

Bride Price In Africa; A Social Capital or Liability to African Development? Reflections on the Practice From A Ugandan Perspective.

By Dr. Tabitha Naisiko (naisiko@gmail.com)

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Since time immemorial, the payment of bride price to the girl's family by the groom's family has been a common practice in sub-Saharan Africa. It was a crucial social capital which actually was a basis of cultural economics. It has dynamics of patriarchy, gender roles as well as community sustainability. It played roles of wealth creation and redistribution of resources, building community alliances, providing identity and social security. It is a foundation of a family. However, society being dynamic and different, the trend has shifted from providing agricultural products such as animal husbandry, food and farm technologies which would facilitate production to pecuniary forms of money and property that facilitate consumption. As a result, bride price payment has in the contemporary Uganda society turned into a double edged sword where to some extent it is a resource for social-economic capital and to others it is a liability leading to uttermost poverty and gender insecurity. This paper is intended to highlight the prospects and evils in the process of bride price payment in Uganda.

Conceptualising Bride-price in an African Perspective

To date, even as reported by Goldschmidt (1976) about the Sabiny and nearly all African communities is marriage authenticated by bride price. These include cows, goats tobacco, money, clothes, local brew, chicken and foodstuffs. Sometimes the marriage contracts are written but in most cases this is done through mutual agreement. Almost all societies in the world have some kind of gift-giving at the time of marriage of its members. Kirwen (2005:116) argues that the reason is that marriage is the source of new life for the community, and the members feel the need to show their support, concern and solidarity with the marriage union in a tangible concrete way...sort of buying into the relationship because it is a fundamental, long term value to the society. However, from the African perspective of the concept bride-price as commonly used is very encompassing and may not even mean the English translation given. It would not then be practical to discuss the bride price which has passed the test of time and modernity in a non-clear way. In an effort to get the real understanding of bride-price, I collected the local words from Ugandan local languages to mean bride price and their literal translation given. The following are some of the findings.

- The Sabiny call it *Konoywek*, meaning a sign of commitment of the groom to take care of the wife, compensation to bride's family.
- The Basoga call it *Omwandu*, from *okwandhula*, seeking to be introduced and accepted in the bride's family
- The Banyankole call it *enjugano*, which is closely related to the verb "*okujuga*", a sound which is made by cows. Some people have suggested that this could be related to the noise made by the *enjugano* cows. In the region where *enjugano* is used, the gifts that the family of

- the bride gives to that of the groom are called *emihingiro*. It is about exchange of resources.
- The Baganda call it *omutwalo gwa taba*. Taking packages of tobacco to seek acceptance in the bride's family.
 - The Batooro call it *omukaaga*. Meaning the six packages given to a bride's family in a ceremony called *okweranga*, which literally means to announce the presence or arrival of oneself. It also refers to seeking acceptance in one's family.
 - The Bakonzo refer to it as *omukagha*, meaning the six goats which must be paid to the bride's family.
 - The Itesots refer to it as *emmanyit*, which means a boy gives animals to the girl's parents, as a token of appreciation.
 - The Japadhola and the Acholi call it *Nyom*. This means becoming a real man in the family. It is a sign of acceptance. If it is not paid, the children do not belong to the man and the wife cannot be buried in his home.

Considering the above local terms, it is noticed that it is not anywhere referred to as bride-price with a commercial connotation. It is about acceptance, exchange of gifts, introduction and exchange of resource between families. The propaganda surrounding this practice if not challenged will continue to damage the institution of marriage as far as community cohesion is concerned. However, since bride price remains a conventional English term used, in this regard, this paper will also use the term as it. However, ideally it would be referred to as gifts of marriage. In African cultures, the practice of bride price payment transcends marriage issues and gets tentacles to issues directly connected. This is in terms of distribution of resources such as land, animal husbandry and poultry which are means of production. It also deals with entitlements, distribution of goods and services. Bride price also plays significant social and moral roles which too are very significant to economic development.

On the other hand, marriage as an institution on which bride price is based as a pillar justifies economic development. All the efforts regarding economics such as distribution of resources, transfer, access and utilisation of resources are means and end of family stability and wellbeing. Thus family as the basic unit of the state attracts all economic attention in history and to date. Considering this, the practice of payment of bride price is vital for contemporary economic development at community level. In the paragraphs below, is a discussion of the significance of bride price and the changes over times that have compromised the actual purpose.

