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## **Traditions of kinship, marriage and bridewealth in southern Africa**

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In the pre-colonial period, and in most parts of Southern Africa throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, marriage, the family and the homestead were embedded in economic, political and religious institutions. The household was the hub of social life, and its layout symbolically expressed the relationships between men, women, cattle and the ancestors. Economically, bridewealth paid in cattle linked the pastoral economy of men and the garden economy of women. Politically, marriages established, sustained and restructured allegiances. The paper concludes with some reflections on the transformations that this traditional structure has undergone in the course of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** bridewealth; homestead; “house”; marriage; Southern Africa

Late in his career, Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the concept of *la maison*, the house, which he characterised as a “moral person possessing a domain” (Lévi-Strauss 1987a). The house is a physical establishment, a place, with symbolic and emotional resonances. It is the home base of an extended or complex family group. Although it faces the world as a corporate unit, the house is typically divided internally, riven by fraternal rivalries, each segment differentiated by particular marriage alliances to other houses.

A crucial feature of Lévi-Strauss’s model is that *la maison*, this “moral person,” has a *demesne*, an estate. Stephen Gudeman (2008) terms the economic domain “the base,” and he remarks that in folk models it is often referred to as “the house.” But the house is also a political presence, particularly in the upper reaches of a stratified society. The house of a king, a chief, or a noble lord may imprint its character, even its internal structure, on the broader political system.

Lévi-Strauss's conception respects the variability of folk models, but he was confident that the "house" could be identified in a great many societies. The prototypes that he referenced initially were the houses of the medieval European nobility — and those of the Kwakiutl of British Columbia. Other examples were later described (see Lamaison 1987; Macdonald 1987; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 2006; Hamberger 2010). Lévi-Strauss suggested in passing that, with some exceptions in southern Nigeria, "Africa no doubt offers no more than embryonic forms of the 'house'" (Lévi-Strauss 1984b, 192). In fact, however, Lévi-Strauss's "house" corresponds rather closely to the "homestead" of the Africanists, and there are clear anticipations of his house concept in the Africanist literature on the homestead ([for example](#) Gray and Gulliver 1964).<sup>1</sup>

But first it is necessary to clear up a terminological problem. Africanists do not use the term "house" in Lévi-Strauss's sense. In Africanist anthropology, the head of a significant homestead is traditionally represented as ideally [being](#) a polygamist. Each of his wives, with her children, establishes a separate "house" within a "homestead." The homestead and its component houses are the key operators in marriage alliances and in bridewealth exchanges.

In pre-colonial Southern Africa, and in some regions well into the twentieth century, the spatial ordering of the homestead projected ideas about the relationships between the ancestors and the living, between the homestead head and his wives, between the various wives themselves, and between men and women. Centred on a cattle byre and surrounded by gardens and grains stores, the homestead was also an economic corporation. And the homestead of a powerful man was a political hub. For those who could read the signs, the relative wealth of a homestead was apparent, and the geography of homesteads in a locality exhibited the regional hierarchy of power.

### **The Nguni and the Sotho-Tswana**

The conventional sorting of pre-colonial Southern Bantu-speaking societies into "Nguni" and "Sotho-Tswana" categories is broadly useful. I shall indicate some variations in the household structures and marriage patterns, but given constraints of space, I will have to be somewhat summary and schematic, and I will only be able to

touch upon historical changes and recent developments (for a more nuanced account see Kuper 1975, 1982; cf. Wilson 1969.)

An arc of territory in southern Africa stretching from the low-lying region of the east coast to the northern Highveld receives substantial summer rainfall (see Figure 1). This is where cereals can be farmed, and so this was where iron-working farmers and cattle herders began to establish themselves some 2000 years ago. They represented the final phase of Bantu expansion, a long-distance movement of people that colonised much of sub-Saharan Africa, pushing aside or incorporating established populations of hunter-gatherers (Kuper and van Leynseele 1978).

\*Insert Figure 1\*

Figure 1: Climate map of Southern Africa, 2011. By Ali Zifan (Enhanced, modified, and vectorized). Derived from the World Koppen Classification.svg., CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=47085453>

Distinctive features of what became the Nguni and Sotho-Tswana traditions appear in the archaeological record early in the last millennium. The ancestral Nguni were concentrated in the fertile, low-lying south-east, in what became the Ciskei, Transkei, Kwazulu-Natal and Swaziland (see Figure 2).

