

BRIDEWEALTH AND DOWRY IN AFRICA AND EURASIA

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Both bridewealth and dowry involve the transmission of property at marriage. Whatever 'symbolic' aspects mark these transfers, they also have their economic functions, not primarily as intermediaries in a purchase, but as ways of redistributing property. Hence they must always be seen in the context of the wider movement of property and its exploitation for productive and other social purposes. Viewed in this way, these differences in marriage transaction have to be linked with other aspects of social organisation, particularly the economy.

There are three aspects of the institutions of bridewealth and dowry which I want to discuss, namely, their correlations, distribution and classification; all three are inextricably involved and logically one ought to begin with the last.

The categories used by most writers (and which turn up in the *Ethnographic Atlas*) are the following: bridewealth, dowry, bride-service, gift exchange, token payments, sister exchange and absence of gifts. We may put in crude diagrammatical form what is often assumed to be the relationship between these major forms of marriage transaction as follows:

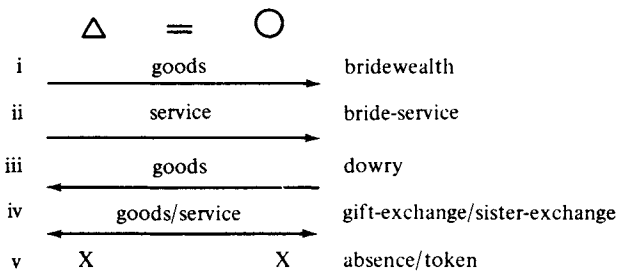


Fig. 1. Marriage transactions

A little thought suggests that this scheme, and particularly the 'opposition' between dowry and bridewealth, is quite misleading. The first discrimination to make has to do with dowry, rather than bridewealth, for there are circumstances in which the two are confused.

Dowry can be seen as a type of pre-mortem inheritance to the bride, bride-wealth as a transaction between the kin of the groom and the kin of the bride.[1]

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But in a good number of societies in Europe and Asia, the marriage prestations are made by the groom or his kin, and are consequently often classified as bride-wealth (or brideprice). But the ultimate recipient of these gifts is the bride and not her kin. It is true that the gifts from the groom sometimes go first to the girl's father, who may indeed take a cut (in this respect there is a continuum); but the bulk goes to the bride herself and thus forms part of a joint (or sometimes separate) conjugal fund rather than a circulating societal one. Rather than employ the misleading term bride-wealth (or brideprice), which has been used for example to translate the Sanskritic word *asura*, I would refer to such transactions as 'indirect dowry'. Mayne refers to *asura* as 'marriage by purchase'; it is difficult to reconstruct the institutions that existed alongside the laws of Manu, but clearly part of the transaction went to the bride herself (1892: 80 ff.) and so was more nearly akin to dowry.

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Even if we confine our discussion to the passage of goods or services from the kin of the bride to the kin of the groom, there are many significant differences among these prestations; the term bride-wealth has been used to cover a set of transactions each of which has very different implications for social structure. However, this range of institutional variation and its economic implications have been obscured by a loose application of so-called exchange theory to marriage. That marriage in simple societies involves an 'exchange' is a somewhat vague notion that has often confused the analysis of social systems. The extreme case is the exchange of 'sisters', formerly practised in parts of Australia and Africa.[2] Here the term has the precise dictionary meaning of 'to be received as an equivalent for', 'to give and receive reciprocally'. From quite a different standpoint the virtually universal incest prohibition means that marriage systems necessarily involve 'exchanging' siblings for spouses, giving rise to a reciprocity that is purely notional. But in most societies marriage is mediated by a set of intermediary transactions. If we see these transactions as simply implying immediate or long-term reciprocity, then the analysis is likely to be blurred. If we assume immediate reciprocity,[3] whether with regard to women or property, then the two sides of the equation have to balance by definition: assumptions about the 'value' system follow from assumptions about the nature of the exchange. The tautology is even more apparent in systems of generalized exchange, where the reciprocity is notional. The analysis is further limited if one regards the passage of property simply as a symbol of the transfer of rights, for then the nature of the objects handed over (the *traditio*) is of little importance. What matters is that some object has been publicly transferred in order to establish the woman as a wife and the man as a husband. Neither of these approaches are wrong; both are inadequate. For they tend to lead to a neglect of the differences within those payments described as bride-wealth (or indeed dowry,

