

# **POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF DOWRY PAYMENT ON WOMEN AND THE GENERAL SOCIETY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A Kenyan Musician, Kelly Brown, once sang a best seller entitled, “African Way”. He was very poetic about African mannerisms which appear to be common across the ethnic and cultural divides. Using the names of African countries like, Somalia, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Namibia, Tunisia, Nigeria, etc, Kelly was enthusiastic about the beauty and commonality inherent in something “African”, so poetic to be ignored. Yes, we have our own way that has over the years defined our cultural and political identity as a people.

Marriage in African way thus entails that certain things must be observed, not for the sake of it, but for the very reason that they define the whole spectrum of African identity. This includes African religions and philosophical life, political life as well as African economic systems. Marriage is never viewed as an accident. Accidents get people unaware, and disorganize the entire society. Marriage on the other hand is a planned social action that involves various stakeholders. In view of this, it is an expression of community beliefs, thoughts, and entire heritage that cannot be wished away because of the advent of new civilization or modernity.

This public lecture seeks to redefine the centrality of dowry payment in our society at a time when the cultural practice has received numerous attacks from many activists. I use the term activist in a more conservative sense. Research shows that many people in Africa still believe that dowry has been abused, and that its original objectives have been compromised by greed and commercial interest. Yes, there are elements of truth to this. However, the very fact that many people have abused dowry payment does not render the rite insignificant and obsolete. There are reported cases of young people eloping as a way of escaping the direct influence from their respective parents who would demand

more payments or put too many conditions prior to their marriages. The same applies to the church and its insistence on weddings. The colourful weddings we witness today are scaring many young people and force them into a come-and-we stay type of marriages. In the West this would be called cohabiting. The factors perpetuating cohabiting include ones inability to pay dowry or meet wedding expenses. It is viewed as a short cut to marriage.

There are cultural issues which have survived the onslaught from modernity and new concept of African renaissance. Marriage, for example, has been a cultural practice with immense influence on the global world of varied cultures and customs and by no means it is yet to survive for many years to come. Even though marriage is an important cultural practice among the human race, it has not been possible to provide a universal common legislation on how it is to be practiced. Every country has its own marital laws based on its own practices and common values.

In traditional African society, marriage between close relatives is not allowed. There are consequences on those who breached this norm. Every marital breach had corresponding consequences. It is for this reason that the teachings of the sages were critically essential in ensuring that no one suffers as a result of breaching marital law. Law exists to ensure that every person's interest is secured, and that no one would suffer any form of injury, physical or psychological as a result of someone else's misconduct. A wrong committed by a single individual, especially in matters related to marriage has a ramification on the entire community. Marriage, as a cultural practice, is a community affair, and it involves not only those who are related in blood, but also everyone associated with the families where the people intending to marry belong. They could be friends, age mates, colleagues, and even social admirers who may not be related to them in any formal way.

In this public lecture I am expected to defend a cultural practice that has been there since time immemorial. Payment of dowry in African society is diverse as the African communities and nations are. Every community has its own formal way of initiating marriage negotiations and subsequently its consummation.

Before we embark on this specific topic, it is understandable to recognize that matters of marriage from African perspective are emotionally touchy, socially celebrated, spiritually binding, and physically embraced. From this perspective I wish to highlight that marriage as an emotional union, is pegged on the loving relation between the persons involved. Understanding of this love would differ from community to community. For a person who is brought up under the western influence, many traditionally arranged marriages would not qualify for “a loving relations” based on the belief that love requires that the potential couples are themselves ready to express love feelings for each other without intimidation. In the modern society, there is a need for the people intending to marry to express their own independent desire for it and relatives and friends would only come in to give them support. Love in African context, is not something spontaneously expressed. It is something that is created by circumstances, the cultural situation, and it is with time that it is allowed to germinate and grow to its fullness, so rich a relationship that everybody would rejoice about it. Irrespective of circumstances under which people get married, the emotional union between the couples is what will solidify the marriage institution. African society embraced this emotionality and bequeaths solidarity within the two communities where the couples come from.