\*Insert Figure 2\*

Figure 2: The Distribution of the Nguni, 2013. By Htonl, based on the Census 2011 by Statistics South Africa. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28087431>.

The ancestral Sotho-Tswana were settled to the Nguni's north-west, in a more arid and elevated region that extended from present-day Lesotho to eastern Botswana (see Figure 3). In the pre-colonial period, and in some places well into the twentieth century, both traditions can be identified by their ceramics and tools, and by the distinctive layout of their settlements.

\*Insert Figure 3\*

Figure 3: The Distribution of the Sotho-Tswana, 2013. By Htonl, based on the Census 2011 by Statistics South Africa. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28087703>

### **The traditional Zulu homestead**

A pioneering analysis of the traditional Zulu homestead was published by J.F. Holleman in the early 1940s (Holleman 1940, 1941). His father, Professor F.D.

Holleman, was a member of the “Leiden School” which developed proto-structuralist accounts of Indonesian societies that Lévi-Strauss admired. Its guiding assumption was that social systems are represented in folk models, and that these models are constructed on the basis of dual oppositions. They are given symbolic form in art and architecture. Taking this approach to Zulu ethnography, Holleman claimed that “intensive research into the nature and structure of the Zulu homestead — *umuzi* — reveals a division on both social and territorial principles into two sections,” the right-hand and left-hand “sides” (Holleman 1940, 31).

\*Insert Figure 4\*

Figure 4: Traditional Nguni homestead. Date and photographer unknown.

The classical Zulu homestead formed an incomplete oval — or a horseshoe, as Holleman (1940) called it (see Figure 4). At the apex was the great house, the *indlunkulu*. This was associated with the homestead head, but it was actually occupied first by his mother and later by his great wife. The site of appeals to the ancestors and the repository of ritual objects, the *indlunkulu* represented the unity of the homestead. Below the *indlunkulu* lay the cattle byre, where the headman kept cows, calves and prized oxen.

A mature homestead would incorporate four or five main wives, each of whom occupied a “house” named for her oldest son. The wives were divided into two divisions, and their huts were arranged in two semicircles, one on either side of the great house and together encircling the cattle byre. These were termed the right-hand and left-hand “sides.” The right hand side was superior: the Zulu called it the *isibay' esikhulu* [literally, great cattle-byre]. Each side constituted a unit for purposes of inheritance. The right-hand section inherited the lion's share of the homestead head's estate but property was also allocated to each wife's house during the lifetime of the head.

The right and left sides were destined eventually to separate and move away to form new homesteads. In the case of a chiefly family, these new homesteads would each be placed at the head of a division of the tribe.

\*Insert Figure 5\*

Figure 5: Late Iron Age Rock engraving of a Zulu homestead settlement. [Tim Maggs \(1995\)](#) notes that it shows huts and granaries around a cattle byre, and that the entrance is downhill. © [\[South African Archaeological Bulletin\]](#).

### **The classical homestead structure**

In 1980, I published a comparative analysis of the lay-out of the southern Bantu homestead, paying particular attention to its symbolic dimensions. My data came from a large number of ethnographic reports and maps produced mainly since the mid-nineteenth century. Comparison revealed that a common structure could be discerned. The same symbolic code operated throughout the region. Thomas Huffman and, later, other archaeologists have since documented the continuity of this common structure — now known among archaeologists as the “Central Cattle Pattern” — over the past 1000 years (see Kuper 1980; Huffman 1986, 2007, 2012; Mitchell 2002).

The layout of the oval homestead is ordered by three spatial oppositions. As Holleman (1940/41) emphasised, one is between the right and left sides. A second opposes the centre and the sides. There is also a third opposition, between “up” and “down,” or west and east. Among the Tswana, the term *godimo* may mean above, or higher, but also west, or “on the right-hand of the chief,” a phrase that connotes high status (Willoughby 1928, 67–68). The ancestors are associated with the sky and with the west. Among the Nguni, the great hut is usually placed at the highest and the westernmost point of the homestead.

