

The Dynamics of Bride Price in Zimbabwe and the UK Diaspora

Ottis Mubaiwa

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To my family, this book is dedicated to you
because I couldn't have done it without you.

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Abbreviations and Glossary

BP	Bride Price
<i>Danga</i>	Refers to the livestock that is given to the bride's father
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GoZ	Government of Zimbabwe
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
<i>Rooru</i>	Bride Price
<i>Lobola</i>	Bride Price
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls

Abstract

My book, which is a product of my doctoral research, examines different discourses on the practice of Bride Price. I explore the historic, cultural and traditional constructions of the practice and contrast these with feminist interpretations that see it as harmful. I then compare these discourses with how men and women today view the practice. Furthermore, I seek to understand if and how Bride Price intersects with gender. To what extent does it help to enforce unequal patterns of power that render women inferior and vulnerable to abuse? I do this by exploring contentious debates within and between the Zimbabweans in the diaspora (in Birmingham) and those at home (in both rural and urban settings). I examine questions of gender inequalities to elucidate how debates on African marriage were influenced by shifting ideas of urbanisation and migration. Existing studies of African marriage focus on local macro-studies: my research is the first to place these questions within a transnational frame, examining perceptions and experiences of the practice across three different contexts. This represents an important original contribution to the scholarship and provides essential context for current debates.

This research consists of a literature review examining the current discourses on Bride Price. The literature review then informed the subsequent data collection. My findings reveal multiple contradictions. Many felt the practice is out-dated but still stated they would observe it, while others held to its centrality as an expression of cultural identity. Some supported feminist arguments that link the practice with gender inequalities. Clearly, expectations around Bride Price have intensified with globalisation and migration. Diaspora Zimbabweans now face the highest Bride Price bill, with couples having to raise the money jointly. My analysis revealed that Bride Price intersects with religious beliefs on marriage which are in turn founded on patriarchal ideology that sees wives as the property of their husbands. As such, my book supports feminist arguments that practices such as Bride Price are harmful and represent barriers to the empowerment of women.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I wish my feminist-lite friends who still support the patriarchal practice of having *Lobola* paid for them will listen!

(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)

In this chapter, I outline and introduce the general context of the book. The chapter takes the following structure: the importance of Bride Price is highlighted followed by the justification of pursuing this research, which includes highlighting my interest in this area of study. Next, the contextual background of my study is outlined which helps set the tone, which is followed by an overview of the patterns of migration, beginning with rural to urban areas within Zimbabwe and then from Zimbabwe to Birmingham. Understanding the migratory and global dimensions to my study is important as it represents a central part of its originality. In this introduction, I also present a justification for my use of a feminist perspective, which I argue helps me to explore the realities and experiences of women. The contribution to knowledge made by this research is also presented, particularly with regard to the theoretical element, which to some extent challenges the critique of post-colonial feminists who have claimed that the emphasis on culture and its overuse as an explanation for the abuse of women in developing contexts is unhelpful. My argument asserts that culture is central to understanding why Bride Price continues but is not the only dimension. The originality of this research will be made clear in this introduction.

1.1 Importance of Bride Price

Bride Price payment is one of the most highly cherished and highly regarded practices, not only in Zimbabwe but also in many other African countries. The practice is performed in order to formalise and solemnise a marriage before the partners can be recognised as husband and wife. According to Hague, Thiara and Turner (2011), Bride Price is widely practised and used as the basis to validate customary marriages in African countries. It is paid by the groom's family to the bride's family and it acts as a contract between the two families. Bride Price involves the exchange of material gifts like livestock, cash, goats, and sheep, depending on the particular community. Recently, due to the influence of modernisation and Westernisation, other new and 'modern' gifts

like land titles, electronics, furniture, cars and other items have been introduced into the process alongside the so-called 'traditional' items. However, these new and modern products - the 'modern' way of paying Bride Price - has in some cases led to Bride Price being seen as a showy affair that has resulted in the payment of "astronomical" amounts (Moore, 2013). The expectation that exorbitant amounts will be paid puts huge pressure on prospective grooms with small incomes.

In recent years in Zimbabwe, the practice of Bride Price has generated a great deal of debate and has faced criticisms from feminists, women's rights activists and some politicians, who have condemned it as an out-dated practice that promotes male domination and gender inequality, subjecting women to abuse and reducing their decision-making powers. It has also been criticised for being commercialised and commoditised in recent times, thus raising issues of affordability and equating women to purchasable commodities. This has prompted some women's rights activists in Zimbabwe to petition the constitutional court seeking abolition of the practice, but the case was lost in 2012. As I write this book, some female members of parliament and NGOs are battling with a bill in parliament that seeks to abolish the practice (Muzulu, 2014).