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though here the problem is somewhat different), and consequently to a neglect of the relationship of these differences to the rest of the social system, in particular the economy. I refer not only to the problem of the indirect dowry, which accounts for much so-called bridewealth (or brideprice) in Eurasia. In addition, there are important distinctions to be made in terms of the size of the payments, their material content, the personnel involved in the giving and receiving and the use made of the objects received. We also need to consider three other factors, whether the payments are returnable at death or divorce, whether they are fixed or variable, and when they are payable.

I can put the point in more concrete terms by comparing the 'marriage payments' among the LoWiili and the Gonja of northern Ghana. The Gonja payment consists of a minimal amount of 12 shillings and 12 kola; it is small by any standards, though it is supplemented by courting and greeting gifts to the future bride and to her parents; and nowadays the expenses of the wedding itself have increased considerably. Among the LoWiili, the transactions flow in the same direction; there is a small payment of 350 cowries which is said to be all that is needed to 'legalize' the union. In addition payments amounting to some 3 cows, 1 goat and 20,000 cowrie shells should be made during the lifetime of the marriage, the last of these at the time the bride joins her husband. If they are not forthcoming at the right time, the bride's father (or his kin) will try to persuade her to return home until the husband meets his obligations.[4] Among the Gonja the transactions are non-returnable in the case of divorce; among the Lowiili, all are returnable.

There are two sorts of implications that arise from these differences. One has to do with the kind of rights in the bride that are acquired by the transfer; 'marriage' is not an undifferentiated concept and these rights are distinctly variable. The other concerns the relationship between the bride or groom and those who provide or receive the payments. The accumulation of property required for the transactions may well delay the marriage of the individual on whose behalf they are made. Such may be the case whether the transactions are part of the process of devolution (as with dowry) or part of the reciprocal process of bridewealth whereby the receipts for women are paid out on behalf of men.

Size of payments

Let me deal first with the question of the size of payments related to rights. In Africa, the relative size of payment is in a general sense linked with the quantum of rights transferred. In systems of matrilineal descent groups, where rights in a woman's procreative powers remain in the hands of her natal lineage, the amounts are comparatively less than in other societies.[5] Indeed the actors themselves recognize the connection between a substantial bridewealth and agnatic descent; 'one constantly hears the comment in Nyasaland that "with us a son doesn't inherit because we don't *loola* (the local form of *lobola*) our wives"'. As Mair points out

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these statements do not mean that those who abandon high bridewealth necessarily abandon paternal filiation (1953: 73), but such a change does seem to be associated with a modification (or a difference) in the organization of kin groups. Indeed, H. Schneider sees social organization in East Africa as having been influenced in the opposite direction by the increasing accumulation of bridewealth. The number of societies in which there are matrilineal descent groups and a bridewealth consisting of livestock is 'statistically quite insignificant' (1970: 145). On the other hand, with the appearance of such a bridewealth, we find the levirate, virilocal marriage, important patrilineages and the disappearance of bride-service. 'Ultimately marriage becomes almost undissolvable' when we reach a figure of twenty head of cattle or their livestock equivalent. The Turu of Tanzania have travelled along this road, further than the Iramba and Mbugwe but not as far as the Gogo. 'That some significant long-term shifts are or were occurring in these societies is apparent. Central to the change was the tendency to accumulate livestock. It may even be that the growth of segmentary societies based on livestock is one of two major directions towards change in traditional Africa, the other occurring among relatively poor people without livestock – being a move in the direction of states' (1970: 146).

