The commercialisation of lobola in contemporary Zimbabwe: A double-edged sword for women

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Bride wealth – or lobola – has undergone a radical transformation in Zimbabwe. This article looks at how the lobola payment has changed from a simple cultural practice into a highly commercialised venture – and how this has affected women, both positively and negatively. Many studies have been done in Zimbabwe on lobola but they have mainly focused on how this practice is conducted and the cultural significance attached to it (Chigwedere, 1982 and Bourdillon, 1976 & 1998). For example, the work of Mvududu (2002), Kambarami (2006), and Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) focused on the effects of lobola in general without exploring its effects in its contemporary commercialised form. Yet, it is clear that lobola has assumed some new characteristics over recent years that need to be analysed to appreciate how the practice affects women today.

It is against this background that I did a study to capture the voices of both women and men on this issue in Zimbabwe. Efforts were made to qualitatively elaborate the extent to which lobola has been commercialised in the negotiation/bargaining process – and how women have been commodified by the commercialisation of lobola.

Conceptualising the ‘Commercialisation of Lobola’

The phrase ‘commercialisation of lobola’ is herein used to refer to a system where the payment of lobola has been transformed from being a mere cultural practice to a business venture, where the bride has a clear monetary value attached to her. It also depicts a situation where, because of the monetary value attached to the bride, payment negotiations are characterised by intense bargaining leading to the payment of a high fee – and is almost equivalent to the...
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selling of a commodity on the open market. However, while lobola has been commercialised, it does still retain its cultural significance to some extent – namely the art of joining two families together and appreciating the important role played by the in-laws in bringing up the bride (Chigwedere, 1982 and Bourdillon, 1976).

While Bourdillon (1976) argues that lobola became commercialised in the colonial era, it is clear that the colonial era only set this process in motion and did not see it become fully-fledged. Indeed, it was changes during Zimbabwe’s serious economic melt-down (from around the year 2000 to 2008) and the ensuing multi-currency era (from the year 2008 to date) that really saw an acceleration in the commercialisation of lobola.

Understanding the concept

Lobola or roora is a traditional custom that has endured for centuries (Chireshe and Chireshe, 2010, 3). As postulated by Stoneman and Cliffe (1989), nearly all traditional marriages in Zimbabwe were – and still are – expected to involve this ritual. According to Bourdillon (1976, 1998), as is the case in many African societies, the normative marriage customs of Shona-speaking peoples are characterised by the negotiation and payment of lobola. In Shona society, the payment of lobola – the main part of which is called roora – is the basis of marriage and family obligations. There is general consensus on what lobola entails in Zimbabwe and in other African countries. Chigwedere (1982) posits that lobola, which is sometimes referred to as bride wealth, is a form of marriage payment in which the bride’s family receives payment of goods, money, or livestock to compensate for the loss of a woman’s labour and the children she bears into her husband’s family. According to Mvududu (2002), lobola can be referred to as the institution through which a man pays some property for the right or privilege to marry a woman. Radcliffe-Brown (1934) views the same phenomenon of bride wealth as an indemnity or compensation given by the bridegroom to the bride’s kin for the ‘loss’ of their daughter.

These definitions have one implicit thing in common. While none of them directly refer to the payment of lobola as the purchasing of the bride, it is implied and therefore points to the idea that women are, through the payment of lobola, commodified. It is highlighted that early colonial interpretations of lobola in Zimbabwe were linked to the sale of daughters for cattle (Ansell 2001, 3). However, it is noteworthy that the purchase of women is not akin to that of other market commodities in the sense that the initial owners of the commodity – the bride’s family – still have a say in how their daughter is treated by their in-law, and can in times of serious marital turbulence intervene and make decisions. In the commodity market, the seller of a product instantly loses control over the product the moment that it has been fully paid for.

Views on lobola

This study involved interviews with 50 female and 10 male respondents in one of the high density suburbs of Harare to gather information on how women have been affected by the commercialisation of lobola. I also conducted focus group discussions to enrich the data elicited from face-to-face interviews. It became clear from the study that lobola has lost its traditional, cultural meaning of uniting two families and has become a money-making endeavour – and that lobola has both positive and negative impacts on women.

Some women argued that they are happy with the idea of lobola because it confers a certain status on them in society and among their kin. However, others are not happy with current situation, arguing that the commercialisation of lobola has resulted in many family problems such as domestic violence. Essentially, the study showed that the payment of lobola goes together with both explicit and implicit obligations. Failing – or merely the perception of failing – to meet these obligations may result in serious problems. Indeed, most women complained that their husbands abuse them out of bitterness for the huge amounts of money that they paid to their in-laws for lobola.