In the traditional homestead, a line drawn through the centre of the settlement connected the great house and the cattle byre. This was the domain of men and cattle, and of the ancestors. The sacred elements of the settlement — graves of ancestors and places of sacrifice — were concentrated here. The cattle byre lay below the great house, and to the east. At the entry to the byre was the male assembly place. Women could not normally enter the cattle byre, which represented the male and agnatic principle in the community. Here, the most valued asset of the homestead was looked after and displayed. The ox, “the god with the wet nose,” was the ultimate sacrificial object. Structurally, and physically, in the layout of the homestead, women were opposed to cattle. And cattle were the medium of bridewealth payments.

The periphery was the domain of the wives, and it was divided between the senior, right-hand side and the inferior, left-hand side. At the lowest point of the semicircles of wives' huts were huts for unmarried men and visitors.

The centre/sides opposition contrasted kinsfolk and wives, men and women, and the past and the present. The right/left opposition ordered wives by seniority. It was particularly emphasised in most Nguni settlements. As the homestead matured, and the great wife replaced the mother in the *indlunkulu*, the centre/sides opposition was downplayed. Yet as Holleman (1940) remarked, among the Zulu the ancestral house retained a shadowy existence even after the homestead head died and the right and left wings of the settlement dispersed. The heir to a junior house moved into the *indlunkulu* and the old homestead with its ancestral graves remained a point of common reference and a ritual centre for the dispersed family.

There were variations. In contrast to the Zulu, the Swazi emphasised the continuity of the homestead. They particularly stressed the centre/sides opposition, and underplayed the right/left division (see Figure 6). This was associated with the fact that the Swazi did not designate a great wife, the mother of the heir-apparent, while the headman was alive. The *indlunkulu* was occupied not by a great wife but by a "mother" of the headman. When his mother died, the headman married a *gogo*, a classificatory grandmother, a woman from the family of his father's mother, to take the mother's place. Her son could not succeed him.

\*Insert Figure 6\*

Figure 6: The symbolic dimensions of the Swazi homestead. Source: Kuper (1982, 146). © [Routledge].

The headquarters of the great Nguni chiefs were blown-up versions of the basic homestead model. Zulu regiments had left and right sections, and they camped at these capitals in right and left sides around the cattle byre. The chief's wives were concentrated in a small circle just above the byre (Kuper 1993, 469–487) (see Figure 7).

\*Insert Figure 7\*

Figure 7: Mgungundhlovu, capital of the Zulu king Dingane, established in 1829. Source: Holden (1855). In the public domain.

Sotho-Tswana towns were considerably larger than the ordinary Nguni settlement. The towns and their wards were nevertheless arranged on the same principles as the Nguni homestead. The headman's homestead occupied the highest and westernmost position in a ward settlement. The home of the next senior family was below and on his right, the third below and on his left, etc. The wards that made up a town were grouped in the same way. The chief's ward occupied the highest point of the town, and it was in the centre and at the western extremity. The other wards were grouped into right-hand and left-hand sections.

Each Sotho-Tswana town, and each ward, was built around a male council place, the *kgotla*, rather than around a central cattle byre. Among the Nguni the area around the entrance to the byre was a male public space, called the *ikundla*, a dialectal variant of the Sotho term *kgotla*.

### **Marriage and the house**

Sociologically, the homestead had a segmentary structure. Its nodes were the houses of the individual wives. These houses were typically rivals in internal politics. Witchcraft accusations between co-wives were common. When the right and left sides of a chiefly household moved away, and each house was placed at the head of a division of the chieftaincy, the rivalries of the original homestead were projected onto the chieftaincy as a whole.

The marriage strategies of powerful families were therefore of enormous political importance, but they did not yield straightforward relationships of alliance. A chief who dispatched a wife to a rival was making a political intervention, aspiring to control the succession to the chiefly house into which he introduced his sister or daughter. Rival claimants to a chieftaincy mobilised maternal kin in their support. Foreign princesses therefore made problematic wives. They were regarded as potential traitors against their husbands, committed as they were to promoting the interests of their brothers and their own sons. There are mythical accounts of chiefs betrayed by princesses, the sisters of rival chiefs. These stories hinge on the capture of seminal fluid for magical use, but they draw attention to the tensions that arose when chiefs married foreign princesses.