It should also be added that with matrilineal descent groups the payments are not always low. Among the LoDagaa the opposite appeared to be the case; the greater the emphasis on matrilineal groups, the higher the payment (Goody 1970b: 451). In this context the insistence on high payments seemed to be related to a reluctance to allow women to marry out (into the groups giving less emphasis to matriliney) and a reluctance to allow women to leave the natal home. In other words, it was a payment to discourage bride-removal; or to put it another way, to encourage initial farm-service on the part of the husband. Women are used as bait to attract the economic services of men.[6]

In bilateral societies in Africa, the payments also seem to be low.[7] This is certainly true of the Lozi of Zambia, and in West Africa low payments are associated with a certain type of centralized state, of which Gonja is one. Although this group of states, which includes the Hausa and the Mossi, emphasizes paternal succession to office and has dynasties based upon the agnatic line, the organization of descent groups is very different not only from acephalous 'tribes' like the Tallensi and the Nuer but also from centralized states like the Zulu and Ashanti. Some of these states have been influenced by Islam and hence tend towards the dowry rather than bridewealth (e.g. Hausa and Nupe). In addition the wedding itself may involve some further expense. Weddings are also associated with the Islamic tradition; indeed these *rites de passage* tend to receive more ceremonial elaboration in dowry systems than elsewhere, for they celebrate the establishment of a conjugal fund.[8] In Nigeria the amounts involved are increasing under modern conditions and have become a substantial factor in the groom's calculations. But although the amounts have increased, the payments are of very different character from the bridewealth of East and South Africa.

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Use

I refer here to the use and destination of the transactions. Money spent on wedding expenses, like money indirectly contributed by the groom to the endowment of the bride, serves different ends from the circulating pool of resources we speak of as bridewealth. Bridewealth is not to be consumed in the course of the celebrations, nor is it handed to the wife; it goes to the bride's male kin (typically brothers) in order that they can themselves take a wife. Indeed it involves a kind of rationing system. What goes out for a bride has to come in for a sister. If the payments are small, the egalitarian distribution of spouses could be disturbed.[9] As Wagner remarks of the Luhya, the transfer of marriage cattle primarily serves as a regulator of marriages and not as a means of increasing the father's wealth.[10] To achieve this end an important aim is not to let the amount received fall below the effective rate. Of the Gusii, Mayer remarks, 'Every father fears being left in the lurch by finding that the bridewealth which he has accepted for his daughter will not suffice to get him a daughter-in-law; therefore he is always on the look out for any signs of a rise in the rate, and tends to raise his demands whenever he hears of other fathers doing so. This means in general terms, that *individual* cases of over-payment produce a *general* rise in the rate all round' (1950: 19).

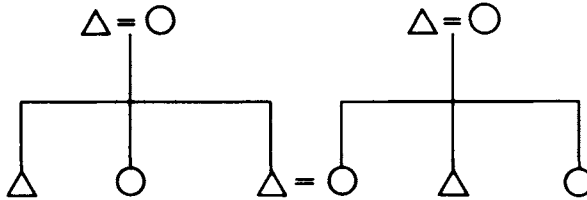
Clearly the balancing can best be achieved if the items have little exchange value outside marriage transactions. Such is the case with cattle in the savannah areas of Africa. Of the Lobedu, Krige writes that: 'cattle coming in as bride-price are not supposed to be used for any other purpose than marriage for, unlike the Zulu who kept large herds, constantly replenished in the old days by raids against neighbours, most Lobedu families do not possess cattle except for short periods of time' (1964: 160). In pastoral societies, such as the Zulu, livestock have of course a critical part to play in subsistence and are but rarely exchanged for other items of value (no more than is land in many agricultural societies in Africa). In farming economies, they are usually stores of wealth. While lesser objects can be exchanged into cattle (usually among kin), it is more difficult to change out, except through sacrifice. If cattle transactions are largely confined to marriage, then the dependence of the groom on a similar transaction is overwhelming. This is so even if the payments are freely exchangeable (like cowries, hoes or iron bars) but large in terms of the individual's capacity to accumulate, an index of which is their size relative to the average yearly income per head. In this case a man is again highly dependent upon 'sisters' for bringing the wealth and 'fathers' for distributing it. The effect is to reinforce the authority of the father and emphasize the tie with the sister.

