

The Cows are coming Home: African wedding customs still have value for the diaspora

LSE's Tendayi Charity Mhende calls for the African diaspora to embrace the symbolism behind the bride price in various African cultures.

Cows, gold, iron, money, land, fabric: all these have been handed over by a groom in exchange for a bride. Called a dowry, it has manifested itself in various forms across the world. In European and particularly Elizabethan variants, it was the responsibility of the woman to provide goods or offerings to the groom's family in order to be wed. The practice may have largely disappeared in Europe, but it remains widespread in many parts of the world including sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent and parts of Eastern Europe.



Across the African continent, the tradition of the dowry remains a key pillar of unifying a man and woman in matrimony. Among the Southern African Zulu tribe the process is known as *Lobola*, the Igbo tribe of West Africa call it *Ikpo Onu aku Nwayi* and in the East African state of Tanzania it is referred to as *Mahari*. The history of many sub-Saharan countries reveals that the practice of bride price was borne out of an agricultural and cattle-based economy where wealth and status were exhibited by how big your family was and how much livestock you owned. A wedding represented the loss of a daughter to a family, hence the loss of labour and someone to tend to younger children within the family. A young man, in paying bride price, would give the bride's family gifts of livestock to replenish labour and to act as a source of food; cows and goats therefore were and are still typically offered as gifts to the bride's family. In the modern era, this has taken on a new form, that of money.

As a girl of African origin raised in Britain and having engaged in conversations with friends who have had a similar upbringing in the diaspora, it seems like the dowry or bride price is becoming a rather alien concept with its significance becoming all the more distorted to us in the 21st century. The distortion somewhat roots from a perception that it is a demodded practice and women have tended to be victims at the hands of callous husbands who mistreat their wives because they say they have paid for her. In the modern era, however, it appears that many are not aware that the bride price also served to protect women as it prevented marital dissolution. If, for example, a man mistreated his wife, he would have to pay more money. He would not get a divorce because it would represent a loss, especially if he had to pay out for another wife. While there is no one form of dowry or one form of African "culture" or "tradition" per se, I believe that the bride price still has relevance for someone like myself and my peers. Now I am not advocating that we go back to a system in which my value to my future husband is decided by how many cows he can afford to give my family. In all honesty, if my future husband was to give my father a cow, I highly doubt he would be able to rear it in his backyard or find much use for it in Birmingham. Rather, it's the

symbolism behind the bride price that leads me to think that we should incorporate elements of bride price into modern marriage in the diaspora.

In the Shona culture to which I belong, a man has to pay what is known as “roora” in order to marry a woman. The process itself doesn’t happen all in one go; rather it is a series of stages acknowledging the family for their work in raising the daughter. These include the payment of the “mbereko” in the form of a blanket which acknowledges the mother carrying her daughter on her back as an infant as well as “majasi” to the parents of the bride for their wedding clothes which usually are worn at the religious wedding ceremony. The bride’s siblings also receive presents, usually in the form of money. Although this practice varies across Africa, the groom expresses appreciation for the family of the bride through gifts of palm wine, blankets, beer and pots in places like Kenya and Nigeria. It strikes me that these gifts show honour to the family of the bride while the groom demonstrates that he can provide for his wife and ultimately for the new family the union will create.

Let me be clear, I am not advocating for the dowry to be restored in its traditional form by Western-settled Africans, but I wish for a return to tradition – with a twist. That honour that is so symbolic of the gifts given to the bride’s family is missing in modern marriages in the West. In weddings today, there is no emphasis on honouring the bride’s family. Rather, weddings are organised in a way to please the couple, while the preferences of their parents are not prioritised.

National statistics estimate that in England and Wales alone, 42% of all marriages will end in divorce, and 34% will dissolve before the 20th anniversary. I would not be surprised if within my lifetime this figure increases, but the plethora of reasons for that can be unpacked at another time. Upholding the bride price, as I see it, highlights a degree of commitment and chivalry in a man that is becoming more and more extinct and shows he not only values his wife but is also committed to upholding a high regard for her family. This is the same family that the woman would return to in the event of a divorce (were it to happen). Of course, the current generation is not what it used to be in the times of Mr Darcy or Shaka Zulu, however, I believe, especially in the context of an African growing up in Britain, we should not let this important symbolic element of marriage erode into something “we used to do”. It is my belief that seeking approval and involving the family sets a good foundation for the rest of the marriage in itself.

As a woman, once you are married you become part of your spouse’s family – you adopt his name and facets of this character. You are no longer the same person you used to be before you wed. Yes, naturally it is to be expected, as marriage means two entities becoming one; and yes, the husband also embraces changes to the person he once was – but undeniably it is the woman who gives more of herself to her groom-to-be. Bringing the cows home, or rather the symbolism carried through the dowry should remain an important feature of marriage. Behind it lies a certain respect and honour for the family which has somewhat worn away and it sets up a good foundation for the newlyweds as they embark on their new chapter.

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