Authenticates Marriage

The property given as bride-price symbolises appreciation to the brides' parents by the groom's family and at the same time authenticates the marriage. This is true to what Goody (1976) observes that in Africa, there are no concubines, all are wives. There are no stepmothers, or stepchildren. In this case, all wives of a man are equal share holders and beneficiaries of his property because he paid bride price for all of them. On the other hand, children too are equal sharers because their parentage was authenticated by the bride price paid by their father to their grandparents. In a field study in 2012 on the impact of bride price, it affirmed that society and women specifically approve of the practice. Muthegheki, S., Kule, C., Naeemah, A., (2012) reports:

The term “appreciation” was commonly used in describing bride price. Its purpose was explained as a ‘sign of appreciation to the side of the lady’s parents, for it gives confidence to parents of the lady that they also produced’. Bride price was important for some of the young women interviewed since they perceived that the status of a wife was bestowed through this process. A recently married woman said ‘Women accept it very much because if you are not paid you are looked at as a house girl to that family. Another said ‘A woman feels safe, secure, stable and respected if bride price is paid’.

Young married women felt that Bride price was important as one said ‘It improves relationships because the wife feels more secure and therefore works so hard to please the husband. There was peace after paying pride price’. Another said ‘A woman whose bride price is not paid feels less attached to her husband and his family’. P. 10

Currently a number of children and women are suffering injustice because they are marginalised as illegitimate. This subjects them to lack of basic needs such as education, security and love. Failure to pay bride-price contributes to under-development as it deprives the husband/father and his family/community of their responsibility to take care of their families. This consequently leads to increased suffering, crime and poverty hence a negative implication to economic development.

Gives Identity to Children

Among the Sabiny, the Karimojongs, the Itesots, the Bagishu, children do not belong to a man if he did not pay bride-price. In the same way, like the Kikuyu of Kenya, such children belong to the maternal family. In addition, a man who never paid bride price is not allowed to receive bride-price from his daughters. If he must, then he should first clear his debt with his in-laws before they give him permission to receive his due from his daughter. Even among the Igbo of Nigeria, a man never owns children if he has not paid bride price and he is not married to the mother of the children. Instead such children belong to his father –in law. In case another man pays bride-price, he becomes the recognised father to the children.

Social Security

Bride price is used to give social security. Widow and orphan custody is based on the bride price the husband paid. Having paid bride-price, the wife becomes a family member of the man and they have the obligation to take care of her even after the death of the husband. While the chauvinistic elites regard this as widow inheritance, the practitioners regard this as widow custody. This is because her identity in the husband’s family is defined and failure to take care of her would mean neglecting their wife and their children. The practice is meant to continue bringing up children in a complete family with both present as role models; an issue that is very significant for human development. However, this does not mean she should be forced to remarry in the family, in case she is not interested. It should be noted that she lives in a patriarchal family where the clan of the man still has a say in the property of the deceased. However, living in her husband’s household means that she should not marry another man

without consent of the deceased's family. Moreover it is highly impossible that they would agree.

Guards Against Divorce

The Sabiny believe that bride price seal marriage and guard against divorce. However, it is important to note that bride price depends on the rites of initiation to adulthood and how the girl behaved during the ritual. Here, it is difficult to establish what is more important in guarding against divorce; i.e. whether initiation or bride-price. However, since the latter depends on the former, it is assumed the former is more significant in binding marriages. After initiation, the age-sets formed act as family courts and ensure the stability of the family. They resolve the conflicts in marriage monitor each other's behaviour and make sure the family has the basic needs through a community effort. Perhaps the divorce rate is increasing where the rites are being compromised because the couples are left on their own. They therefore fail to cope with the problems and end breaking up. Marriage breakdown compromises financial stability and economic development at large.