The role of the father is clear. The authority of the older generation is linked to the extent to which the young are dependent on them for marriage cattle or the equivalent. The dependence will extend in some measure to all contributing kinsfolk, which may include maternal as well as paternal kin.[11]

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The givers and receivers

This point concerning the range of contributors raises another difficulty about the assumptions behind the diagrammatical representation of marriage transactions given in Fig. 1. It turns out to have the same sort of failings as many 'models' (read 'diagrams') of cross-cousin marriage (XCM); it lets one man or woman stand for the sibling group, or, worse still, for the entire kin group. If we increase the number of roles laid out in the model (the failure to do which is a defect of much discussion about the mother's brother), we see where the problems arise.



A few more roles are now included, but even this increase would be insufficient to permit a proper examination of bridewealth transactions in some African societies; for the Nuer, we would clearly have to introduce many more roles in the same and senior generation to ego, both inside and outside the patrilineal descent groups of the bride and groom. Indeed for some societies it has been argued that marriage sets up certain kinds of debt which can only be repaid at the next generation, by means of a return of spouses (XCM), or by remitting a proportion of the bridewealth received for the daughters of the marriage, or possibly by the sister's son's seizure of the property of his mother's brother (see M. Harris 1968), though in this latter case the compensation would appear to be travelling in the wrong, or anyhow the reverse, direction. In all these cases we have to include further roles and further elements of the network of transactions, if we are to understand the pattern of marriage prestations.

In sum, transactions in the same direction may be destined for different social persons. In Africa, bridewealth does not go to the bride, but to her kin; we recognize this when, rightly or wrongly, we speak of terms of compensation or recompense (Radcliffe-Brown 1950: 50), or even bride-price; it is wealth for, not to, the bride. On the other hand, dowry, in the usual sense, does not go to her kin, but to the bride herself, sometimes to the husband (at least for safekeeping) or even to both spouses jointly. Bridewealth and dowry then are very far from being mirror opposites. Indeed, the mirror opposite of bridewealth would be groomwealth; and of bride-service, groom-service. But there is little to be put in these two boxes by way of actual cases, except perhaps the payments for the 'borrowed man' of the Menangkabau of Sumatra (or, from one point of view, the *urugubu* of the Trobriands of Melanesia).

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However, it is also necessary to remember that in Africa the payment was usually the responsibility of much more immediate kin; of the Hehe, Brown (1932) writes that in practice a man did not look for assistance to relatives more distant than his father and his mother's brother, and the same can be said of the majority of African peoples; the range of contributors and recipients is characteristically narrow, usually limited to members of the unit of production (the farming or herding group) but often to the unit of consumption, the children of one mother. This unit, whose existence is dependent upon polygyny (at least in its serial form), is of central importance in the fission of domestic groups (Fortes 1949; Goody 1973a) and in the establishment of new productive units, as well as in the more subtle solidarities of human life; and it also forms the focus for the distribution of male property under what Gluckman has called the 'house-property complex'. [12] In many cases the same group serves as the focus for the allocation of bridewealth between males and females. That is to say, the sister's bridewealth is used for the brother's wife. But even outside the group of uterine siblings, the mutual dependence on bridewealth may lead to the institution of 'cattle-linked siblings', as practised by the Lobedu, where the continuing debt of the brother to the sister allows her to claim his daughter as a bride for her son (MBD marriage). In this case prescriptive matrilineal cross-cousin marriage is to be seen as a continuation of the relationship between siblings at the succeeding generation rather than as an aspect of the affinal relationship between lineages. [13] Here it is clearly associated with the type of bridewealth payment and the cattle-linked sibling. The ideal is for every man to marry a daughter of the actual woman with whose cattle his father obtained a wife. The sister in question has the right to demand a son of her brother to be her daughter's husband; each is said to be 'born for' the other.

If bridewealth is both high and held within a small domestic unit, how are the inequalities of childbirth evened out? For in the family lottery a balanced combination of males and females will appear in much less than 50% of the families that have children (and there are often very high proportions that do not).

