



JJEOSHS

ISSN: 2618-1517

**Jumuga Journal of Education,
Oral Studies, and Human Sciences (JJEOSHS)**

editor@jumugajournal.org

submission@jumugajournal.org

<http://www.jumugajournal.org>

Volume 2, No. 1, 2019

**Bride Wealth and Religio-Cultural Conflict in Africa:
A case Study of Dinka Anglicans in South Sudan**

By Martin Olando, DTH
Bishop Hannington Institute, Mombasa

Abstract

Bride wealth has been a significant point of conflict between Christian religion and African religion which goes hand-in-hand with its cultural heritage. Some African Christians have held this practice close to their hearts. In some cases, where bride wealth negotiations have taken place, questions have arisen concerning its alleged conflict with biblical teachings. Is African culture in conflict with indigenous religion of Africa? Does the Christological exhortation in Matthew 5:17 that God's mission is not to destroy people's laws and the resultant cultures but to strengthen it? In view of this, a research on bride wealth and its dalliance with Christianity is critically important as we seek to explore how African Christians understand biblical teachings regarding the practice. The goal of this article is to specifically explore a theo-cultural reflection on bride wealth with particular reference to the Dinka Anglican church of Sudan. In turn, this will provide vital lessons for African ecclesiastical context in regard to bride wealth and its resultant rituals and practices. Methodologically, the article samples the Dinka of Sudan; and through extensive study of literature regarding bride wealth. In the nature of things, are there specific cultural elements that contradict biblical teachings? Are there practices that requires refinement and/or abandonment altogether? Does the Dinka case help us to understand the broader African context in its entirety? Such questions inform the methodology in this article.

Key words: Bride wealth, Dinka, Anglican, Cattle

Introduction

Bride wealth is a major concern among the Dinka Anglicans of Southern Sudan and other parts of the world. The Dinka are the largest ethnic group in Sudan; and their population is about two million (Mark Nikkel, 2001). However, this figure is subject to debate because no proper census has been carried out in Sudan since 1954 (Mark Nikkel, 2001). The majority of Dinka in Southern Sudan are Anglicans who form seventy per cent of the Christian population in Southern Sudan (Wheeler, 1997). The Dinka were among the first ethnic societies to be evangelized in Sudan by the Roman Catholics from 1887; and later the Anglicans Missionaries from 1906. Anglicanism in Southern Sudan spread rapidly and the first African Anglican priest was ordained in 1943 (Werner, 2001). Despite the growth of the Anglican Church in Southern Sudan, there is also a strong presence of the Roman Catholic Church, African Inland Mission, Presbyterian denominations and the African indigenous religions. Like in the rest of the sub-Saharan Africa, the church in Sudan has grown rapidly, most notably in the South (Werner, 2001).

In the middle of the sixth century, Egyptian Christians penetrated Nubia. The first European missionary sojourn in the Nubia region and South Sudan in general was sent by the United American Mission (UAM) and Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1906. Subsequently, Rev. Archibald Shaw, a CMS missionary, noticed the importance of cattle to the Dinka and noted that without cattle there was no marriage. In other words, the Dinka value cattle so much that it is impossible to buy cattle from the Dinka at any price. This is evident when we mull over the fact some insurance claims in some parts of Southern Sudan are paid in terms of cattle (Interview with Jeremy Otieno, Insurance official with UAP Insurance Company based in Nairobi and with offices in Juba, 2009). Thus, the Dinka love cattle, whose main social use is the payment of bride wealth. The value of a man in the Dinka society is viewed in terms of the cattle he possesses. Indeed, the Dinka view cattle so seriously that they have a myth depicting how, since time immemorial, a man's work has always been tending cattle (King, 1986).

As noted thus, Bride wealth is paid in terms of cattle despite the fact that the social changes brought by the movement of the Dinka to other parts of the world, also allows payments in the form of liquid cash. The money may be paid in various currencies, that includes the Kenyan shillings, American dollars or the Sudanese pound. Socially, the Dinka are grouped into Bor, Agar, Ngok and Rek Dinka, among others (Nikkel, 2001). All these Dinka groups value bride wealth and many men have remained unmarried because they cannot afford to pay bride wealth. Further, the marital process is too ritually demanding. Considering that most Dinkas living in Kenya are Anglicans, the Dinkas living in North America, popularly known as "the lost boys," come to Kenya to look for suitors and eventually marry. Such betrothals are followed by payment of bride wealth in terms of the Kenyan shillings or in American dollars (Nhial, Difin, 2003). Some of the "lost boys" have made bride wealth payment more expensive, as they transact it under hard currencies of the western world, and whose value is greater than those of the African context. Of importance to note is that most of the local people believe that living in America, Australia and Canada is a sign of wealth. Therefore, any young Dinka man who is living in America is 'charged' more than the local suitors. Determined to get wives, the 'American' young men pay the bride wealth as demanded by the would-be in-laws. Hence, the Dinka men living in America come to Kenya and pay their respective bride wealth without necessarily finding undue difficulties in the course of these transactions. In turn, this encourages most young Dinka boys in Kakuma and Nairobi to dream and eventually aspire to live in North America for a better life.