For lesser nobles and commoners, marriage links consolidated the patron-client relationships that the Zulu termed *khonza*. The bond was commonly initiated



and sustained by a loan or gift of cattle made by a patron to a client. The clients would be expected in turn to offer wives to their patrons. The exchange of cattle and wives linked the homesteads of commoners to local headman and lesser chiefs, and connected chiefs to particular royal homesteads. The higher a man stood in the political hierarchy, the more wives he would be given. The powerful also gained cattle in the total reckoning of their marriage exchanges, since they gave out a reduced payment for lower-status wives, while the sister of a chief could command twice the normal rate of bridewealth.

It was by way of this system of *khonza* allegiances that the segmentary politics of the royal family became the politics of the entire state. The rivalries, succession disputes and civil wars of the nineteenth century were in essence the internal, domestic politics of the royal house writ large.

### **The house in politics and economics**

Particularly for the powerful, marriage was therefore necessarily a political act. It was also imbued with religious significance. People talked as though the ancestors themselves paid and received bridewealth. The ancestors were responsible for fertility and might withhold a woman's fertility if the bridewealth was not paid in full. The Tsonga prayed with striking directness, "May the harvest be plentiful; may the cattle multiply; may all our wives become pregnant" (Junod 1927, 403.) The exchange of wives for cattle was also, and very fundamentally, an economic affair. Indeed, it mediated and facilitated the very basis of the traditional economy, which was a dualistic system, one part male, the other female.

Cattle-keeping was a matter for the men, and it was a capital-intensive business. Normally, a few men and boys could manage a large herd, and extra cattle could be added without requiring substantially more labour. Women could not enter the byre, which was placed at the heart of the homestead. Indeed, women were dangerous to cattle. The Nguni banned new wives from drinking milk from the ancestral herds.

Agriculture provided the bulk of the homestead's food. It was labour intensive, but land was not scarce in pre-colonial times, and cultivation was "extensive," fields being cleared and abandoned every few years. Women did most of the work in the fields. Their granaries were placed beyond the homestead fence. In some areas,

women also kept small stock, usually goats, and these were commonly penned beyond the granaries or, in areas where stone kraals were built, small goat pens were attached to outside walls.

Married women ground the corn, cooked for their houses and prepared beer that was a precious yield of their cereals. Beef was roasted outside by men on ceremonial occasions, but boiled and eaten indoors by women.

In the eighteenth century, maize was introduced, largely displacing sorghum. Maize was more productive and reliable, and its diffusion led to rapid population growth and to the development of larger political units. But it was valued less than sorghum. Different grinding stones were used for maize and for sorghum. Among the Zulu, sorghum was threshed and winnowed outside the homestead, maize in the hut. Maize was used mainly for porridge, cooked and eaten in the hut. Both grains could be used to brew beer, but sorghum beer should always be served to men at the entrance of the cattle byre on ceremonial occasions.

Both pastoralism and agriculture were risky enterprises. Households had to cope with recurrent droughts and with bovine and plant diseases. Cattle herds could be confiscated by chiefs, or looted during wars, or stolen. But a combination of pastoralism and agriculture offered some security. Cattle might be lost one year, while the gardens yielded good harvests and the granaries filled up. The next year the fields might be blighted by disease, while the cattle herd flourished. Surplus grain could be made into beer to reward the labour that was recruited to prepare the gardens for sowing, and at harvest time. Grain could also be exchanged for cattle or cattle products. And cattle could be used to pay bridewealth for a wife, who would contribute labour in the fields.

It was therefore prudent to balance investments in agriculture and pastoralism, and one of the ways in which this was done was through the exchange of wives for bridewealth. "Do you prefer sons or daughters?" a witness was asked during the 1883 Commission of Enquiry into Native Law and Customs ([Cape of Good Hope](#) 1883, II (1), 98). "Both are good," he replied, "the girls bring cattle and the boys look after them." Rendered in cattle, bridewealth represented a transfer of resources from the pastoral to the agricultural sector. The more wives a man had,

the more grain his household produced. A man also made his parents-in-law regular prestations of meat, while his wife's family made him gifts of grain and beer.

### **Bridewealth**

"Cattle beget children" was the common saying, resonant symbolically and in law (see, for example, Gluckman 1950, 184). The fundamental bridewealth rule was that rights in a woman and her children were transferred in exchange for the payment of cattle. Should a wife be childless, then either the bridewealth cattle had to be returned, or her family was obliged to replace her with another wife.