It is clear that in no case is a family with an odd number of children going to be in balance. Of those families with children, over 50% will fall in this category. With regard to families that are balanced in terms of numbers, one half of all two child families will be in sexual balance and 6/16 of the four child ones. In other words, not a large proportion of families are going to display the balance desiderated by many town-dwellers in western Europe and equally by those requiring a balance for the purpose of bridewealth or sister-exchange. [14] What strategy does one adopt when one has daughters but no sons? One answer is that in polygynous societies, a man continues to hope. And in extremity a man may sometimes use the daughter's bridewealth to marry a wife in order to bear a son. [15]

The influence of marriage payments on family composition is made quite explicit in Elechi Amadi's novel, *The Concubine*. 'Wolu, Madume's only wife, bore him four daughters – a most annoying thing, despite the dowries (i.e. bridewealth) he knew he would collect when they got married. But who would bear his name

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when he died? The thought of his elder brother's sons inheriting his houses and lands filled him with dismay. But there was enough time to marry another wife and the problem did not bother him unduly. Moreover, his daughters' marriages would provide him with the money for another wife'. Here we have illustrated an inheritance system that excludes close women in favour of distant males, which as we shall see, is connected with the payment of bridewealth. On the other hand, the position of women under such a system is in some ways better than under one of dowry; for the disabilities of daughters in terms of the patrilineal transmission of property and office are mitigated by what they bring to the family at their marriage. Their bridewealth can be used to obtain a wife for a brother, and in some societies even their father can employ that property to marry himself another wife, as in Madume's case. Such a strategy is based upon polygyny, and the example illustrates clearly the situation in which a man may seek another wife in order to supplement his holding of children. As a result of polygyny, the problem of imbalance is always a temporary one for any male. Nevertheless the present composition of the family (the existential family) must bear upon people's decisions about marriage. The second of two brothers may have to delay his marriage while waiting for bridewealth cattle. This delay may make him more likely to enter into a 'consensual' or 'alternative' union, where these exist; or in more recent times, it may make him more likely to leave as a migrant labourer. In other words the lack of a bridewealth payment could lead to similar kinds of action to those found under Eurasian conditions and dictated by the shortage of land, that is, the second son entering into a fili-centric union or leaving the countryside to swell the growing population of the towns.[16] Equally the father of several daughters, while traditionally in Africa he would have found difficulty in utilizing his assets to hire labour, could use them to help pay for farming parties; alternatively he can afford to be generous towards a kinsman who wished to marry his daughter, e.g. in a mother's brother's daughter marriage, and who might possibly come to live with him. The surplus of wealth is not difficult to deal with; it helps compensate a couple for the deficit in males who would have provided some insurance in old age. The surplus of sons is less easy. Here, a man may have to borrow bridewealth from near agnates more fortunately placed. He may secure such a loan by mortgaging the bridewealth of his future daughters, as when a Lobedu who had no sister would go to a maternal or affinal relative, or to a friend or even a stranger who had cattle, saying '*Ge no khuru* – I have a knee', in reference to his procreative powers, thus pledging himself to send an as yet unborn daughter in marriage (Krige 1964: 162). Or he may have to save out of current earnings, which means increasing production or lowering consumption. There is rarely any difficulty in Africa, even today in many places, in finding extra land to bring under cultivation. With a stable population the surplus of sons may itself lead to a redistribution of existing land within the lineage, the additional sons in one family being balanced by a deficit in others. But one could also proceed by cutting down expenditure, especially on sacrifices. An alternative at the present day is for

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a man to engage in wage labour in order to acquire the necessary capital; just as women in an urban situation may acquire capital through selling sex in order to free themselves from the marriage bond.[17]

But the relationship between high bridewealth and labour migration goes beyond the problem of the disadvantaged son. In Northern Ghana it is peoples with a high bridewealth payment that have the highest rates of labour migration (Table 1).[18] Among the Konkomba, wealth gained in wage labour is used for marriage payments (Tait 1961: 31). But the Konkomba are a particular case, having mortgaged their own women by a tight system of infant betrothal for girls; if they want to marry young, they have to import wives from outside.