Curiously, those who are unable to pay bride wealth often decide to elope, a phenomenon which is gaining currency among the young Dinka in the Diaspora. Eloping can also be attributed to the tedious process involved in bride wealth payment. In other instances, eloping occurs when many men compete for a girl. The man who first proposed may elope with the girl to avoid competition. However, eloping can be avoided if the prospective groom negotiates with the bride's parents on how the payment can be done. Ironically, there are limited cases of church leaders who have also eloped after failing to afford bride wealth. Nevertheless, Church leaders who eloped are constantly suspended from leadership, as a measure of upholding ecclesiastical discipline. This makes it necessary to develop Christian-biblical perspectives on bride wealth practice among the Dinka and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

The Dinka Bride Wealth Process and its Interpretations

In some traditional African societies, the consent to marry a girl is normally given after the payment of bride wealth (Mugambi, 1989). The Dinka fall in this category and they generally give consent after bride wealth has been paid. If any man wants to marry either in church or through African customary laws, he has to adhere to the bride wealth practice. Certainly, marriage in Africa is a package that includes courtship, betrothal and bride wealth payment (Beller, 2001); as Africans value bride wealth highly and tends to reject anything that seems to interfere with it. Bride wealth is money or goods given to a bride's family by

the bridegroom, especially in African societies. In this regard, bride wealth is understood as a sign of appreciation to the parents of the bride for the responsibilities of raising her to maturity and readiness for marriage, in addition to being an act of affection to the girl by giving goods or money. It affirms the new-found relationship between the two families. It makes all people know that the young man is committed to the entire journey of life and would not likely backtrack on this solemn agenda (Haselberth, 2004). This has not always gone as envisaged as childlessness in African context has always found itself a thorn in the marital flesh. Sometimes, goods brought in the course of betrothal and marriage have been returned as the marriage breaks down. Such scenarios are however discouraged and polygamy has been used as a measure of addressing the gaping holes therein.

Among the Dinka and other African peoples, marriage is not considered legitimate without the exchange of gifts in the form of animals, beer, food or other material goods to the parents and family of the bride. In other African communities, the bride paid goods to the groom's family. There are several reasons for bride wealth among the Dinka. The bride wealth gifts are understood to be: a form of compensation for the loss of the girl from the home, a public declaration that the marriage was genuine, an indication of both families' recognition of the marriage, an expression of honour to the bride's parents and seal of the marriage covenant, making it legal (Deng, 1972).

The bride wealth system assumes an important role in the distribution of family property, and in forming and sustaining alliances among families in society. This institution specifies that a prospective husband, usually with the help of his relatives, must provide a substantial sum of money or highly valued goods to his future wife's family before a marriage contract is acknowledged. As noted earlier, the principle "goods" for paying bride wealth among the Dinka are cattle. Marriage is a means of acquiring cattle by the bride's family while being a loss of the same for the groom (Deng, 1972).

Among the Dinka, bride wealth is considered to be the cost of acquiring the right to have legitimate children in marriage. The practice is very important because it determines the plight of children born out of that marriage. Bride wealth gives the husband authority over his wife and gives the wife the right of burial at her husband's home.

Critically important is to concede that bride wealth items differ from one society to the other (Kirwen, 2005). These range from foodstuffs, drinks, money, cattle, sheep, goats, utensils, ornaments and tools. Among the Dinka, haggling over bride wealth was only the first step in celebrating the marriage of the couple. For them, bride wealth is traditionally and largely paid in form of cows and the quantity depends on many factors. This includes: the height of the bride; the height of the lady and so on. Another factor is the competition among interested. If there is competition, the girls' relatives keep the cattle from the competitors separately. Each moment a competitor adds to his cattle, the other competitors are informed and given the room to add to their bids. The highest 'bidder' will have the girl for marriage. Despite this appearing patriarchal and disrespect to women, the two families still have to agree according to what is normally accepted in the Dinka society. Some clans within the Dinka have put a standard of bride wealth payment at thirty cows, which is again a huge price to pay. Doesn't such encourage cattle rustling and/or theft of flocks? Nevertheless, after the two families agree upon the bride wealth, the traditional and/or ritualistic Dinka songs are performed as a measure of providing the official marital zeal.