A Foundation to Establish a Family

Due to misrepresentation or lack of appropriate vocabulary, "bride price", just like rites of initiation to womanhood has been presented only in a negative form. There are several organisations in place like MFUMI in Tororo which fight against bride price and ensure they are removed from marriage rituals. However, these organisations have not acknowledged that upon getting married, part if not all the gifts are given back to the bride by her family to go and start a new family. This is the practice among the Banyankole, Bakiga and several communities in Western Uganda. In cases where this is not done, it is justified for those organisations to ensure it is done. Among the Basoga and Bagishu, the bride-price is given back to the children of the couple when they too have a ritual to perform like when a son is undergoing a rite of initiation to adulthood, the maternal uncle who is in charge takes care of the logistics. Even when he is marrying, the maternal uncle gives his nephew the cows to give as bride price for his wife. The maternal uncle also has a role to help his nephew build a house and he is the one to perform the rituals of house warming.

The practice of giving bride price is more of staking the goats and cows in another family than buying the bride. The exchange of gifts and resources through bride-price is what Kanyandago (2009) refers to an appropriate strategy for "prosperity for all" bona baggawale as the case was before alteration of these key institutions. Bride-price therefore, goes beyond marriage gifts but has tentacles that affect human development in the areas of food security, accommodation, human capacity building, identity formation and role specification both at the maternal and paternal families of the offspring of a particular marriage. Bride price if analysed and supported other than fought, contribute to human development basing on their functional roles.

Builds Alliances and Binds the Community

In Africa, marriage is never an affair of an individual couple. When the processes of bride-prices payment begin, there are two sides that are involved in the negotiations. This is a process that

takes a long time and can even go beyond a day. The Luhya community of Kenya justifies the time spent saying that the process is also used to determine the temperaments and patience of the intending in-laws. They make it excessively long, while watching the tempers of the other party lest they give their daughter to a violent family. On suspecting so, they can reject the offer and advise the girl to look for another suitor. However, under normal circumstances, through the lengthy negotiations, friendships and social networks are formed. These networks help to run the activities of the community in areas of human development such as mobilisation for security, social capital and communication. Among the Sabiny, those involved in the process are the age-sets who will even follow the couple and support it in case of need through monitoring each others' welfare as sworn when making an oath during seclusion.

It should also be noted that in African communities, bride price is not supposed to be completed. It is paid in halves and it is a sign of pride and arrogance to pay all the charge at one go. This is done with a purpose of maintaining the link between two families otherwise if all is paid; there is a risk of total separation. The boy's family may feel like it has bought off the bride, so no need of frequenting her family. On the other hand, the bride's family has a duty to take an animal to the groom's family each time their daughter gives birth. The sex of the animal depends on the sex of the child born. Among the Sabiny it is a cow and among the Bakonzo it is a goat.

Considering the above, it can be argued that although "bride-price" has portrayed negatively portrayed in the modern society, it has significant roles to play in marriage and economic. It is a basis of the how community align their relations with one another in the family. They are a platform for understanding gender relations in the family. They are also a source of social capital on which community is based for its opportunities through bonding, linking and bridging. In other words, the process and act of paying bride price comprise cultural economic opportunities for the communities not only in the past and to date even in African communities. The process do not only cause inner social security but also create trust among the participants and thus are able them to share resources, labour, advice and well as financial capital. Through community coming together, many groups which operate commercially have been formed and through this social capital, they have been able to link themselves to government programmes such as National Agricultural Advisory and Development Services, Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies and business people. In turns, these groups help one another in the cultural task of contributing towards paying bride price for members who are marrying. Thus groups and associations indicative of the task such as *Gema ku mwino* (support your friend), *Mukenkede*, *Munno mukabi* (a friend in need), Basoga Bainho are several in Uganda.

Through the process of bonding, bridging and linking, people have opened up business ventures that require no or little interest on loans; they have pulled resources together on a rotational basis. A recent research by Bank of Uganda revealed that more money with a value of 19 trillion Uganda shillings by the year 2014 was channelled through mobile money facility than banks because banks are not user-friendly. Social capital is enhanced by closer facilities where by people continue to support each other's business in case of hiccups. This is more common among women's groups whereby members may offer to take care of the other's children when she has gone to trade. In this case, we ought to appreciate cultural platforms such as bride price that bring people together to enable such opportunities.

