The Negative Consequences of Dowry Payment on Women and Society

REV. DR. EMILY ONYANGO

In May 2015, CBE president and Priscilla Papers publisher Mimi Haddad traveled to Kenya to work beside one of CBE’s closest partners—Ekklesia Foundation for Gender Education (EFOGE). One of her reasons for going was to participate in a public lecture on dowry, offered by EFOGE in partnership with The Anglican Diocese of Bondo and Bishop Okullu College of Theology. Two of the several lectures given at that event have been adapted for this issue of Priscilla Papers and appear below.

Dowry, or bride-wealth payment, is a widespread practice in many African societies. In traditional African societies bride-wealth had some positive aspects but mostly negative consequences, for it stands at the foundation of patriarchy. In traditional African societies, bride-wealth was related to goods and services that a bridgroom and his kinsmen transferred to the family of the bride. Traditionally, this transfer involved the delivery of livestock by a suitor to the father or family of his prospective bride.

The negative consequence of bride-wealth is clearly seen in the debate on terminology. The term “bride-price” has the connotation of a purchase or financial transaction. Though it is always claimed that what we actually have is bride-wealth, in present day society it is more like a financial transaction. Bride-wealth has been highly commercialized, leading to many negative consequences such as women treated as property, the idea of daughters as investment, come-we-stay marriages, forced marriages, enslavement, family conflict, inferiority and dehumanization, and gender-based violence. Each of these several categories will be described briefly below.

Women as Property

Commercialization of bride-wealth started with the introduction of the cash economy. Bride-wealth is paid to individuals in cash, as opposed to livestock. Cash is a symbol of sale, so women are seen as articles of sale. This leads women to be seen as property and chattel. Parents put a price on their daughters; in many communities the standard payment apart from cash is a grade cow, water tanks, or other unofficial payments. The payment becomes even higher if the bride is educated. When women are treated as property, they have no dignity. Such treatment as property is clearly seen in the way the transaction meeting is held, with haggling and bargaining, but without the input of the women.

Daughters as Investment

Parents see their daughters as a means of getting rich. Most of the people groups, for example the Nandi, value their cows more than their wives and daughters. They only value the daughters because they will eventually get cows from their suitors. John Mbuthia argues that Africans view their daughters as an investment whose dividends can be gleaned periodically. A daughter is like a bank account, and it seems only right to many that her father should be able to draw from her from time to time. The craving for bride-wealth money by parents, especially in Kenya’s Central Province, leads women to form groups through which they pay their bride-wealth if the men cannot pay. This group even includes single women who have children, and their main argument is that if they have to receive bride-wealth for their children, they have to ensure their own bride-wealth is paid.

Come-We-Stay Marriages

Commercialization of bride-wealth leads to eloping or what are referred to as come-we-stay marriages. Many young people cannot afford the hefty bride-wealth, so they neither inform their parents nor have their marriages blessed in churches. Many marriages also begin on a shaky financial foundation because the couple might be forced to take a loan to pay bride-wealth to parents. Thus, even as they begin their married lives they are servicing the loan. In many instances, the girls have to help the men by contributing to funds for the bride-wealth, and hence the practice has lost its original meaning. In some instances, the man borrow the money but expect the women to pay when they become married.

Forced Marriages

Many parents are more interested in bride-wealth than in the welfare of their daughters. They are happy to marry their children off to rich men, even if the children are under age or have not completed school. This is especially common among pastoralist communities such as the Maasai. Other communities, however, also practice forced marriage. For example, in instances where a family has boys who need to go to school, they may marry off their daughters to gain money to pay bride-wealth. This means that parents will not give the girls education, but marry them off instead. Orphans are almost always forced into marriage by their uncles or other relatives so that money can be found to educate boys. In most African communities, marriage cannot be nullified even if the woman is undergoing problems, for if a marriage has to be nullified the bride-wealth has to be paid back. Women therefore stay in abusive marriages because the parents cannot pay back the bride-wealth. The idea of bride-wealth is based on traditional practices such as those among the Luo tribe, taking bride-wealth in advance from your friend with the promise that you will give them your daughter.

