

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BRIDE-PRICE, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE NANDI.

By G. W. B. HUNTINGFORD.

The social institution known as bride-price is at present a subject of controversy, for anthropologists are in agreement neither as to its name nor as to its proper significance; and this scientific meeting\* is a convenient occasion for trying to describe to you something of the theory and practice of this rather puzzling custom, the more so as most of the tribes in Kenya indulge in some form of it. First of all, bride-price may be defined as a payment, usually in live-stock, sometimes in food or objects of daily use, made by a man to the father or group of the woman he is going to marry. This payment seals the marriage-contract, acts as a guarantee of the stability of the marriage, and is a compensation to the father for the loss of his daughter. It is useless to seek a parallel to this in our own social institutions, because we have nothing even remotely equivalent to it; but if we go back to the Homeric poems we find something which is similar in many respects to the modern African custom. In the Iliad and Odyssey we are told that girls were given in marriage in return for what the translators call "bride-gifts," which are called Hedna in Greek; these hedna were not necessarily cattle, but, as is implied by the verb used to describe their preparation, works of wood or metal, clothes, and food—just as the Tindiret Dorobo at the present day give fur caps and honey-wine. Therefore we may believe Aristotle when he says that the early Greeks bought their wives, provided we understand "bought" to mean "made payment for"; superficially the marriage arrangements may appear to be a matter of buying and selling, though actually they consist of making a payment—not quite the same as buying; and the Nandi describe it by a word which means "pay," and is different from the verb meaning "buy."

In Nandi marriage, there are two aspects, the ritual and the economic; and though marriage can take place without the fulfilment of the latter condition, it cannot take place until the ritual part has been performed. The two aspects, though connected, are not inseparable. Now the verbs used in Nandi to describe the giving and receiving of bride-price are hardly ever "buy" or "sell," but "pay" or "give"; and nowadays a verb borrowed from the Swahili *toa*, used of paying hut-tax, is very often employed. It is thus quite evident that there is some notion in the Nandi mind of

---

\* Paper read at Annual Scientific Meeting, 1932.

“ payment.” I mention this because some anthropologists seem inclined to deny that there is any element of payment in the transaction. The statement, too, that is common in the mouths of the Nandi, “ We like to have daughters because they bring us cattle,” is quite definite as to this. And the fact that girls are sometimes married when very young—that is, before puberty—and wear the dress of married women, would alone be sufficient evidence that payment is at least one of the ideas underlying the bride-price. For this practice of marrying immature girls is only resorted to in extreme cases, for example, when a girl’s father is very old and poor, and expects to die long before his daughter is marriageable; by thus obtaining a husband for her, he acquires cattle which increase his herd, and give him more stock to bequeath to his sons. The husband in such marriages is one who already has a wife, and the child-wife does not cohabit with him till she is old enough. Ordinarily the whole of the bride-price is not paid before marriage, which often takes place before any of it has been paid; but the full amount must be paid eventually, even if the husband dies before he has completed payment, in which case the obligation falls on his sons or relations.

There is no question of barter in the preliminaries to a marriage, for the amount of the bride-price is fixed, though it fluctuates from time to time; and any disputes that may arise concern not the cattle, but the number of goats and sheep. The amounts recorded are as follows:

Before 1909: 1 bull, 4 cows, 5 goats.

About 1909: 1 bull, 1 cow, 10 goats.

At present: 1 bull and 1 cow (or 2 cows), 5 goats.

A statement from Sir Claude Hollis’s book is worth noting; he says, “ If the parents cannot come to terms, it is a common custom, except among the Tungo clan, for a man to elope with his bride, in which case the price is arranged at a later date.” This is what happens in such cases, and is still further evidence for the economic side of marriage. The Tungo clan is excepted from this rule, because the bride-price among them is higher than among other clans.

The payment of bride-price neither implies nor means that a man buys a wife: she is no more his property than a European woman is her husband’s property. After marriage a woman enters into a definite social status of a “ married woman,” and she acquires with this status the duties and privileges of her position, which is that of a free person. If she was bought, and became her husband’s actual property, he would be able to beat her at his pleasure without fear of any consequences, and she would not be allowed to leave him. As it is, if a man ill-treats his wife, she may take refuge either with her parents or with one of her husband’s age-mates; and whoever takes her in

will endeavour to make peace between husband and wife. Further, an habitual wife-beater acquires a bad reputation, and may be cursed by his age-mates. A wife may do as she pleases; if she chooses to be lazy and will not work in the fields, her husband may possibly beat her, but he cannot force her to work, and he must either do it himself, or pay somebody else to do it for him. If a wife wishes to visit her parents or friends, to spend her husband's money—if she can get any—or to take part in social activities like dancing or beer-drinking, her husband has no authority under customary law to stop her, whatever he may actually do if she goes against his own wishes. Nor can he get rid of her if she displeases him, provided she has had a child; for the one condition essential to the possibility of divorce is that the woman must be barren, whatever reasons the man may have for seeking a divorce.