The Paradigm Shift: Contemporary Bride Price as a liability in Uganda

Despite the above just like many useful African institutions that have been abused, bride price too has frequently been abused by the contemporary society. This does not however underplay its indispensable significance to African communities. Thus it can be affirmed that bride prices retains core moral values that binds the community and promotes its wellbeing in many aspects of life. However, the recent changes in the material given as well as the process compromise the core values of bride price and at times it has eventually become a liability to cultural economics as well as development. It is important to note that traditionally bride price comprised of reproductive materials such as chicken, goats and cows which could reproduce and give not only social capital but also food security and nutrition values. The bride price of the time is comprised of consumables and commodities that go absolute. Now people take sodas, sugar, furniture, meat, clothes, television sets, solar panels, motorcycles and vehicles. These are consumed while others continue being a liability to the recipients. They require electricity, fuel and in turn increase bills for payment.

Furthermore, unlike the traditional forms of giving goats and cows where the chicks, kids and calves could be distributed among relatives on a continuous basis, current forms of bride price cannot enable that. They in fact promote individualism because they cannot be shared easily. In such situation, social capital of linking, bridging and bonding which in turn result in a lot of economic opportunities cannot be realised. This causes tensions in society such as jealousy, witchcraft suspicions, and hatred. It is no wonder that right now in Uganda; the society is becoming individualistic and divided between the poor and the rich. One of the unifying factors such as bride price has been compromised by commercialisation and selfishness.

The bondage that people get as relatives through marriage alliances are no longer easily made because the proper community accountability is lacking. Consequently, there are marriage breakdowns due to lack of commitment, thus creates no trust, social security which are important values to business enterprises and their sustainability. Hence there is need to emphasise again that the process of payment as well as the forms of bride price had communitarian values that boosted the cultural economics. The economics of the time based on individualism and mistrust cannot prosper to build the country.

Bride Price is said to Increase Domestic Violence and Other Social Evils

The (Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust, 2002) as well as (Thaira and Hague, 2009) observe that in the past, the tradition of bride-price is believed to have operated beneficially to give formal recognition to marriages and protection to wives against abuse, to stabilise the partnership and to join the two families together. Today, however, the practice appears to have become commercialised and to have lost much of its traditional value in many instances. Bride-price can appear to be the 'buying' of a wife as a commodity, which can result in abuse towards a woman if she does not fulfil her 'value' or if she attempts to leave and the bride-price cannot be repaid.

In a field research carried out in Western Uganda by Muthегheki, S., Kule, C., Naeemah, A., (2012), the findings indicate that bride price in the contemporary society has led to human rights issues which in the process have negative impacts on cultural economics. Some of the extracts from page 13 reveal the following:

Exploitation of women: A clan leader identified among others the impact of bride price on women and said *'It enslaves the woman ... disrespects her because the woman was bought through bride price.'* A religious leader mentioned that bride price was a human rights offence and said *'It is not right to put human beings on the commercial market, bargain for them and when one is fed up, dump them leaving the woman psychologically tortured. Women lose their dignity, have to do endless hard labour – and then failure to produce children becomes a big crime once you have been paid for.'* This exploitation was also mentioned by a government official who said *'A woman turns to property of the man after paying bride price and she is exploited to the maximum and this deprives her of her rights.'*

Economic burden on men: The economic burden for men was a common theme reported by all participants. The economic impact on the couple and the couple often starting their marriage in poverty was frequently mentioned. A government official said: *'It has resulted in poverty since it is costly and over charged and sometimes boys are left with nothing after the payment of bride price, and therefore suffer after marriage because all the money that would be used to feed the family was used to marry.'* Young men spoke about how bride price affects them financially: *'We suffer so much because we pay a lot of money.'* He thought this was a form of *'financial mistreatment'*. Another noted how men often get into financial trouble due to bride price and said *'The man may have to borrow substantially and go into debt and impoverishment in order to pay bride price and may have no income.'* P. 13.