## THE DEFENSE

### **Marriage as a social institution**

Marriage as a social institution is also celebrated. As a union of two people, it also serves as a union between two different communities. Marriage creates an environment for the establishment of new relations. Sometimes people got married from hostile communities. Such marriages lessened tension and creates new avenues for mutual understanding. Such coming together is essential not only for the extension of communities’ relations, but also for preserving a cultural tie between different communities.

## **Marriage and spirituality**

All communities in Africa recognize the spirituality behind marriage. In as much as marriage is a cultural celebration, it invokes the spiritual consciousness of the society. There are prayers and thanksgiving that characterize marriages in Africa that we cannot ignore. Even though these forms of spirituality are peculiar to every community, the centrality of God is essential. The invocation of the spirit of African saints is significant. It is all religion in practice. When celebrating marriage, the African is participating in an act of worship and reverence to gods of our fore fathers is rationalized through our act of invocation.

## **Marriage as physical union**

Last but not least, marriage as a physical union is the climax of all other forms of marriage processes. Physical union in traditional African set up is highly valued and climaxed with celebration. It is this form of union that provides a means for procreation, and establishment of a new family.

## **Marriage and appreciation**

Now having given the above highlights, I want to emphasize that there is nothing good that comes cheap. A woman is the most precious thing in a man's life. And in fact, from African perspective, it is the most celebrated cultural rite that every adult would long for. For a man getting a woman to marry is the biggest achievement that calls for celebration. A woman plays a significant role in a person's life. A woman gives a man a social status. A person wins respect from friends, relatives and colleagues when he has a wife. Equally, a woman in African context is treated with respect and socially elevated when she is married. For this reason, both the woman and the man would enjoy social acceptances and respect reminiscence to marriage.

The great question for this public lecture is: should dowry determine or continue to determine marriage in a society? Many theoretical arguments have been advanced to discredit the custom. Some have claimed that dowry is another word for "purchase". I am well aware that some speakers coming after me will struggle to prove that payment of dowry for marriage is outdated, and should be

abolished. I will not delve into such a misnomer. I have begun by stating clearly that something good is worth a penny. Payment of dowry is as old as man, and even anthropologists would find some commonalities across cultures showing the extent of appreciations expressed in marriages. In traditional African society, dowry was never considered as a payment in the same understanding a person would pay for a commodity. Far from it, it was generally viewed as a means of appreciating the family where the woman comes from for the loving care they gave to the woman. A woman in the African context is priceless, and no amount of money or number of cattle can be equated to her. For this reason, the more the cattle are given, the higher degree of the level of appreciation for her *pricelessness*.

### **Background understanding**

Let's look at the background of the African woman prior to her marriage. Unlike the western culture, African woman is the embodiment of a family unity, community pride, and essentially, the epicenter of economic viability. Apart from natural state of child bearing, the African woman is always at the center of every form of economic life in the family. She participates in all matters pertaining to food security, kitchen matters, and almost every domestic chore. A good wife is not judged by her fertility but her character, productivity in terms of food production and love for her husband and relatives. It is for this reason, that the culture of appreciating them is not negotiable. The appreciation always takes different forms from one cultural community to the other. During the pre-colonial times, all forms of appreciation were in terms of livestock. There was no money as a unit for appreciation. Livestock were essential because of their intrinsic nature as part of human life. We live with them, care for them, rely on them, and rationally, part and parcel of our human society. During those days, a family could boast of big herd of livestock and partying with a few as a way of appreciating the family of the woman was never considered a big deal. Pastoral communities with big number of cattle would always give more depending on their ability. There was no fixed rate whatsoever; the whole payment was determined by the ability of the marriage negotiators, the ability of the man's people, and the wisdom of the parents of the woman.

