists within Nuer society,

though one that has gradually changed over time due to conflict, displacement, and monetization, among other factors. These descriptions of the marriage process are broadly consistent with those documented in existing literature on wedding rituals, the meaning of marriages, and the connection to livestock in South Sudan (or southern Sudan pre-independence) and the greater Horn of Africa (Hutchinson 1992; Leonardi 2011; Dekker and Hooegeveen 2002; Falge 1999).

Early in the traditional Nuer marriage process, families of the potential couple gathered information about each other and consultations took place across a broad network of (mostly male) relatives and clan members. In this stage, a central consideration was the amount of bridewealth in cattle to be transferred from the extended family of the groom to the extended family of the bride. Much has been written about the multiple meanings of bridewealth, including as a social and economic transfer (Hooegeveen, van der Klaauw, and van Lomwel 2011), as embedded in cultural systems of meaning (Comaroff 1960), as a means of securing the reproductive and productive capacity of women (Goody 1973; Radcliffe-Brown 1950), as a means of ensuring the male ownership and subordination of the woman and her children (Adhiambo Onyango and Mott 2011; Grabska 2014b), and as a means of providing protection and status for married women (Akurugu, Domapielle, and Jatoe 2021). The exchange of bridewealth and resulting ties across families are core components of building social connectedness (Adhiambo Onyango and Mott 2011), and may play a particularly important role in re-establishing social networks following mass displacement in South Sudan (Ensor 2017). Grabska found that some male Nuer returnees to (pre-independence) Southern Sudan from Kenya and elsewhere in the early 2000s ‘married local girls to gain prestige and establish local

roots' (2014a, 161). As Hoogeveen et al. write, 'because of bride wealth payments, marriages should be considered a contract between families rather than between individuals' (2011: 122).

The number of cattle to be transferred are based on a number of factors, including the wealth and status of the clans and families of both parties (Gulliver 1955; Turton 1980); the standard rate of bridewealth payments in an area (Kuper 1982); and the broader economic, political and security context, taking into account drivers such as conflict, displacement, and raids (Sommers and Schwartz 2011). External factors, such as the relative value of women's labor (Borgerhoff Mulder 1995) and livestock epidemics (Fleisher 2000), can also affect bridewealth negotiations, as do characteristics of the prospective bride, including reputation, beauty, age and educational achievement (Diala 2018). Conflict, displacement, animal health, monetization and urbanization in South Sudan have all affected bridewealth levels, negotiations, acquisition, and composition (Hutchinson 1996). Increased education of returnee refugee girls in the early 2000s also boosted bridewealth levels (Grabska 2012, 2014). This article focuses specifically on the interplay between displacement since 2014 and the shift to cash.

Both historically and in recent decades, while cattle were sometimes given to the bride's family all at once, more often they were exchanged gradually. Importantly, accruing adequate cattle for bridewealth created systems of debt that could extend for generations, creating deep bonds among and across the groom's families and associates (Thomas 2015; Hutchinson 1996; Gulliver 1955). Hutchinson describes how an implied continuation of cattle exchange secured these ties:

Bridewealth negotiations invariably concluded with a declaration by the groom's family that additional cattle would be forthcoming on the marriage of the bride's daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters, until such time as the extended debt uniting the two families dissolved. (1992, 297)

Other aspects of the marriage process further facilitated the creation of new social networks over time. In Nuer contexts, bridewealth is exchanged between equivalent social connections on both sides. As one of our female research participants explained, 'If a girl gets married...there is a special relationship that comes between the giver and the receiver, because a relative on the groom's side gives a cow to the same relative on the bride's side.' This system of equivalency shapes, to some degree, who is most likely to form new social connections during the marriage process. As the above quotation suggests, it also personalizes the process of bridewealth exchange, increasing the likelihood that the giver and recipient establish lasting relationships that extend well beyond the wedding ceremony.

A celebration of the union took place once the bridewealth payments had reached a given level and brought together the extended family, clan and other more casual social connections. These collective events symbolize the communal—as opposed to individual—nature of the marital union. Joint contributions—with the expectation of reciprocity—are made, as explained by a female research participant in the Bentiu PoC:



Before people came to the PoC, marriage was very important. People in the family whose daughter is being married could prepare food and gather in the home of the girl's father to receive the parents of the bridegroom to initiate the marriage with joy and happiness.