Thaira and Hague (2009) in their field research carried out in districts of Eastern Uganda too revealed the following key negative impacts that were repeated in interviews with members of the public and with professionals and duty bearers:

- Bride-price makes marriage unequal because the woman is paid for by the man; thus, its continued existence cements inequality between men and women.
- The woman can become an article of property in her own home as bride-price can give the appearance of 'commodifying' human relationships. It may, therefore, feed into the abuse and maltreatment of the wife.
- It may deprive girls of education when parents seek an early or forced marriage in order to raise the bride-price, and take their daughters out of school. It can lead to the 'selling' of human beings because the family needs wealth.
- Children may be taken away and withheld by the husband's relatives if the mother leaves since bride-price was paid.
- It leads to women appearing to be worthless unless paid for, belittled, and able to be treated however men want. The practice gives the possibility of the virtual enslavement of women in the worst cases, as women are unable to leave if being mistreated because bride-price cannot be repaid.

- It can result in landlessness and homelessness for women.
- Men may have to borrow substantially and go into debt and impoverishment when they are young.
- The practice may cause a male inferiority complex if men cannot - or fail to - pay. Some men are left unmarried because of their inability to pay bride-price.
- Very young brothers may be left to pay back bride-price for a sister leaving her husband.
- It may make having children impossible, as men/young people cannot afford marriage, holding back development and community life.

The above negative results about the process of bride price payment and their consequences imply that the practice has gone off the cultural trail. However, a solution as most researchers suggest is neither to modify nor remove it but to revisit the cultural procedures and values attached to it. We learn that the practice solved many socio economic problems and promoted human welfare. Unfortunately, the African cultures as custodians for survival strategies for living on the continent are now often used as reference not resources for solving problems. In other words, looking the significances of bride price, we learn that the economic platform that benefits everyone. However, the contemporary commercially minded society has abused it and hence resulting into problems and suffering in Africa.

It can hereby be affirmed that when we lose our cultural strategies, we are incapacitated to transform our economies because they are baseless. It is on this basis that several modern/international economic development strategies introduced to Africa fail to make a remarkable impact and end up causing more harm than betterment. Taking Uganda as an example, the country has been blessed with an international goodwill thus it receives many investors, loans, grants and donations in form of cash flow to enable its economic growth and development. On the contrary, such financial help has not helped whereby human suffering is at an increase and the gap between the majority poor and the minority rich is widening.

The contradicting results accruing from discrepancy between heavily funded programmes and poor human welfare remains a development puzzle in Uganda. This implies that the root cause of underdevelopment is not yet tackled. Serpa (1999) quotes the former United Nations (UN) Secretary General, Kofi Annan, lamenting that Africa is struggling with a multiple of crises, these being ecological, economic, social and political. Moreover external aid has not prevented the tumbling of per capita incomes; children dying of malnutrition and more worrying, the fear that even if Africa implemented all the required reforms correctly, the situation would continue to deteriorate. While Annan acknowledges the external aid and its noble efforts, he seems to agree that a better understanding of an option for African human development are not yet explored. Ela (1998) also wonders whether this is refusal to develop or failure of Westernisation. He observes that human development strategies based on Western capitalism dissuade Africans from genuine development. He argues that this is because Africans tend to distance themselves from a model of development that destroys not only the social links but also links with ecology and spiritual life. Ela refers to this as “bankruptcy of capitalism” on black African continent. This justifies “bride price” as a cultural economic strategy because it keeps all the spiritual and socio-economic links of the community.

Reflecting on the above and the theme of bride price in the cultural economics, we learn that the development paradigm Africa is using is external to them and it has not helped to improve on the quality of life of the people. The reason for this is that the efforts for economic development are not grounded in the communitarian cultural strategies that inform the acquisition, distribution and management of resources. Bride price is at the core of marriage; a place where the social structures are made vibrant and are regularly activated through rites to enable role fulfilment. This in turn enables human development through the provision of services and human needs in the community.

Conclusion

Although bride price is a resilient old cultural economic practice, we learn that despite changes and adaptations of modernity and globalization, it is still relevant and can be harnessed for economic development in the contemporary society. This implies that it still plays significant roles that cannot be overlooked at this point in time when the continent is on the move to economic development. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages, we learn that amidst challenges, the advantages are stronger. They are potential bases for economic development because bride price is the gist of marriage which is the foundation of human development and a justification for economic development. This is because the social structure which determine roles, responsibilities, statuses, resources and their management are all based on marriage which is authenticated by bride price. Bride price therefore should be considered for cultural economics and be cultivated for that purpose.

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