During the exchange of the bride wealth, the Dinka man is dependent on his relatives. The traditional African societies are well known for sharing whatever they have and doing things in common. Cattle for bride wealth payment are acquired from the family members as a natural part of being Dinka. Since there is a common cause, all Dinka, especially the relatives of the groom, assemble whatever resources they have to support one of their very own. Additionally, the young Dinka men strongly believe it is an old practice and also a source of exploitation. Joseph Khuer, a 28-year-old layperson in the Episcopal church of South Sudan (ECS), believes that since God said everything is free, then women should be given freely in marriage. Khuer boldly mentions the book of Genesis, without giving the exact reference, declaring that God said everything is free. However, Rev. David Deng gives another perspective. He admits that he was required to pay thirty cows. He didn't have the required thirty cows but he discussed it with the bride's family. They accepted what he had and promised to pay the balance later. By the time when the researcher was compiling this article, Rev Deng had paid twenty-two cows rather than the required thirty. Despite commanding respect among the church members and his in-laws, Rev Deng did not conduct a holy matrimony, as customary marriage is the one he went through. Deng, 30, had been told how it was difficult to marry without paying the bride wealth. Supported by his relatives, he was able to pay some cows. His belief is that with the parents' consent, all is well.

Mary Aluel, a mother of three girls living in Kakuma, does not see anything wrong with bride wealth practice. According to her, the Bible records this practice and therefore God approved it. What God has approved should not be put aside because of humanity's selfish interests. Aluel says that the Dinka strongly uphold the teachings of *Nhialic* to the letter and they follow *Tiem Ager de Yecu Kritho Benyditda* (the cross of Christ the Saviour our Lord). She believes that the teachings of Christ in the New Testament do not contradict the Old Testament teachings. Aluel asserts that bride wealth is mentioned in the Old Testament book of Genesis, yet she does not support holy matrimony. In her understanding, what was mentioned in the Gospel of John, chapter 2, about the wedding at Cana is not enough to support church weddings compared to the several scripture passages on bride wealth.

For a Dinka man to think of marriage he must be ready to give cattle or pay money, as bride wealth has to be given to the prospective in-laws. Negotiating the bride wealth is the most difficult and interesting part of the Dinka marriage process. This is normally a prolonged discussion between the bride and the groom's relatives. The groom and the bride are not allowed in the proceedings. At times the talks can result to bitter exchange of words; and in other times, it can be poetical. In negotiations, both parties try to do their best: the girl's side would want the man's family to pay the most, while the man's family would want to pay the least. In these 'contests', as the researcher observed at Kakuma refugee camp of Kenya, bride wealth was first put at 120 head of cattle. Small sticks equivalent to that number were put on the groom's side. These sticks symbolized the number of cows to be paid. The relative of the groom removed fifty sticks from the 120 sticks. The bride's party went out to talk and consult and later brought back 20 sticks. It went on with both parties giving out their number, until an agreement was reached at 70 cows. The talks which began at 10 am ended at 6 pm. Thereafter, there was celebration from both sides, especially from the groom's side. Food was served and the parties ate together, as the Dinka community, like other African societies, value communal eating, which is a sign of friendship.

Among the Rek Dinka, after the bride wealth has been paid in full or the agreed amount, the bride's family pays back *Arueeth* (These are cows given back to the groom's side). The cows should be *Mabior* (white) or any beautiful colour. Giving away the girl follows only after months or years. If the bride wealth is not paid as agreed, the wife is taken away and the children given to the paternal grandmother. Elders do many formalities of marriage while the young people are engaged in courtship. The number of cattle that a man must pay as bride wealth is also determined by the size of the girl's family. The "value" of the girl in terms of physical beauty, strength of character and personality are determining factors. The larger the family, the larger the number of cattle paid as bride wealth. There are some cows for the uncles and cousins and so on. The girl's mother can be given 10. At Kakuma displacement camp, cattle are sold at 100,000 Kenya shillings each, equivalent to 1000 USD. This therefore means that if the groom has to pay for 30 cattle in monetary form, he will pay 3,000,000 Kenya shillings or \$30,000. A case in point is the marriage that took place in 2008, where a man gave his in-laws two million Kenya shillings or \$20,000 in addition to 60 head of cattle. During the floods that devastated Northern Bor district of South Sudan and much of upper Nile in the 1960's chiefs decided that those who had no cattle would be given girls in marriage provided that they pledge to pay later after recovery. Many cleared their debts in later years. In 1992, elders from Bor Dinka held a conference, which resolved that lack of cattle should not hinder people from marrying. In the early 90's, Kuol Manyang issued a decree through Payams (Elders courts) that the standard payment of bride wealth should be 7 cows. Many young people eloped and ended up paying 7 cows. This was a great relief to many who could not pay bride wealth, though it didn't last for a long time.