The above quotation emphasizes the social interaction that surrounded the marriage rites, and hints at how this has been diminished with displacement. Such gatherings were important for building communal ties through celebration of shared experiences.

### **THE SHIFT TO CASH DURING CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT**

Displacement changed both the marriage process and the significance of marriages themselves. A key component of this change was the shift towards greater use of cash, both within the Bentiu PoC and in the surrounding towns. The shift towards cash as a bridewealth commodity has been gradual and is driven by a variety of factors. Hutchinson reports that, as a result of gradual monetization, by 1980 the 'mutual convertibility' of cattle and money had extended into some Nuer areas to the extent that a 'generous' father-in-law would 'accept cash in place of a bridewealth cow or two,' though note that cash was accepted in limited amounts (equal to only one or two cattle out of a 20 to 30 total exchanged) and was not the preferred medium (1996, 72). This gradual transition also reflects broader shifts in terms of the economy and livelihoods of the region. Indeed, Nuer communities are increasingly integrated into formal labor economies, most often through employment with locally operating NGOs or oil companies, or as a result of remittance flows resulting from the international migration or cross-border displacement of kin.

In this sense, Nuer encounters with money are by no means new, and the effects of displacement on marriages may be wrapped up in these broader economic dynamics.

The role of displacement in the shift to cash is apparent in a study among (pre-independence) Sudanese Nuer refugees in Ethiopia in the 1990s. In the absence of cattle ownership among refugees, cash became a component of bridewealth transfers and, according to Falge, this substitution ‘initiated a change process in the meaning of marriage from the establishment of an alliance to an economic resource’ (1999, 51). However, Falge demonstrates that the marriages settled by cash, as opposed to cattle, were considered less secure and more prone to divorce, and relations between the couple and their affines was less close than if cattle had been exchanged. Grabska (2014) examines the marriage process for Nuer returnees from Kakuma (Kenya) and Khartoum in the early 2000s and finds that “cattle-based marriages remained the rule in Western Upper Nile.” Cash played an important role, but at the time a groom and his family were most likely to convert available cash into livestock for the bridewealth. Grabska continues, “Cattle-based bridewealth was the means of maintaining some of the norms that defined Nuer social identities vis-à-vis transforming post-war landscape of community’s gender relations” (2014, 169). However, Thomas argues that the entrance into the marriage market of educated diaspora returnees to independent South Sudan both drove up bridewealth rates starting in the late 2000s and increased the cash proportion of payments. Echoing the findings of Falge, Thomas discusses the larger social impacts of this transition:

The bridewealth system was supposed to symbolize an exchange of wealth and obligations to create a fair alliance between two families, not a commercial transaction, but the dollar-fuelled inflation in bridewealth is changing things. (2015, 149)

Although cash has entered bridewealth transactions for various reasons, views on this shift among respondents for this study remain ambivalent, with many viewing cash as a substandard and (hopefully) temporary substitute. A female research participant explained:

[Marriages] are conducted using cash because there are no cattle [in the PoC], but some people still prefer their daughters' bridewealth in the form of cattle. So, they will make an agreement with the groom's family to receive half the bridewealth in cash, and then later to receive the other half in cattle once there is peace and they get a chance to move out [of the PoC] and start a new life.

Hutchinson found similar sentiments three decades ago among displaced Nuer living in the Khartoum area, who were paying cash bridewealth but promising future payments of cattle 'when the world becomes good again' (1996, 102). Falge (1997) reported similar delayed bridewealth payments among displaced Nuer in Ethiopia in the 1990s. Despite the preference for cattle, this demonstrates that cash transactions—and pending credits in livestock—surrounding marriage do establish lasting socioeconomic relationships between families.

#### **EFFECTS OF THE SHIFT TO CASH ON WEDDINGS AND MARRIAGES DURING DISPLACEMENT**

Our research in the Bentiu PoC confirms many aspects of the shift to cash discussed above, including the perception of cash as a place-holder for cattle and as a less-preferred solution given the reality of displacement. However, we also find that this shift challenges social norms and customs around weddings and marriages as a means to foster and maintain social connections. These shifts imply a change in who is and is not able to marry, as well as who is likely to contribute and receive bridewealth. These socioeconomic elements have always existed, but have undergone transformations. In addition, there is evidence that cash bridewealth – as opposed to cattle—can heighten individual agency and challenge the top-down system of authority that relies heavily on the decisions of male family members. Some of these changes are welcomed by younger male and female respondents, even while being lamented by those who perceive an undermining of both tradition and their power.