Despite the above arguments made by feminists and politicians, the voices of the most important stakeholders have been missing; the men and women at the grassroots level who are more affected by the practice of Bride Price. There are few studies that capture the voice of those actors, especially in cities and rural areas, and fewer still seek to explore perspectives across generations and transnationally. This study, therefore, attempts to fill this gap by analysing the views and experiences of those members of society. Accordingly, the main objective of this research is to provide a theoretically sound and informed study, based on a set of interrelated conceptions, of people's perceptions and experiences of Bride Price. Thus, the study is guided by the following heading: *The Dynamics of Bride Price in Zimbabwe and the UK Diaspora.*

This heading is based upon the assumption that Bride Price is in some way a gendered practice reinforced by feelings of masculinity and femininity in societies. It is also a class issue that, in some respects, conforms to forces of modernisation and modernity but at the same time resists those forces. This is geared to influence the way people perceive Bride Price, its process, and the experiences and outcomes of it for men and women. This book is based on months of field study with the Shona and the Ndebele ethnic groups in Birmingham, UK, and in urban and rural Zimbabwe.

1.2 Justification for the Research

Bride Price custom has existed for a long time, though with gradual changes and modifications that sometimes bring its relevancy and legitimacy into question. It is a common assumption that once modernisation occurs in a society, there would be a corresponding reduction in the level of traditional practices held by the society. However, in Zimbabwe, the Bride Price custom has tended to defy this assumption and is instead is gaining more momentum. This research seeks to ascertain if changes have occurred in how and why it is practised, and also considers if any changes reflect shifts in family structures and the respective roles of married men and women.

There are few documented studies that provide reasons for the continuation of the practice or that seek to understand wider shifts in marriage patterns and gendered expectations. As such, this book is situated in a clear knowledge gap, but my decision to focus on Bride Price is also because it represents a vehicle through which changes in patterns of gender relations within family structures and more widely across society can be addressed. This, of course, involves looking at the shifting make up of families across the settings of this study as well as probing the ways in which Bride Price is observed today.

There is a lot of debate in Zimbabwe about the relevancy of Bride Price payment; women's rights activists, legal professionals, religious leaders and other members of civil society often contribute to these debates. But there is limited empirical evidence to substantiate the different claims made by the groups in the debate. This study therefore tests theory in order to generate evidence-based knowledge about the dynamics of Bride Price payment and people's perceptions about it. The knowledge produced will contribute to informing academics, human rights activists, family scholars, legislators and other policymakers on how best to debate or legislate on reform in relation to the practice.

I also chose to focus on Bride Price because it is useful and important in terms of trying to understand changes within marital and household structures and the patterns of relationships within them. If I can capture changes in the way in which Bride Price is practised, that would also be an indicator of change within gender relations. Bride Price is central to marriage and so it offers a useful focus in terms of capturing shifts in how marriage is viewed and gendered; for example, in the respective expectations placed on women and men once married. If no changes are found in either or both Bride Price practices and gender relations, this would also highlight how embedded the practice is and how central certain ideas about gender are. Feminist literature on Bride Price such as Walby (1990), Tong (1993) and Lundgren (1995) argue that Bride Price maintains an unequal gendered hierarchy through marriage. Women are

effectively bartered and sold at the point of marriage rendering them inferior to their husbands and vulnerable to violence and their autonomy and life opportunities are reduced. I want to explore the extent to which Bride Price still operates to instil unequal patterns of gender even after urbanisation and migration and in the context of a Westernised and global world.

1.3 Reasons for My Interest in this Area of Research

I recognise at the outset that the issue of Bride Price is not straightforward and that it is considered by many to be an important traditional cultural practice of considerable value, with a long history in various parts of Africa. However, since modernisation and globalisation have brought economic, social and cultural changes - both negative and positive - the need to reassess the practice in terms of these changes in the 'modern' age has been widely suggested to be necessary. Whilst acknowledging the historical significance and benefits of Bride Price to family and community integrity, conducting this enquiry in contemporary times is considered to be important, timely and highly relevant (Dery, 2015).

My interests lie in understanding individual experiences and the implicit meanings connected to Bride Price. I am also interested in capturing and putting on paper the viewpoints of those that are affected positively and negatively by the practice. It would have been interesting to gather the views of non-African women on Bride Price to determine the discourses that shape outer perceptions of the practice. However, the ambitions of my book were already great. In this respect, I sympathize with Grounded Theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) who emphasise the development of theory from empirical data in contrast to approaches which analyse data from 'a theoretical point of view'. My approach probably owes much to my cultural-anthropological background with its 'traditional' emphasis on ethnographic detail and reluctance to generalise as there may always be a counter-example in empirical reality. This has been pointed out by, amongst others, anthropologists such as Fishburne Collier and Yanagisako (1987) and post-colonial thinkers like Oyewùmí (2002, 1997).

I was conscious throughout, nevertheless, of the historical importance of Bride Price and of the significance of upholding African cultural beliefs in the contemporary era. It is particularly appreciated that 'cultural' rituals are not frequently universally advantageous or detrimental and that it is the changing nature of 'culture' that results in its prolonged existence (Dery, 2015). I therefore explored the link between culture and Bride Price by considering the adverse and the valuable features of it as experienced by my participants.

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