Bride wealth has affected church attendance among the ECS Dinka. Bride wealth determines how the congregation values their leaders. Bride wealth payment gives the leaders integrity and authority; and hence, the congregation judges the leaders on the ability to pay it. Some ECS pastors, church leaders and members do not attend church service because they have not paid bride-wealth. They eloped and the congregation cannot accept them, hence a conflict between culture and the gospel. Their integrity is measured with their inability to pay bride wealth, though issues to do with tithing take a different dimension. Due to the pressure from their respective congregations and the desire to keep church's integrity, ECS suspends priests who elope. This again drives us to the conflict between gospel and culture and further drives us to explore the panacea to this. A case in point is Michael Mabior, an ECS priest, who eloped with a girl and was relieved of his pastoral duties. He later paid a bride wealth of 20 cows and Kenya Shillings 40,000, equivalent to 400 USD. Eloping is a critical concern among these 'poor' pastors, leaders and the congregation. A man who has eloped risks being killed by the girl's relatives unless he owns up to his deed. This is followed by an agreement on how he will pay the bride wealth. In such scenarios, bride wealth is higher for those who elope, as penalties are administered.

Theological Reflections on Bride Wealth

Various African theologians have given their perspectives on bride wealth practices. African theology should address the African needs based on the biblical faith. Bride wealth culture has been practiced since time immemorial and rose out of African philosophy. Mercy Amba Oduyoye says that the marriage gifts should show bonding and friendship between two families (Oduyoye, 1983). In her native Ghana, *Aseda* (thanks offering drink) and *Tinsa* (drink offering) sealed the gifts exchanged between the two families. Oduyoye notes that *Aseda* and *Tinsa* never represented any economic value. This set a stage for friendship, but not an exchange of goods or to buy a slave. These bride wealth gifts were for the sole purpose of a covenant between the two families (Waal, 1968). As Osadolor Imasogie puts it, God in the African worldview is present in all daily activities (Imasogie, 1983). This may apply to the bride wealth ceremonies because God is present and oversees every activity and ceremony in the African community. The knowledge that God is in control at that moment gives the picture that everything including bride wealth gifts are under God's control. Both Mugambi's and Imasogie's views may elicit thinking on whether bride wealth practice should be accommodated or not. If we go by their arguments, then God is present in the Dinka bride wealth practice.

Any ritual by a group of people has to have a meaning therein. The bride wealth practice can be considered as an African ritual. In the African kingdom of Dahomey, rituals were not only structures, but they also determined how things would be done by that particular society. The bride wealth ritual determined how relationships should be formed in the communities. Bride wealth signifies friendship, and the new families (after the exchange of bride wealth) should display what the bride wealth meant. In the case of the Dinka, bride wealth has merits and demerits. Nevertheless, some African theologians have spoken about the dangers of this practice (Mutabi, 1994). Apart from the great potential of linking up hitherto unknown families and clans, and even enhancing the dignity of the bride, there are express dangers imbedded in this practice. Among the Dinka, there is danger of the woman getting turned into the husband's slave (Maluma, 1994). Edna Maluma highlights that a woman works under the command of the husband, because she has been bought through bride wealth. Some men in Dinka-land abuse bride wealth practice by inflicting suffering on women. The women become slaves to the husband's family, so that even if the husband dies, they cannot remarry without the consent of the husband's family. Bride wealth also entitles a husband to bodily pleasures with his wife, with or without her consent (Mutabi, 1994). A Dinka woman cannot say no to marital sexual activities with her husband, who may be promiscuous. The payment of bride wealth was an official approval to control by the husband. In addition, some parents and families of the bride have commercialized the practice, thus losing the original meaning of friendship and social bonding. The parents demand expensive bride wealth gifts, which must be given for the marriage to be consummated. It turns out to be a profit-making act rather than a gesture of friendship. Some families take it as an opportunity to get rich. For the bridegroom families that afford to meet all the demands, they may be left with nothing to take care of the wife-to-be.

Biblical Interpretations of the Practice of Bride Wealth

Marriage is the union of a man and a woman, first consummated in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve. The example of the God of the universe providing Adam with a wife from the beginning was considered a duty of fathers to secure wives for their sons Gen. 24:3-4 (Unger, 1984). The union became a pattern for all others to follow. In the Old Testament times, there were many ways to get a girl for marriage. The father of the man selected the girl for his son, a situation that has no room for sons of single mothers. Rarely did a man marry against the wishes of his parents, as did Esau (Doughlas, 1977). At times, the girl's consent was sought before the payment of bride wealth, as with Rebekah in Gen. 24:58. If the young man chose the girl, his parents would negotiate as in the case of Shechem in Gen. 34:4, 8. Bride wealth was the price paid by the suitor to the parents of the prospective bride, as well as the portion that the bride brought to her husband (Gen. 30:20; 34:12; Ex. 22:17; 1 Sam. 18:25).