Importantly, while the data show a transformation of the exchange process with ripple effects upon the social order, there does *not* appear to be a weakening of the norms surrounding bridewealth expectations. Research participants largely agreed that the lack of cash or cattle experienced by many did not mean that marriages could take place without the exchange of resources. ‘There is no girl given for free,’ said a female respondent in a focus group discussion. ‘If a man does not have cows or money, and he cannot get them from anywhere, he will not marry until he gets the bridewealth.’ This narrative suggests that even when people had to make adaptations to the process of paying bridewealth, and sometimes had to rely on different sources, the norm and practice of bridewealth payment itself remained relevant, even during displacement.

### *Changes to the systems of social exchange and reciprocity*

The increased reliance on cash in bridewealth impacts the systems of social exchange and reciprocity within and beyond the PoC. The fluidity of cash means that its benefits are often fleeting, as opposed to cattle which serve both as a visible marker of the exchange and provide on-going tangible benefits. Unlike cash, which disappears once spent, animal reproduction enables the material and social benefits to spread throughout a broader network, fostering new social connections among affines while also bolstering existing kinship systems (Kuper 1982). When asked about her perceptions of cash versus cattle-based bridewealth, a female research participant in the Bentiu PoC emphasized the longer-term material and social benefits of the latter:

Cows are alive by the blessing of god. They live for a long time, they produce milk, and they produce offspring. So, when someone gives you a cow, it is like an investment which grows and you reap the benefits for a long time. It is a shared resource. Everyone benefits from the milk it produces. But cash makes people heartless. We wouldn't rely so much on cash if we still had our own cows and our own resources.

This quotation illustrates that, in contrast to the extended and multi-generational exchange of bridewealth cattle (Hutchinson 1996), the substitution of cash can weaken social connections among people who would have previously relied on support from each other. Support among these networks was easier to provide when cattle were in regular circulation, as a simple gift of milk could sustain social ties. People gifted calves, allowed bulls to mate with other people's

cows, and lent animals (sometimes for years, decades or a lifetime) to social contacts, especially those who were less fortunate. While we do not have data on how these affinal networks are mobilized in response to conflict and displacement, we know that this system of reciprocity and support is significantly stronger when bridewealth has been exchanged, and especially when it is in cattle. It is therefore no surprise that, despite the shift towards greater use of cash in the Bentiu PoC and surrounding towns, research participants explained that most brides' families strongly prefer to receive at least half of the bridewealth in the form of cattle. Grabska (2014, 172) found that in the early 2000s a groom's family also often preferred the exchange to be in cattle, in part because the control by the family over cattle (as opposed to cash) resources gave the man's kin a much greater role in the selection of the bride and in control over the bride's resources once she joined the household. At the same time, however, Grabska showed that young men's increased access to salaried employment (especially for educated returnees) meant that their access to cash allowed them to mount at least some challenges to their elders' control over marriage partners and timing of marriage

The extensive social connections created through cattle exchange also have longer lasting benefits for the marrying couple as compared to cash. A participant in a focus group explained, 'Marriage by cows stabilizes a relationship. Money just gets finished.' A male research participant echoed this sentiment and elaborated on the effects of bridewealth payments in cash on not only the marrying couple, but also their broader kin:

Those who have paid bridewealth in the form of cattle do not have problems, but those paid in a combination of cash and some few cattle have problems in the

family. It's not only the father of the girl who takes the bridewealth. Brothers and blood relative who also receive cows from the marriage sometime refuse to accept cash. They begin to ask [the father of the bride], "why did you accept cash as the bridewealth?" When they are informed to come and take their cows in the form of cash, they can refuse and tell you to return the cash back to the man who married your daughter. When the father-in-law calls his son-in-law and explain this to him, it can bring misunderstanding between the wife and the husband, because the man will ask "Why would your parents decide to return the cows I paid in the form of cash to me?" When you marry using cash, we don't see it as the valuable kind of marriage.