One of the most agonizing experiences any African would not wish to undergo is the denial of an opportunity to marry a person of your choice on the ground that you cannot make dowry payment. In traditional African society, marriage was never a personal issue that would require a person to struggle on his own. It was, however, a communal matter that required the participation of everyone else: relatives, friends and the entire community where the person comes from. The following are the key pillars that we can highlight:

- Dowry was appreciated as a means of registering ones approval for marriage.
- Dowry payments were obligatory tokens of appreciation symbolized by exchange of livestock resource
- Dowry was and still is the symbol of appreciation to the family of the woman for their care and release to another family.
- Dowry is a sign of commitment that shows a man's willingness to safeguard the marriage
- Today people pay dowry as part of a continued cultural practices.
- Payment of dowry enhances bonding between the two families who enter into marriage
- Dowry as a token of appreciation is a continuous process; it is not a onetime event. This is what makes it different from an act of commerce.

Even though livestock donation is becoming rare, financial equivalent has been accepted. This change of token is necessitated by the changes in our lifestyle. Today people marry from far and wide and transporting animals is becoming increasingly difficult.

### **Why should it continue?**

There are various reasons why the practice cannot be abolished. Culture defines people, their lifestyle, beliefs and practices, politics and religion. Firstly, as a cultural practice that is deeply rooted it is inconceivable to assume that it is outdated. A cultural practice cannot be classified as outdated so long as it is still embraced by the people. Luo cultural practice of removing the six lower teeth as

a form of initiation had a major objective. It was meant to create a passage for feeding a person during his ill health and was not able to feed on his own. Liquid food would be administered to him with ease. However, with modern health facilities made available, the once celebrated cultural practice died its natural death. The people lost interest in it as it became obsolete. There is no cultural practice that can survive in an environment of irrelevance. Today the modern generation, including myself, never went through the initiation of teeth removal. For this reason, it is a logically attainable fact that dowry payment is still appreciated by the majority and it may not die soon so long as its primary objectives remain relevant. It is a matter of inculcating positive attitude towards it.

The second reason why the practice must continue is because of its spiritual content. Payment of dowry is a form of worship through thanksgiving. In worship, thanksgiving plays a central role as we express our appreciation to God. We give generously without measure as we feel touched and able. In a service of thanksgiving we urge people to contribute generously. There has never been any reason to question generous contribution. As an act of worship, we contribute generously to the dowry as a way of appreciating the woman we love, her family and entire community. Dowry paid is not actually exclusively to the parents of the woman. Every person has a share in it: the aunties and uncles, brothers and sisters. The more it is given the more extended are its beneficiaries. It is viewed as a unifying factor or bond of unity. Christian tradition provides a space for celebration of such a nature, and this involves material gifting. Even in Christian thanksgiving, people contribute and the contributions do not go to God in an actual sense but only symbolically. To this extent, we have to understand dowry in that light of thanksgiving whereby the material gifts of cows or money would not go to God directly, but to his servants who brought up the woman.

The third reason is that our young girls today would not feel comfortable if they are not appreciated. Even though their understanding is that if a man loves them, he must prove by sacrifice that he can do everything for their sake. To the African woman, such a sacrifice is a sign of love. The more the man gives, the higher the level of his capacity as well as of his love. I doubt if there is any woman that would

resist such a temptation to feel loved. This is an African way of doing things and we must accord it its due place as part of our heritage. The underlying belief is that a woman who is highly appreciated also wins the respect of her peers, community and relatives. A woman is less appreciated or not appreciated at all, if no dowry is paid for her. These are social ingredients that build our social capital to a certain height and we cannot just ignore them for the sake of modernity or some form of cultural schism. However, I wish to take cognizance of the fact that due to poverty level in most of our society, some people have taken advantage of the culture to use their girls as bait for monetary or economic gains. Some of the generation of this age that believes in money economy would see the value of this culture only in terms of its financial value and ignore the positive social values attached to it. It is a matter that requires education for change of attitude. The African way, is the way. Thank you.