Traditionally, the bridewealth circuit was virtually closed. Not only was entry into the circuit largely restricted to those who received bridewealth, but there was also a rule against leakage from the circuit. Nevertheless, a few men owned sufficient unencumbered cattle to pay bridewealth from their personal resources. It was also possible to earn cattle by trading grain, or by working as a herbalist or blacksmith. Increasingly, from the middle of the nineteenth century, men would work as migrant labourers to earn the wherewithal to make a marriage payment.

Ideally (and probably in practice), when a man had sufficient cattle, he provided the bridewealth for the first wife of the oldest son of each of his "houses." In exchange, he could claim the bridewealth cattle paid for this son's first daughter. Wives for whom a man's father paid the bridewealth, the "household" wives, had the highest status. There were also "house" wives. A man might acquire a wife with the cattle received from the marriage of a sister in the same "house." The woman then had a claim on her brother's house. It was, in a sense, *her* house, and she could make free with its goods. She would also require an appropriate return for the bridewealth she had brought in: among the Nguni, a co-wife to live with her in a subordinate position; among the Sotho-Tswana, a daughter to marry her son.

Among the Sotho-Tswana, the mother's brother was expected to make a significant contribution to his nephew's bridewealth. In return, he could expect a share of the bridewealth received for his niece. Indeed, any person who contributed towards a bridewealth payment would then have a claim on the first daughter of the marriage, or on the bridewealth paid for her. It would therefore be misleading to say that men were exchanging women between themselves. Rather, men and women

exchanged certain rights in women and cattle. All these exchanges were governed by the same rule of reciprocity: the transfer of cattle gave a claim to a wife in return.

The Cape Nguni diverged from the common Nguni pattern in one crucial regard: the bridewealth payment was balanced by a dowry of cattle that accompanied the bride. “Among us,” a Gaika elder told an official commission of enquiry in 1883, “when an alliance is made between two rich men, the cattle pass each other, and the one family gets as much as the other” ([Cape of Good Hope 1883, II \(1\), 93](#)). The consequence was that the exchange did not initiate a series of further exchanges of cattle and wives, as was expected elsewhere in the region. Once bridewealth had been matched by a dowry payment, the exchange was closed. Cape Nguni women did not demand a sister to be a co-wife. In most other areas, however, the marriage exchange was open-ended. Among the Sotho-Tswana, it might take two generations to complete the exchange, which included the payment of bridewealth, the full transfer of rights in children to a father and, finally, the dispatch of a new bride in the next generation, following the path of her father’s sister.

Bridewealth debts were strongly enforced, and inherited. And debts lived on, continually renegotiated and adjusted to crises of childlessness, separation or divorce, or premature death. Junod ([1927](#)) recorded that among the Tsonga in the early twentieth century, 90% of civil cases had to do with bridewealth debts. “These complicated relations due to the *lobolo* poison the whole of native life,” Junod commented: “the *lobolo* question fills the African village with hatred and bitterness. The *milandju*, the debts!” And he quoted the moving plea of a Tsonga evangelist who invoked the image of the slave-trade:

These *lobolo* debts are ropes which start from the neck of one and go to the neck of the other. Though your father dies, this rope still ties you, you are kept tied to your father’s bones by this accursed rope! Others will get drawn into its coils and the strands become entangled round you! Cut it and be free! (Junod 1927, I: 439, 280n, 282, 531.)

This conception endures. Deborah James ([2015, 53](#)) quotes a Sotho-speaking rural schoolteacher:

People have been in debt since time immemorial ... In marriage, when I pay *lobola* I don’t pay the whole amount. I am in debt — I owe the family of my

wife. They have the right to follow me up, and send people, even to send the chief to collect the debt ... They might even allow you to have children, and when your first daughter gets married, you are paid *lobola* for your daughter, you will then use these cattle to pay your in-laws.

To see only the debts is, however, to perceive the system only from one perspective. Structurally, the binding and enduring debts underpinned a series of marriages. As Lévi-Strauss ([1949] 1966, 467) remarked, with reference to Junod's ethnography:

Once *lobolo* is received it immediately commences a new cycle ... Scarcely is it received than it is re-invested for a wife for the brother or cousin of the young bride. As a thread runs through a piece of fabric, *lobolo* creates an unlimited series of connections between members of the same group, and between different groups.