Although not stated, it is believed that the Bible prescribed a minimum *Mohar* (Hebrew, "bride wealth") of fifty shekels paid during betrothal. Betrothal was one of the steps towards marriage. In biblical times, the legality of the marriage was determined by payment of bride wealth at betrothal. Once parents and those acquiring a wife agreed upon in the course of their negotiations, betrothal and wedding concluded their resultant transactions. There is evidence that some pronouncement, such as "you will be my son-in-law" (1 Sam. 18:21) was made by the girl's father. This gave the groom "legal possession" of the girl, but this was far from consummation of marriage. Sometimes the Hebrew word for husband is "owner." However, like other patriarchal cultures, marriage became more than a purchase; it was an agreement between honourable people, and in this respect it took on special significance. The law prescribed a fine equal in sum to the *mohar* of virgins (Ex. 22:15-16), bride

wealth for seduction. Rape and seduction represented “theft” of virginity. High *Mohar* was the price to pay for that theft. It is by this logic, probably, that the Bible prescribes a fine of hundred shekels, double the price of virginity (Louis, 1973).

Abraham charged his most trusted servant to find a bride for his son. Rebekah’s relatives gave their daughter to the husband-to-be, after the exchange of gifts. Dating was not practised. The father of the bride at times gave a gift called “dowry” in the form of property or a maid. This was the bride’s money and property and from it she could supply her husband with a concubine, if she herself was unable to present him with a male heir (Montgomery, 1985). This is reflected in the Abraham, Sarah and Hagar account in Gen. 16:13. The selection of the bride was followed by the espousal. The first step after the agreement between the two parties was the betrothal, which was not the same as the actual marriage. The marriage followed later. However, betrothal was almost as binding as marriage itself. It was a formal proceeding on the part of both the bride and the groom’s parents. Oaths and presents to the bride’s parents confirmed it. The husband naturally demonstrated generosity and affection by giving gifts to the bride. The ceremony of betrothal consisted of payment of a piece of silver, or a gift or the conveyance of writing in the presence of more than two witnesses. The ceremony of betrothal was an assembly to get good news. Invited guests would add their good wishes. The young man and his parents returned home only after the wedding, which could be weeks or even months away. At this point the future groom was excused from military service until after marriage (Deut. 20:7).

During the betrothal, the bridegroom had to make a marriage payment to the bride’s father. This sealed the betrothal and established legal rights of the bridegroom. The Hebrew words for “betroth” means “legally make one’s own (Nuer, 1991). The marriage, which follows betrothal, is correspondingly an act in which the man takes possession of the wife (Deut. 21:13; 24:1). The unmarried girl was, in a sense, her father’s property. Any attack on the girl by any person was regarded as loss of value, because of the bride wealth. The father would in due course receive a marriage gift or bride price for her (Cole, 1973). The girl or woman did not have personal existence at her own disposal. The girl was simply a passive unit in the family under the protection and control of her father and brothers. The bride wealth gifts were described by different terms. There were three types of gifts that were associated with betrothal in the Bible. *Mohar* was a price paid to the father for the daughter, such as the seven years performed by Jacob for Rachel and Moses’ keeping of the sheep for his father-in-law. The gift to the bride or groom from her father sometimes consisted of servants (Gen. 24:5; Judges 1:15) (Douglas, 1978) In Joshua 15:19, Achsah received springs of water as Berakah (blessings) from her father, Caleb. Pharaoh gave his daughter, the wife of King Solomon, the city of Gezer as a wedding gift. This kind of gift was called *Shiluhim*. It was conceived as a daughter’s inheritance of her father’s possession. The records of antiquity often refer to the custom of the bride’s father giving gifts to her daughter at her marriage.

In oriental custom, it was normal for the bride to be given a large present by the father when she got married. The gift would be either land or a maidservant. Leah was given Zillah by Laban as a gift when she married Jacob. Jacob after toiling for seven years for the younger daughter, Rachel, was tricked into marrying Leah. After the wedding festivities for Leah, Jacob married the younger Rachel, but had to work for seven more years as a payment for her dowry. Laban, probably aware of Jacob’s love for Rachel, greedily anticipated a generous bridal present that Jacob’s love would offer. He decided to double his bargain bride gifts. Laban gave a maid to Leah as a gift. The Nuzi tablets confirm the wedding gift of a housemaid to a daughter (Guthie, 1989). Gifts given to the bride were retained by the wife if divorced, except in the case of adultery. *Mohar* was a compensation gift from the bridegroom to the family of the bride, and it sealed the covenant and bound the two families together. *Mohar* was the price of the bride, but a wife was not purchased. *Mohar* was at times *paid* in proportion to the status of the bride and a poor man could not, on that account, afford to marry a woman from a rich family (1 Sam. 18:23). For example, the servants who accompanied Eliezer were a testimony of Abraham’s wealth. Yet David, though from a poor family, married the daughter of King Saul. David’s initial reaction when he fell in love with King Saul’s daughter was how to pay the bride wealth, since he was poor. Shechem in Gen. 34:12 offered so much bridal payment and gift for the bride and the relatives exposing his wealth.