Conjugal rights are central in all marriages. My interviewees concurred that men’s understanding is that conjugal rights are purchased through the payment of lobola and as such, they should not be denied them at any point. However, women feel that sexual rights should be negotiated and not controlled by one person. But some men insist that they have paid large sums of lobola and that this gives them the right...
to take all decisions to do with sex – even to the extent of forcing their wives to have sex when they are not willing. These findings reinforce Bergen’s (1999, 4) postulation that men “are often portrayed as jealous, domineering individuals who feel a sense of entitlement to have sex with their ‘property’.”

The situation is made worse by the fact that women still find it extremely difficult to report cases of marital rape, even though the act was finally criminalised in Zimbabwe in 2002 through the Sexual Offences Act. Bergen (1999) and the African Population Research and Health Center (2010, 1) found out that ‘marital rape is one of the under-reported violent crimes because it is socially tolerated’. Women feel that this is not only a betrayal to the husband, but also a disgrace for her family. In addition, women admit that it is harder to press charges when the husband has paid a large sum of money to their family as lobola.

Married men’s control over sex does not only infringe women’s rights, it also exposes them to HIV infection. Some married women find it very hard to negotiate safe sex since their husbands simply say ‘Dzakaenda dzakapfeka macondome here?’ (Did the cattle we paid go with condoms on?).

In addition, men who have paid lobola sometimes resort to violence to ‘discipline’ their wives since they believe that the payment of lobola gives them a license to abuse their wives, who they consider to be part of their property. This situation has been worsened by the commercialisation of lobola. Gustafsson and Worku (2006, 5) noted that the payment of lobola is ‘as if the husband buys his wife’.

While discussing lobola, it is critical to note the major role played by aunts/tetes in arranging marriages and in the lead up to the payment of lobola. And the tetes continue to intervene after the marriage to resolve conflicts. The tetes ensure that marriages are safeguarded at all costs, even if it sometimes means sacrificing the rights of the women. Where lobola has been paid, it is very difficult to get a divorce because the matrikin will always prod the woman to endure. One respondent indicated that it is very common to hear the tetes saying “Chingotsungirira mwana wehanzvadzi yangu, yeuka kuti murume wako akabvisa pfuma. Kana ukumuramba tinoivanepi mari yekumudzorera?” (You just have to endure my niece, remember your husband paid lobola. If you divorce him, where will we get money to reimburse him his lobola?).

The study also found that charging of exorbitant lobola fees can result in enmity between two families. A very bitter lady who participated in the study said that her husband normally speaks harshly every time they have an argument. She said that her husband says, “Vabereki vako vakandidhurisira ende vakatopfuma neni.” (Your parents overcharged me and they are now rich because of me). The traditional purpose of lobola – to bring two families together as postulated by Bourdillon (1976, 40–49) – is therefore sacrificed for the love of money. In contemporary Zimbabwe, some bitter husbands no longer treat their in-laws with respect as in the past since their relationship has been poisoned by the commercialised nature of the lobola process.

However, some women said that they are happy with the current situation despite the many alleged side-effects of the commercialisation of lobola. As noted by Nyambedha (2004) and Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen (2003) the payment of lobola guarantees women and their children the right to resources within the kin group, and a place within the kinship structure. Married women also told me that lobola gives them status because ‘if a large sum of money is paid for you, it shows that you have value’. Most women interviewed said that if the woman is loved and has value then ‘real’ money has to be paid. They argued that the payment of a higher fee can denote true love. An example was given of a police officer who earns approximately US$200 per month, but managed to pay US$2500 cash. It was agreed that this kind of commitment bestows value on the woman who is being paid for. One woman claimed that, “if he loves you, he should pay a meaningful sum for you.” Others reasoned that “Kana uchibva kuvanhu unofanira kuva munhu anokosha. Kubhadharirwa mari shoma kushandiswa.” (If you are a person with a cultured family background, then you ought to be of great value. You are being used if nothing meaningful is paid for you.) These results concur with the sentiments shared by Thorpe (1997) and Chireshe and Chiresha (2010), who argued that the majority of people believe that the payment of lobola reflects that the groom and his family are committed to the marriage. Bourdillon (1976, 50) in his study among the Shona peoples found that the payment of a high bride-price conferred a higher status on the bride and reflected the value the husband places on the marriage.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

It is clear from the research findings that women have mixed feelings about not just the concept of lobola, but also the amount that is being paid these days. While some women noted that a large sum of money paid indicates true love for the wife and commitment to the marriage, they were put off by the negative effects. It is against this background that I suggest that lobola should be regularised so that it ceases to be a millstone around women’s necks. Men, who play a central role in the lobola negotiation process, should also be urged not to turn lobola into a money-making project for this has far-reaching implications for women and for marriages. The state should also be implored, in its protracted efforts to curb domestic violence, marital rape and other social ills, to consider re-educating society on the dangers of allowing exorbitant amounts of money to be paid as lobola in marriages.
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