### **Preferential marriage**

Although the fundamentals of the bridewealth system were common throughout the region, they played out in distinctive and contrasting ways among the Nguni and the Sotho-Tswana. These variations were connected to their very different rules of exogamy and preferred marriage.

Among the Nguni, marriages were not generally permitted between a man and a woman who shared a grandparent. (Exceptionally, Swazi aristocrats favoured marriage between descendants of a common great-grandparent [see Kuper 1982, chap. 7]). The Sotho-Tswana, however, had a marked preference for the marriage of first cousins. A new bride was therefore already a member of the extended family.

A critical contrast between the two traditions was the way in which bridewealth debts were managed. Among the northern Nguni, a man who received bridewealth on his sister's marriage would use it to finance his own marriage. His sister was then entitled to demand that a younger sister be sent to be her co-wife. Only a minimal payment of bridewealth would be made for this secondary wife. Among the Sotho-Tswana, a woman would claim her brother's daughter to marry her son. (He would be marrying a cross-cousin on his mother's side, his mother's brother's daughter.)

Sotho-Tswana chiefs and their heirs preferred to marry into the houses of junior wives of their father. A favoured alliance was with a house that had been

placed at the head of another ward. These marriages were with father's younger brother's daughters, occasionally even with the daughter of a brother. The Tswana said they were good because "the cattle return to the kraal." This was not literally the case, since the fathers of bride and groom would have their own, separate herds, but it was true in another sense, since the family's herds belonged, ultimately, to the paternal ancestors.

A more down-to-earth motive was political. These marriages managed alliances within the ruling group, reinforcing them but altering their character. The junior family would be reclassified in the next generation as "mother's brother's people" rather than "father's brother's people." A subsequent marriage into that family would be classified as a marriage with a mother's brother's daughter. This reclassification was also a demotion, and could cause friction. In the late nineteenth century, Chief Montshiwa of the Tshidi-Rolong took wives from two houses of his father's brothers. One of these houses, a loyal ally of Montshiwa, came to be defined as "mother's brothers." The other family were rivals, indeed the leading opponents of the chief. They "resisted all attempts by Montshiwa and his sons to have them spoken of publicly as mother's brothers" and insisted that they were the chief's father's brothers. The chief, they contended, had married his father's brother's daughter "as is Tshidi custom" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1981, 42).

Commoners had no choice but to accept that they were locked into an inferior situation, sending daughters, generation after generation, to the same political superiors. The commoner therefore often stood to the noble as mother's brother to sister's son. Their patrons were marrying mother's brother's daughters. Commoners also married mother's brothers daughters, but for a different reason. Most commoners could not rely on their fathers to provide bridewealth for their marriages. A man often had to wait for a "house" sister to marry, and then he would turn around her bridewealth to acquire a wife for himself. His sister would require the return of a wife for her son, who would then be marrying his mother's brother's daughter.

In the 1930s, Isaac Schapera demonstrated that Tswana nobles and commoners had very different patterns of kin-marriage. Two-thirds of the marriages of nobles were with women from their father's side of the family. Forty percent of their marriages were with a father's brother's daughter. The higher the rank of the noble family, the higher the rate of marriage with a father's younger brother's

daughter. Only a quarter of their marriages were with a mother's brother's daughter. In contrast, just 18% of commoners married close kin, but 50% of their close kin marriages were with a mother's brother's daughter (Schapera 1957). A similar pattern was reported for other Sotho-Tswana peoples in the first half of the twentieth century (Kuper 1975).

These contrasts between the two traditions were dramatised in the rituals that attended courtship and marriage (for a detailed account see [Kuper \(1982, chap. 9\)](#)). The Nguni bride was an outsider. She had to approach her prospective husband at his father's homestead, and the main ceremonial acts took place there, notably the formal transfer of the bride. This ceremony dramatised the distance, and the rivalry, that separated the wife-givers and the wife-takers. (To give just one example, when the Pondo borrowed elements of European marriage custom, and wedding cakes were offered, two cakes had to be provided, one for the bride's party and one for the groom's [Wilson 1972]). After the wedding, the outsider Nguni wife entered into a humiliating novitiate, marked by elaborate *hlonipha* avoidances. She could not drink milk from the cows of her husband's herd until a special ceremony had been performed, usually only after she had given birth to children.