Bride wealth was paid in different forms. Silver was literally used until other forms of money were later introduced (Harrison, 1998). What Abraham’s servant presented to Rebekah was precious. He presented Rebekah with preliminary gifts. These gifts, a ring for the nose and two bracelets, were extremely valuable. Other gifts followed when the family gathered. Special gifts were presented to the mother and the brother of the bride. These gifts were to compensate the loss of a beloved member of the family. The custom of presenting valuable gifts to the members of the bride’s family goes back during the time of Hammurabi (1728-1686 B.C). After giving Rebekah the preliminary gifts, Eliezer had to meet with the bride and other members of the family to obtain their commitment. After giving out the gifts, consent had to come from parents and relatives. If the relatives’ consent

was not important, then Eliezer and Rebekah could not have gone back to tell Isaac's family members. She could not have gone with Eliezer, after being given the valuables, without the knowledge and consent of family members. Rebekah, after receiving the gifts, remained veiled until the marriage had been consummated. The veiling was a sign that bride wealth had been paid for her betrothal. The Book of Exodus records the case of a Hebrew daughter sold by her father to another Hebrew. In this case the sale appears to have been a form of marriage arrangement. It was common for a father to arrange for a daughter under the age of puberty to join another family. The expectation was that when she reached puberty she would marry the master. This would serve as bride wealth. This differed from a normal marriage contract because the master had options: if he did not want to marry the girl, he could marry her to his son; if his son did not want to marry her, they had to set her free. A female Hebrew slave could not go out free as the menservants did at the end of six years, but after seven years she became betrothed to the master (Ex. 21:7). Since the daughter had been sold into servitude, the master could betroth her to any of his sons.

King Saul expressed a unique type of bride wealth. After David smote Goliath, the Philistine, he went to live with King Saul of Israel. But Saul's daughter Michal revealed her love for David, and Saul seized on the moment to make a deal: if David would bring back one hundred Philistine foreskins, he could marry his daughter. Instead David brought back two hundred foreskins and Saul blessed his daughter and gave her to him. The handing over of bride wealth gifts made the official engagement almost as binding as marriage. In Exodus 22:16, any man who had defiled a woman who is not betrothed would pay the bride wealth and was obliged to take her as a wife. To underscore the importance of bride wealth, any man who defiled a betrothed woman would be stoned to death. According to middle Assyrian laws codified, if a man raped an unbetrothed maiden, he could be forced to marry her and pay bride wealth to her father. If the father did not wish to give his daughter to the rapist, he could take the bride wealth. Such laws suggest the possibility of marriage by rape. Community pressure would be on the father to accept the marriage, such as that of Shechem as his son-in-law. In the eyes of the community, Dinah would be "damaged goods" to any other suitor. Hamor, Shechem's father, arranged a meeting with Jacob, attended by all of Dinah's brothers. He asked not only for Dinah's hand in marriage for his son, but also for other marriages between the families. He offered to pay whatever she said (Gen. 34:8-12).

Bride wealth negotiations were a family responsibility. Jacob's sons took over the negotiations and deceitfully agreed to the marriage on condition that all the men of Shechem would submit to circumcision. Simeon and Levi "took Dinah out of Shechem's house" when the men of Shechem were still recuperating. This can only mean that payment of bride wealth, which included the circumcision of Shechem, concluded a formal marriage. Dinah had accompanied Shechem as his bride. Bride wealth could be any agreed action by both parties. In some instances, *mohar* was given not as compensation but to enhance the prestige of the giver. The gift served to establish a blood-covenant between the giver and the recipient, and the bond was complete when there was a fair exchange and compensation. Therefore, marriage was not merely an incidental transaction between the two families; it created and cemented a relationship of alliance between them. One family gave a very precious possession, a daughter; the other, to put things on an equal footing, gave a valuable present. The *mohar* thus established the prestige of the husband and his family, because marriage was a symbol of a success in the society. Social usage in antiquity required the groom to give presents to the bride at betrothal, which were technically named *mattan*, voluntary gifts. No biblical legislation was connected with this, for it was not considered legal obligation. Originally *mohar* and *mattan* were both paid in cash, yet clearly distinct from each other. The former was given to the father, the latter to the bride. The former was legal and compulsory, the latter social and voluntary. *Mohar* and *mattan* became so closely allied as to make it difficult to distinguish between them. The amount of *mattan* was not fixed, but varied according to the social position of the couple. Thus *mattan* is recorded in the Talmud ranging from a million dinars to a hundred zuzim. If the husband wished the *mattan* to remain the private possession of his wife and fully in her control, he would write a special deed, called *sheter mattah lehud*.

It is hard to state the betrothal age for men. In the Old Testament times, men worked with their fathers for several years after puberty, so as to gain experience and to assist in saving for *mohar*, to the point of making some sort of gift for the bride such as jewellery. This was witnessed in Eliezer's and Hosea's presentation of silver to Rebekah and Gomer, respectively. Bride wealth in biblical times established the prestige of the husband and his family, and gave him authority over his wife. For a Dinka man who has paid bride wealth, the woman is under him and she has to serve the groom. When Rebekah came to Isaac's home she had to come down from Carmel as an act of humility and service. A man's worth in the Dinka community was valued at how he can pay the bride wealth. Shechem was valued according to how he responded to the call for circumcision in order to marry Dinah. Isaac was respected when Abraham paid bride wealth for him. Jacob earned prestige when he worked for extra seven years as bride wealth for Rachel.