Bridewealth in cattle is more likely than cash to be distributed to a broader group of recipients within the bride's social network. This allows the marriage to foster and strengthen new relationships, to the benefit of not only close kin, but also between an extensive network of bridewealth contributors and recipients. Cash on the other hand, is more likely to be directly exchanged between the bride and groom's immediate kin, to the exclusion of more distant social connections. A female participant explained:

Girls in the PoC are married with money, which was never there before the crisis. Before, when your niece is being married, the aunt or uncle would get a cow from the bridewealth, and this could make relationships strong and long-lasting. But with money, this has ended. Now, you hear that your brother or friend's daughter

is married and they do not even mind to inform you of the function at his home.

This came about because of money.

A marriage in which cattle was exchanged not only benefited more people and for a longer period of time than did fast-flowing cash, but also, as the above quotation suggests, brought more people together to celebrate the union. These components appear to be correlated with the affording of respect to the marriage and also to the groom who has successfully accumulated the requisite cattle. A male research participant noted:

Before, when you got married to a girl, the wedding was traditional. People danced around. But now marriage is conducted using cash. People do not do the ceremony and the respect is not there. Before, if a man paid a lot of cows for bridewealth, people would highly respect that person.

***Where economic implications and social connections meet: Considering the liquidity of cash***

The liquidity of cash also has livelihood implications, as explained by a woman in the PoC who had to work more after her daughters married, even with the influx of cash from their bridewealth, because cash runs out faster than the dividends provided by cattle. 'If my daughter is married today in the PoC, I won't stop looking for firewood because the cash will disappear. In a short period of time, I will be back at square one.' In the often-insecure environment of the PoC, the receipt of cash bridewealth can create a liability for a bride's family. A male research participant explained: 'Cash caused many conflicts. When you are given bridewealth in the form



of cash in this PoC, you have got to be vigilant throughout because more criminals are attracted to you to rob you of the cash.’

On the other hand, some respondents considered receiving cash to be safer than receiving cattle, because cash can be hidden from potential thieves and from those who might seek assistance. One male respondent spelled out the risks associated with receiving cattle:

Nowadays, parents in the PoC prefer payment of bridewealth in the form of cash by the bridegroom. [...] If the bridegroom has cattle, he is requested to sell cows and pay in the form of cash...No one would like to take care of the cattle when they become targets for raiders.

Although having cash may increase vulnerability to theft, money can also be hidden or moved rapidly. Cattle, in contrast, are highly conspicuous, and cattle ownership comes with its own set of risks, particular given the escalation of violent cattle raids in South Sudan over the course of the current crisis (Wild, Jok, and Patel 2018). This has led some respondents to prefer cash over cattle as a means of bridewealth.

Summing up these views, the (in)visibility of cash as a bridewealth payment illustrates its weakness in building social connectedness: there is less transparency about how much there is, where it is, and how it is being used or shared. In addition, when cash is exchanged as opposed to cattle, there are impacts upon the wedding rituals themselves, who is involved in them, and the

time frame over which they unfold. Collectively, these changes can foster mistrust as opposed to building reciprocity.

### ***Changes to who can afford to marry***

The shift to cash as a sizeable portion of bridewealth for those living in the Bentiu PoC has affected perceptions regarding *who* can or cannot afford to marry. Whereas in the past those who could easily marry were from families with large herds, today ‘the people that mostly marry with money these days are the ones working in the NGOs,’ several women expressed in a focus group discussion. Put another way, bridewealth paid in cattle is more closely aligned with ‘traditional’ wealth, whereas bridewealth paid in cash originates from salaried positions and corresponds with ‘modern’ wealth. Hutchinson explains the detailed typologies of wealth based on the provenance of cattle and money that existed prior to the civil conflicts that began in 1983. These differences had important implications for how assets could be used. For instance, the ‘money of cattle’ was cash received for selling collectively owned livestock and was to be used only for upgrading the familial herd and never for trivial, mundane or individual items such as school fees, food or beer. In contrast, the ‘money of work’ was earned through exertion and petty trade (but not of livestock) and was considered individually owned (Hutchinson 1996). These differences began to blur as a result of the displacement, market collapse, decimation of herds, and widespread impoverishment that accompanied the conflict, but cattle remained an important component of bridewealth whenever possible. During displacement in Kakuma camp in the 1990s and early 2000s, fewer people were able to marry at all due to poverty and gender imbalances (more men than women) in the camp (Grabska 2012). Following the signing of the peace agreement in early 2005, large numbers of educated returning refugees were able to secure

jobs with NGOs and local government and the flow of remittances to returnees increased (Grabska 2014); these factors increased the availability of cash for bridewealth for those limited numbers able to access these resource flows. We can only assume that marriage—with either cattle or cash—has become *more* difficult in the intervening years due to the resumption of conflict, loss of livelihood assets, deepening poverty, and prolonged displacement.