There was also the practice of bride-pawning among the Kambas, Nandi, and Kisii. This means that when the
community was experiencing starvation, they could give their daughters to the neighboring community in exchange for grain, with the view that, if the situation improved, the girls would be redeemed. However, this redemption never happened, and in some communities, such as the Kisii, the head of the family into which the girl was pawned could even have a sexual relationship with her!

Enslavement of Women

In Africa, bride-wealth has always been paid in exchange for a woman’s productive and reproductive labor. The woman is seen as a source of labor for the family and also a machine for giving birth. As a result, if the woman does not give birth, the man can demand his bride-wealth to be repaid or mistreat her. By paying bride-wealth, men have legal rights over the ownership of children. As Ugandan poet Okot p’Bitek says, an African woman is a slave or a beast of burden. The woman is expected to work hard and pay back the bride-wealth.

Family Conflict

Most dowry marriages are founded on bitterness and suspicion, which leads to conflict. This is mainly due to the unreasonable demands of parents before the marriage. These demands lead to the loss of respect and, in some instances, the couple pays the money requested and then breaks any relationship with the bride’s family. Men who do not pay bride-wealth do not have legal rights over their children and their wives. A recent case in point is when a man was denied the right to bury his wife and the children were taken away from him. The man had struggled with the wife who was suffering from breast cancer. He had been drained both financially and emotionally, and when the wife died, the family then wanted to discuss bride-wealth.

Inferiority and Dehumanization

Since men pay bride-wealth, there is a notion that the girl has been bought. This gives women an inferior position; they cannot be equal with the buyer. This is dehumanizing because whatever little the men pay is not equal to the value of a human being. The whole of the man’s family has a notion that they are participants in the purchase. The man’s sisters have a notion that the bride-wealth was used to purchase the brother’s wife, hence they have a stake in controlling her. In fact, in Luo culture the wife always refers to her husband’s sister as a partner in her late husband’s community. In most instances, these marriages are dehumanizing, and the widow is exploited.

Gender-Based Violence

As objects and possessions, women are abused both physically and psychologically. The language used by most men is that they are disciplining their wives. Wife beating or battering is rampant, and most people accept this as normal. Even professional women are beaten by their spouses. Bride-wealth is also seen as paying for the productive and reproductive labor of women. This implies that, when the woman becomes married, she has to add several hours of work to her day, hence as p’Bitek says in his epic poem, Song of Lawino, an African woman becomes a beast of burden. Secondly, through bride-wealth a man is seen as having paid for the reproductive labor, hence her sexuality itself is bought. In many instances a woman is viewed as a sex object. First, a woman’s major role is to give birth to and take care of babies, especially boys. If a woman does not give birth to boys, she is beaten and insulted. Secondly, the man controls her sexuality and demands sexual satisfaction, whatever the situation. A woman does not have control over her sexuality. As an example, people claim that there is no such thing as rape in marriage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the payment of bride-wealth in Africa, which leads to the inferiority and mistreatment of women, is not in line with biblical teaching on equality between men and women. Secondly, it is against the Christian view of marriage as partnership and a bond of love between two people. In the Bible, marriage is compared to the relationship between Christ and the church. Christ comes to challenge negative aspects of culture which enslave people; hence Christians in the modern world should rethink the practice of bride-wealth.

Notes

2. Local Native Councils Meeting, 1927.

REV. DR. EMILY ONYANGO is a priest in the Anglican Church of Kenya and serves as senior lecturer and dean of students at St. Paul’s University in Limuru, Kenya. She has earned a PhD from the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia, as well as a ThM from the Asian Center for Theological Studies and Mission in Seoul, South Korea, and a BD from St. Paul’s University in Limuru.