Bride Wealth and Christianity in Africa today

Any Christian theology proceeds through participation in and reflection on activities in the society. Theology requires facing the realities in any given society. Among African peoples, bride wealth practice has been an important point of conflict between Christianity and African beliefs. Bride wealth was viewed as heathen by a section of western missionaries. They felt this practice had been used as a tool of making money by parents whose daughters get married, and that men who paid bride wealth misused the women as servants and tools of oppression. Bride wealth can be an impediment to divorce because the woman will not go back to her parents' home. There is a tedious process of recovering the bride wealth gifts. Among the Dinka, the bride wealth gifts are shared out among the bride's relatives. In the event of a divorce, it becomes difficult to get back the cows from all the relatives. The cows are shared amongst the boys in the bride's family members who want to marry. Since bride wealth is a symbol of friendship that is formed through a covenant, it is difficult to settle for divorce without talking on a friendly basis to solve issues in marriage.

Bride wealth is definitely mentioned in several forms in the Scripture. Bride wealth in the scriptures is expressed through exchange of silver shekels, land, foreskins and maids. God speaks to us in our experiences and cultures so that we can understand Him better. It is a biblical belief that, whenever man encounters man, God is present as a witness and party to the encounter. Therefore, in bride wealth encounters in the Old Testament, God is present (Macquarrie, 2004). God is a God of covenants. Christianity should not throw away bride wealth because it is a covenant between two parties. In God's covenant with His people there is always a sign to seal the covenant. He always ensures there is a token, which acts as a constant reminder of the terms of the covenant. With Noah in Genesis 8:20-22 and 9:14-17, it was the rainbow. Abraham had to undergo circumcision in Gen. 17:9-11. Jesus had the seal of His blood as proof of the covenant of our salvation. Bride wealth was established through Jesus Christ being our bridegroom, who paid a very high price. In the Hebrew biblical betrothal practice, gifts given to the bride and a cup called a cup of the covenant was shared and sealed between the bride and the groom with the drinking of the wine. This cup, known as the cup of the covenant, is spoken of in Jeremiah 31:31-33 and in Luke 20:22. Christ's shedding of his blood, and similarly the slaughtering of *biol* among the Dinka, signified a new relationship. To seal this marriage covenant in public it is important to have a public Christian wedding ceremony in a Bible-believing church, for marriage is a covenant relationship between a man and a woman on the horizontal level, and between God and both of them on the vertical level. This requires a clear understanding of the various covenants alluded to in the Scriptures, with a clear distinction made so as to refer to those that specifically mention or allude to marriage.

God is present in bride wealth practice. Abraham was chosen of God and God saved Isaac from being sacrificed. Right from his birth God was with Isaac. He fulfilled his promise that Abraham would be a father of a great nation. In Genesis 24, Eliezer, Abraham's servant, chose a wife for Isaac. If Jehovah was not in the plans, Laban could have disagreed and Rebekah could have said no. But the Lord triumphed over all potential problems for he had a special interest in Isaac. If God had not approved of the gifts, Laban and Rebekah would have bluntly rejected the offer. God gave David victory to get two hundred Philistine foreskins to pay bride wealth for Michal, King Saul's daughter. In His omniscience, God knew reasons for David's fight with the Philistines in this particular case. The victory is God's approval of the intended purpose of David's bride wealth war against the Philistines. Friendship is a key value of human life. God calls His people to demonstrate love. Payment of bride wealth and exchange of gifts signifies love. God is love, which is expressed through our relationship with other people. Relationship is formed because bride wealth is a covenant between two families. Bride wealth joins two families together and it fits with Christ's description of his followers being one people before God. Bride wealth builds up friendship that is based on love; it brings friendship between the two families. God through Jesus is the author of friendship and love.

Exploitation and oppression is not God's will for humanity. In some instances, bride wealth can be used as a tool of oppression against the groom. The bride's family can fix a high bride wealth price which is out of reach for the bridegroom. King Saul demanded one hundred foreskins, which was an uphill task for David. Laban demanded that Jacob work for seven extra years to get the love of his heart, Rachel. This kind of exploitation is witnessed among various groups of the Dinka. The payment of more than thirty cattle in the current economic situation is a great exploitation. Indeed, if bride wealth is friendship, negotiations should be carried out with a mind free from exploitation. God through Jesus Christ is against oppression. Jesus came to free the oppressed and set the prisoners free. Those oppressed by this practice have consolation in Jesus, though it should be noted that Jesus never came to abolish the laws but to free those oppressed (Luke 4:16-20). When the true meaning of bride wealth, a beginning of relationship, is lost, then it becomes oppressive rather than a friendship-building exercise.