Among the Sotho-Tswana, a bride was ideally a cousin. Often betrothed in childhood, her future father-in-law would send a cow to provide her with milk as she was growing up. She was courted at her father's home, and the main ceremony marked the delivery of the bridewealth cattle to her father's cattle-byre. She then entered into her marriage with little formality, and usually without being subjected to special restrictions.

### **Migrant labour and urbanisation**

In the pre-colonial period, and in most parts of the region throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, marriage, the family and the homestead were embedded in economic, political and religious institutions. The exchange of wives for cattle was an economic transaction, although it should be understood as a gift exchange, in Marcel Mauss's sense, rather than a matter of buying and selling. Politically, marriages established, sustained and restructured allegiances. And marriage was highly ritualised. Wedding ceremonies, bridewealth transfers, and the etiquette that governed the conduct of wives made symbolic statements about the

very nature of men and women, leaders and followers, cattle and grain, and the living and the ancestors.

Beginning in the 1820s, ineluctably and at a gradually increasing tempo, though with much regional variation, all these structures were undermined and transformed. Colonial expansion and population pressure that followed the spread of maize cultivation precipitated internecine wars (termed the *Mfecane* by the Nguni, the *Difaqane* by the Sotho-Tswana). Christian missionaries came onto the scene in the same period. One of their main aims was the abolition of polygamy and of bridewealth, which they characterised as the sale of women. Polygamy actually increased among the Nguni in the early colonial period, but as mission activity spread, it declined. In 1932, 15% of married men in Pondoland were polygamists, but by the 1950s the proportion was only 4–5% in the Transkei and in Zululand, and under 1% in the strongly Christian Ciskei (Wilson 1981).

As European overrule was established, chieftaincies were broken up or subordinated. Extensive grazing areas were confiscated, and the remaining landholdings squeezed. Africans were increasingly forced to labour on white farms, and with the discovery of diamonds in Kimberly in the 1860s and the gold rush on the Witwatersrand in the 1880s, young men would spend years away from home, in the mines and, later, in the industrial sector.

As grazing lands were lost to white farmers, and cattle herds declined, bridewealth payments were increasingly made at least partly in cash. This usually had to be earned by migrant labour. Among the Xhosa, cattle holdings were radically reduced following the cattle killing of 1857. Everywhere in the eastern Cape, herds had become small in relation to population by the early twentieth century. Cash became an element in bridewealth. Monica Wilson recalled that when doing fieldwork in Pondoland in the 1930s, she found she had to ask “how many marriage cattle had walked on their own legs, and how many were tall, how many short” (Wilson 1981, 135) because “£5 or 10 sheep or goats represented one ox or cow and might be referred to as an ox or cow (*inkomo*). This rate of exchange had been established long before 1930 and it continued until 1955” (141). But the market price of cattle kept rising. Since the nominal number of cattle required for bridewealth remained stable, Pondo men found it more and more difficult to raise a *lobolo* payment (Wilson 1981, 135, 141).



Marriage strategies also changed. A good measure is the prevalence of cousin marriage among the Sotho-Tswana. Eileen Krige (1981, 155) reported that even in the 1970s cross-cousin marriage was still common among the Lovedu, and that 40% of married men were polygamists. Mönning (1961) documented a similar proportion of cousin marriages in a Pedi chiefdom, where nearly half of the married men were polygamists. However, Bothma (1962) found that only six percent of Ntshabeleng men were married to first cousins. Such variations were partly a result of different political developments. Where the chiefship was weakened and the ward system undermined, close kin marriage declined. But the local level of migrant labour was also crucial, and this was closely related to the fate of the pastoral economy. Where men had fewer cattle, they were more likely to become migrant labourers.

Colin Murray (1981) provided an excellent account of the bridewealth system in Lesotho as it operated in the 1970s. Chiefs had lost much of their power; the active male population was engaged in migrant labour rather than pastoralism; and broad kin networks had lost some of their importance in people's lives. Bridewealth nevertheless remained relatively high. The traditional scale of payment was ideally still honoured. Payments were calculated in livestock units, and cattle were usually included in the *bohali*, although the bulk of the transfer was made in cash. Annual *bohali* transfers (in or out) represented about one third of many households' income.