A man may divorce his wife—always provided that she is barren—if she is what is called “a bad woman.” The implications of this adjective are: first, continual disobedience, laziness and neglect of her work; second, continued breaking of sex-laws, that is, being caught with other men; third, refusal to cohabit (rare); and lastly, neglect of her children. For such causes a man may divorce his wife; and after the divorce he is entitled to demand the return of the bride-price, or whatever part of it he has paid—provided he can find another husband for the woman; if he cannot, he has no claim on the bride-price. To the best of my knowledge, divorce is rare, not so much, perhaps, on account of the difficulty of finding a new husband, but because of the return of the bride-price. In cases where a husband contemplates divorce, the wife's parents will do all they can to mend domestic breaches to avoid the return of the bride-price; and they usually succeed. If they fail, it is much more usual for the parties to separate, than for actual divorce to take place, when the wife often becomes a professional prostitute. And in some instances the husband is afraid to divorce his wife in case she may refuse to leave him; a situation for which customary law does not provide.

Returning to the economic aspect of marriage, there are three ways in which a Nandi can acquire cattle of his own. These are: (1) By his share of cattle taken on a raid, or nowadays by the less ostentatious means of theft; (2) by buying cattle, or receiving cattle as payment of wages; (3) by receiving the cattle paid as bride-price for a daughter. The Nandi bride-price *must* therefore be regarded as being in the nature of a payment, for it is an economic transaction in which cattle are passed from one man to another, and become the actual property of the receiver, being returnable only under the circumstances I have already described. We may note, too, that only a man's own acquired cattle may be paid out, since inherited cattle are not private property, but held in trust, as it were, for the whole

tribe living and dead. Girls are definitely regarded as sources of wealth, just as in Homer they are called "maidens who bring in cattle."

The Nandi conception of bride-price is in our eyes something of a paradox, since a man pays for something which does not become his property. Perhaps it may help us to understand it if we consider it as somewhat analogous to a tax; for example, a man pays a road tax, which gives him the right to use the roads, and to expect, in return for the money he pays, that they will be kept in good order; but the payment of the tax does not mean that the roads become his own property, to do what he likes with. He may not dig holes in them any more than a Nandi may ill-treat his wife, unless he is looking for trouble. Granted that the bride-price is both a guarantee and a compensation, it is payable to the bride's father in return for something received. Nor can I find that the Nandi conception of marriage and bride-price has altered as the result of modern economic conditions; in this, as in other tribal affairs that really matter, the Nandi have so far been singularly unsusceptible to outside influence. Indeed, not counting the fluctuations in the amount of cattle payable, the only change that is apparent in the Nandi group is one for the better; for, if we are to believe Mr. Beech, among the Pastoral Suk—when he wrote in 1911—"women have no liberty, they must do as they are told," and among the Agricultural Suk, "woman is a property, and must do as she is told, and all the work," implying definitely that a wife became her husband's property, being bought by the bride-price, which among the Pastoral Suk was exceptionally high—10 cows and 20 sheep. If Beech is correct, the Suk furnish the only exception known to me of the anthropological axiom that "a woman for whom bride-price is paid does not become her husband's property"; and the Nandi group (with whom we may include in respect to this at least the Elgon Nandi, Elgeyo, and Dorobo) have made a distinct upward step in bettering the condition of women. Whether Beech's statements are accepted or not, I think that the facts concerning the Nandi show sufficiently that while a wife is not bought, and does not become a "property," the underlying motives of the bride-price are first, payment, and second a guarantee of the stability of the marriage.

Concerning the term bride-price which I have used, there has been of late considerable discussion as to whether it is not an objectionable word, giving a false idea of what is really meant. It is maintained that the word implies the buying of women, and that people are liable to form quite incorrect ideas from its use. Various substitutes have been proposed, among which may be noted "earnest" (in respect of its function of sealing the contract); "indemnity" (in view of its being a compensation); "marriage-settlement"; "espousal-

fee"; "bride-wealth"; "equilibrium guarantee"; and "bride-compensation." It is needless to say that all these suggestions have met with adverse criticism, and have found opponents who condemned them. And in truth, none of them are entirely satisfactory, while some are definitely misleading; for none sufficiently emphasize the notion of payment which is such an essential part of the transaction, and which is clearly brought out in the term "bride-price." This term, if we must have an English word for it, is really the most satisfactory, were it not for the possibility that it may mislead people into thinking that savages sell their women. I myself suggested the Greek word *Hedna*, which has the double merit of fulfilling our requirements, and of being a technical term with a definite fixed meaning which we cannot alter to suit our own pet theories. It has also been suggested that native terms should be used; of course, when describing native customs, the vernacular term should be recorded; but a native word is unsuited for a general term, as it may imply something either more or less than a similar term in another language, apart from the fact that all tribes do not possess distinctive names for bride-price—the Nandi for instance call it simply "cattle," sometimes "daughter cattle." A non-native technical term which may be understood to cover all shades of meaning is really better.

To sum up, the actual facts relating to bride-price among the Nandi are: bride-price is a payment, but the wife is not sold, and does not become her husband's property; the bride-cattle become the property of the woman's father, and hence girls are regarded as real sources of wealth.