In 2018-2019, salaries from NGOs are a primary source of cash for bridewealth, likely indicating that young men who are more educated, speak English, and can navigate the humanitarian world are in a better position to marry. However, this ‘money of work’ lacks social significance, and the preference for cattle remains, especially in the vision for a more peaceful future. As a young man in Bentiu explained:

The family asks for half the bridewealth to be settled in cash and the rest of the cattle is agreed to be paid when there is a peace agreement and people move out and stay free of any attacks. Then the balance would be paid to the in-laws in the form of cattle.

The divide between those who have the ability to marry (with cash and/or cattle) and those who did not was discussed as pronounced and a potential source of tension and shame for young men in the PoC. As one research participant noted, ‘those with no cash don’t want anything to do with those who have cash because when you ask for help from them, they will say that they have no cash.’

*The possibility of agency: Mixed attitudes towards the shift to cash bridewealth during displacement*

We have demonstrated how cash as a medium of bridewealth does not support or maintain social connectedness in the same manner as cattle exchange. While many respondents lamented this change (except in cases of avoiding cattle raids), a contrasting current also emerged in the narrative. These discussions cover the decrease in the number of stakeholders, the shift in the power dynamics, and the emergence—at times—of increased agency of the marrying couple and of the individual man and woman.

As discussed earlier, research participants generally agreed that cash-based bridewealth, as opposed to cattle, is exchanged between fewer members of the bride and groom's social networks. They also described corresponding changes in the perceived authority of parties involved in marriage decisions following displacement. Prior to moving to the PoC, fathers and other male relatives would play instrumental roles in the negotiations and distributions of bridewealth cattle. In marked contrast, respondents stated that in some cases, youth living in the PoC did not even consult their parents before deciding to marry. (A similar pattern was found by Grabska (2014) among young returnees in the early 2000s who fell pregnant intentionally with a partner who did not have parental approval; this act normally forced acceptance of the marriage.) A focus group discussion participant explained: 'Before, a father could advise his son on who to marry. If a young man wanted to marry a certain girl, the father would investigate the family and he could say "no, pick another girl." But these days, young men don't even consult their father.' Other young people confirmed that decision-making about marriage in the PoC was more squarely in the hands of the couple, with fewer extended negotiations or obligations. This shift

was closely linked to the transition from cattle to cash: ‘The important thing I have seen in cash is that it’s easy for people who get cash to get married,’ one male respondent said. A key informant felt that young people who lived in towns also often preferred cash payments to cattle.

In this sense, cash (as opposed to cattle) bridewealth may either be contributing to or be a symptom of the erosion of generational authority in the PoC. Male elders in pastoral societies traditionally had great sway and influence over the lives and decisions of male youth—including on issues of marriage—due to their control over cattle resources (Spencer 1976). A number of male and female respondents of various ages lamented the change in elders’ involvement. They felt that the shift in the marriage process—including inter-generational consultations around partners and payments—reflected not only a weakening of social connectedness, but also the erosion of collective marriage rituals and a possible decrease of support for the couple. This process has been gradual and occurring over decades and generations, as evident in Hutchinson’s description of the accrual of bridewealth from the 1980s:

With the expansion of the market economy, young men became far less dependent on the good will of their fathers, older brothers, and paternal and maternal uncles in the collection of bridewealth cattle than they were, say, during the 1930s and 1940s. (1992, 308)

This was confirmed by a research participant who explained that, while a large number of relatives were previously involved in procuring cows for the marriage and the transfer of livestock was visible and transparent, there is now less clarity about how much cash the man’s

family paid and whether it was ‘adequate.’ This can create conflict among family members down the line.