Murray (1981) explained that bridewealth payments now represented a transfer of resources from young male migrants to older men. The migrant also sent remittances to support women and children who remained behind and managed the family's rural, agricultural base. There was, once again, a dual economy, but now instead of herding cattle the men went away to earn money in the mines, farms and cities. To secure his family, a man had to invest earnings from the male economy of paid labour in the female, agricultural economy. His retirement would be cushioned by bridewealth payments for his daughters and remittances from his sons.

The contrast with the situation among the Tswana and Kgalagari of Botswana is striking. The social and political systems, and the economies, of the Basotho and the Tswana were very similar in the immediate pre-colonial period, but the Basotho lost almost all their grazing lands to white farmers. The Tswana in what is now Botswana lived in a more arid region, and retained their grazing lands. Agriculture was very important in Lesotho, pastoralism marginal. In Botswana agriculture was

secondary, pastoralism dominant. Basotho men had to marry to keep their base at home. They married young, paid a high price in bridewealth, and their marriages were stable. Tswana men from Botswana were far less likely than the Basotho to engage in migrant labour (Schapera 1947). Since agriculture was marginal, they were less inclined to marry, or to pay bridewealth (Schapera 1970, especially 138–139, and Schapera 1978). Bridewealth payments were relatively low and they were made (often late, even posthumously) above all to ensure that sons could inherit property from their father. There were also many unmarried mothers.

In the period of high apartheid between the 1960s and 1980s, forced population movements into crowded reservations that could barely support agricultural production put family structures under extreme strain. Anthropologists doing fieldwork in this period documented the consequences, among them the rising number of unmarried mothers in rural areas (e.g. James 1985; Sharp and Spiegel 1985; McAllister 1986; Niehaus 1989; Bank 1994; de Wet 1995. For an overview of rural ethnographies from this period, see Hammond-Tooke 1997, chapter 8).

In South African cities, there were yet greater changes in gender relationships and marriage. At first, men greatly outnumbered women in the cities, but some male migrant labourers formed relationships that amounted to a second marriage (Krige 1936). In the second half of the twentieth century, the permanent African city population grew very rapidly. Many women now settled in the cities, although their children would often be brought up by grandmothers in the countryside. Eleanor Preston-Whyte (1981) reported that many migrant Zulu women were Christians, widowed, abandoned or divorced, or unmarried mothers. Deborah James (1999) described the situation of comparable Sotho women migrants in Johannesburg. These women usually remain unmarried. They establish mutual aid associations with other women from home and form women-headed households that might include several unmarried daughters with children, and grown, unmarried sons.

The old bourgeoisie and members of the rising middle-class do tend to marry. Although they may be Christians, they often pay bridewealth, but this is not the bridewealth of tradition. In the cities, and even in some rural areas, a man will require an elevated bridewealth payment for an educated daughter. Monica Hunter (Wilson) (1936, 191) found that a woman with above-average education commanded a higher brideprice in Pondoland in the 1930s. Eileen Krige (1981, 156) reported that among

the Sotho-speaking Lovedu in the 1970s, bridewealth had come to be regarded “as compensation for nurture and varies according to the standard of education of the bride.”

Deborah James ([2015, 52–58](#)) has noted that the costs of a wedding and bridewealth place a huge burden on young urban men, and often feed tensions between young husbands and their in-laws. The high cost of bridewealth may, paradoxically, undermine marriage. There have been other major structural changes. The multi-faceted “house” has no place in the urban setting, although there are interesting links, little studied so far, between some urban and rural establishments. The link between marriage and political alliance has largely disappeared, but traces may still be found in some of the most prestigious chiefly houses, and even among leading political figures. The South African ambassador to Argentina, Zenani Mandela-Dlamini, is the elder daughter of Nelson and Winnie Mandela. She married Prince Thumbumuzi Dlamini. Thumbumuzi’s elder brother is the present Swazi king, Mswati III, and one of his sisters, Mantfombi, was married to the Zulu king. Her son, Goodwill, is the present king of Zululand.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Notes**

1. There is a similarity between the homestead conceived in this way and what Edmund Leach termed the “local descent group”: “the corporate group of persons who have the most decisive say in bringing about an arranged marriage is always a group of co-resident males representing, as a rule, three genealogical generations” (Leach 1951, 24).

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