This propensity of bridewealth systems to lead to male migration into the towns has an interesting corollary in dowry systems. Where considerations of status and honour dictate that a woman has to acquire a certain measure of property before she can get married, the opposite kind of migration may result. In many parts of Europe, young women moved into the households of other people in order to become domestic servants until the time for their marriage came along. Once

Table 1. Marriage transactions and migration in Northern Ghana (from 1960 census)

<i>People</i>	<i>Total pop. in Ghana</i>	<i>Enumerated in non-natal regions</i>	<i>% Migrants</i>	<i>Marriage payments</i>
<i>A. Acephalous</i>				
Konkomba	110,150	13,860	13	High(7)
Frafra(1)	242,880	26,580	11	High
Kusasi	121,610	13,870	11	High
Builsa	62,620	7,260	12	High
Kasena(2)	78,210	16,860	21	High
LoDagaa(3)	239,230	30,460	13	High
<i>B. Centralized</i>				
Gonja	62,700	4,880	8.0	Low
Dagomba	217,640	23,960	11.0(5)	Low
Mamprusi	58,710	3,300	6.0	Low
Wala	47,200	5,850	12.0(6)	Low
Vagala(4)	2,230	20	0.9	Low
Degha(4)	8,830	390	4.5	Low

(1) Includes Tallensi, Nankanse, Namnam.

(2) Includes Isala, Awuna.

(3) Includes LoWiili, LoBirifor, LoDagaba, Dagaba.

(4) Commoner groups within centralized states.

(5) Of the 'Dagomba' population, nearly half live in the towns of Yendi and Tamale (including Tamale rural).

(6) The bulk from Wa town.

(7) Marriage was sometimes by exchange, though more usually by child betrothal.

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again girls from households with surplus females were likely to move into households with a corresponding deficit; servants, Berkner has argued, were to some extent children substitutes (1972). But women also moved into towns, in order to accumulate property for their dowry. In this connection, the intriguing suggestion has been made that the late marriage age of European women, combined with the necessity of accumulating property for their marriage, may have been a significant factor in both the supply and the demand for goods in the early stages of industrialization in western Europe (Hajnal 1965).[19]

The balancing out has an interesting link with the age of marriage. It has been argued that dowry delays marriage. When the daughter takes her portion, the familial enterprise has to be partly dismembered, whereas the marriage of men affects the fund in a similar way only if the property has to be handed on to the next generation at the time of the marriage.[20] Friedl describes one situation of the 'delayed daughter' in rural Greece in the following terms: 'Besides the property costs of the dowry, a farmer loses the labour of his daughter both on the farm and in the household. If he has no farming son who can bring in a wife, or has only a young son who will not be ready to marry for several years, and a single daughter, this cost may be considered great enough to delay the marriage of the girl. If a man has one daughter left at home and a wife who is ill, this may again delay the girl's marriage, for the cost of losing her services is too great. Finally there is a psychic cost to the parents, particularly to a mother, at the marriage of a daughter. She loses the companionship of a friend, confidante, and working partner. Since, among the more prosperous farmers, girls marry increasingly late i.e. between twenty-five and thirty, mothers have many years of continuing co-operation in the house and fields with grown daughters, and the wrench of of parting is seriously felt. They commonly speak longingly of how much they miss their absent daughters' (1963: 122).

Where substantial bridewealth changes hands, the opposite effect occurs. As Mair points out, 'When cattle payments are made, the marriage of girls tends to be early for the same reason that that of men is late — that a girl's marriage increases her father's herd while that of a young man diminishes it' (1963: 56). Among the Chagga and Luhya, men chafe at the delay, girls at the speed.

Just as with dowry, there are other factors affecting age at marriage that operate in a contrary direction. In dowry systems, a man may want to confirm an advantageous match as soon as possible, and hence a girl, and possibly the boy, may be betrothed while they are still children. The Brahman rule of pre-puberty marriage has been attributed to the concern to fix the partners of the woman permanently in a hierarchy of castes (Yalman 1963); the same argument would apply to other considerations of status. In bridewealth systems, a man may be in a hurry to see his sons beget descendants, while a girl's marriage may be delayed if the mother is still bearing children. Nevertheless, there is an interesting link between economic calculation and the prevalence of plural marriage. Polygyny, which is so widespread a feature of African marriage, is made possible largely