However, not all research participants saw these changes as lamentable. Some felt that recent shifts in the marriage process enabled the inclusion of those who would not previously have been meaningfully consulted. In that vein, some research participants welcomed that women in the PoC are now more readily contributing cash to marriage processes, as opposed to the cattle-based exchanges which were predominantly controlled by men. Grabska (2014) ascribed some of the increased agency of women in decisions around both marriage and divorce to women’s increased involvement in income-generating activities that had previously been strictly the domain of men.<sup>4</sup> In another shift, one focus group participant in data collection for our study remarked that people now rely more heavily on their friends and neighbors to gather cash (or, in few cases, cattle) for bridewealth, whereas before most such transfers were from within the family. Youth who are members of savings groups said that they can mobilize those resources to help other group members get married: ‘We collect money on a weekly basis and give the money to the father of the girl if the marriage is agreed to be conducted with money,’ reported a male member of a savings group. This indicates that while there has certainly been a shift in who is consulted and involved in the marriage process, this shift does not necessarily represent a shrinking of social relations in every domain, nor are these shifts universally lamentable across different stakeholders. As such, we see that while some social connections are

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<sup>4</sup> Grabska’s research (2011, 2012) in Kakuma refugee camp in the mid-2000s also illustrated the impacts (and unexpected consequences) of international programs to promote gender equality and female empowerment. While very few people of marrying age in Bentiu 2018-2019 would have participated in such programs in Kakuma, these concepts of what it means to be ‘modern’ and ‘civilised’ have made their way into some segments of Nuer society, and are likely also affecting the extent of female agency, direct involvement of the couple in the marriage process, and changing power dynamics between generations.

weakening due to the shift in marriage norms and processes, new forms of connections and agency may be emerging.

## CONCLUSION

This inquiry stemmed from recognizing that weddings and marriages continue during displacement, albeit in ways that are affected by changes brought by armed conflict. We have focused specifically on one such change, the shift from a cattle-based to a more cash-based economy in displacement. We explored this question through a lens that understands social connectedness to be an important component of how people survive during conflict. Our discussion has highlighted the ways in which the shift from cattle to cash during the most recent period of displacement has resulted in corresponding shifts to the norms, practices, and attitudes surrounding marriage. While recognizing that this process is gradual and driven by multiple and often overlapping factors, we demonstrate how the move away from cattle has decreased the strength and depth of systems of social exchange and reciprocity and how marriages during displacement have become less communal and collective. The economic and livelihood impacts of exchange cash are much more fleeting and can increase insecurity for recipients. However, we also see that the shift to cash has implications upon who can—and can't—afford to marry and who has influence over the marriage process. Young men are less beholden to the will and generosity of their fathers, couples are better positioned to make decisions together, and women may have a greater say in the marriage process. In addition, we see how marriages and bridewealth payments create important social connections even within settings of displacement. At the same time, the nature of these connections is shifting due to a wide range of factors and

processes; alongside these shifts comes changes in who can and can't marry, who benefits from marriage, and what these benefits entail.

Given that this research emerged through an institutional partnership between academics and practitioners, we want to briefly highlight some key implications of this work for humanitarian policy and practice. First, our analysis suggests that it is essential for discussions of humanitarian cash to go beyond a narrow livelihoods lens to include a full gender analysis and a consideration of the impact – positive and negative – that cash can have on rituals and relationships. Second, practitioners focusing specifically on gender issues in contexts of conflict and displacement ought to take into account not only gendered harms and restrictions, but also the possibilities for agency that reconfigurations in livelihoods and relationships bring to the fore. Paying attention to these changes can potentially allow humanitarian organisations to support and amplify moments of agency, rather than inadvertently or unwittingly undermining them.

A number of outstanding questions represent promising avenues for future research. Given the focus of this paper on changes *during displacement*, it will be important to follow over time how the observed changes to practices and attitudes surrounding marriage evolve as people leave the PoC to return to their places of origin or resettle elsewhere. Relatedly, many research participants expressed doubt or worry as to whether marriages forged under the circumstances of displacement and relying on cash bridewealth will last, and whether the social ties typically associated with marriage will remain strong. Tracing this question by chronicling the lives and



social networks of people who forged new social ties in the PoC can shed light on the effects of the changes we document.

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