God created male and female in His own image. They are both equal before God as indicated in Galatians 3:28-29. Mostly, it is the man who pays the bride wealth. Payment of bride wealth does not make man superior. It does not give freedom for the subjugation of women. Biblical bride wealth practice does not condone the groom acting superior and oppressing women. Isaac, Jacob, and David did not oppress their wives, yet they paid bride wealth. The bride wealth principle is lost when men make women servants in total contrast of God's intention for creation. God is the giver of life. No amount of precious items can be measured to pay for human life. In biblical times the *mohar* was valued in terms of the status of the parents and the beauty of the girl. David had to pay one hundred Philistine foreskins to marry Michal. Abraham paid fifty shekels and gave Rebekah special gifts to marry his son Isaac. Both Michal and Rebekah had special status. Any item cannot equate the value and the physical beauty of a person. Bride wealth should not be considered as compensation, because it is only God who can compensate human life. The human body is fearful and wonderful made by God; hence there is no substitute for it in any form (Psalm 139:14).

Conclusion

The Christian model of marriage faces major challenges in Africa. A great number of men and women live together without getting the "formal church" or approved weddings. For cultural and social reasons, marriage rites such as bride wealth have ceased to be a viable option for many people. Marriage, as understood in traditional African societies, is a protracted process, typically preceded by a long period of wooing and negotiations between two families (Guichard, 1996). African theologians must seek to address issues that seem close to the African heart and explain them well in the simplest terms possible. On the whole, the Dinka case has helped us to critically re-evaluate ourselves in light of marital crisis in Africa. In other words, how should the bride wealth be viewed? And how should it be conducted in African Christianity? While the article has not satisfied all the marital concerns, it has helped in triggering the matter for further action, and further debate.

Nevertheless, the Dinka, like in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, need a theology that identifies with them, but at the same time does not compromise on biblical truths. Bride wealth, which is the linking of two families in the Dinka society, as in the rest of African societies remains a critical concern. In view of this, there is need to study the importance of bride wealth within biblical and traditional African contexts in order to fully gain a balanced position regarding the practice.

REFERENCES

- Beller, Remy. *Life, Person and Community in Africa: A Way towards Inculturation with the Spirituality of the Focolare*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications – Africa, 2001.
- Carson, D. J., and A. Motyer. *New Bible Commentary*, 21st. Century Edition. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Cole, Alan. *Old Testament Commentaries of Exodus*. Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1973.
- Davidson, Robert. *The Cambridge Bible Commentary*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Deng, Francis. *The Dinka of the Sudan: A Case Study in Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Inc., 1972.
- Douglas J. D., ed. *The New Bible Dictionary*. London: Cambridge, 1977.
- Grey, Donald. *Genesis: A Devotional Exposition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1976.
- Guichard, Pierre, and Jean Pierre Cuvillier. *A History of the Family*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.
- Guthie, D. J., and J. A. Motyer. *New Bible Commentary*. Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1982.
- Hammond, Peter. *Faith under Fire in Sudan*. Cape Town: Frontline Publishers, 1998.
- Hastings, Adrian. *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*. New York: Clarendon, 1989.
- Haselbarth, Hans. *Christian Ethics in the African Context*. Nairobi: Uzima press, 2004.

- Imasogie, Osadolor. *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*. Achimote, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1983.
- Kirwen, Michael. *African Cultural Knowledge: Themes and Embedded Beliefs*. Nairobi: MIAS, 2005.
- King, Noel. *An African Cosmos: An Introduction to Religion in Africa*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishers, 1986.
- Louis, Epstein. *The Jewish People: The Jewish Marriage Contract*. New York: Arno Press, 1973
- Macquarrie, John. *Principles of Christian Theology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.
- Maluma, Edna. *Women's Perspectives, Abundant Life for Women. Claiming the Promise: African Churches Speak* (New York: Friendship Press, 1994).
- Mbiti, John. *Introduction to African Religion*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1991.
- _____. *Love and Marriage in Africa*. Nairobi: Longman, 1973.
- McKenzie, John. *A Theology of the Old Testament*. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1974.
- Mugambi, J. *African Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1989.
- _____. *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*. Nairobi: Longman, 1989.
- _____. .
- Mutabi, Jane. *Indigenous Religion and Culture: African Churches Speak*. New York: Friendship Press, 1994.
- Nickel, Mark. *Dinka Christianity: The Origins and Development of Christianity among the Dinka of Sudan with Special Reference to the Songs of Dinka Christians*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications – Africa, 2001.
- Nuer, Werner. *Man and Woman in Christian Perspective*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991.
- Oduyoye, Mercy. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Pfeifer, Charles, and Everett Harrison, eds. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1962.
- Stuchbely, Ian. *This Is Our Faith: Guide to Life, Worship and Belief for Anglicans*. Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1981.
- Shorter, Aylward. *African Christian Theology—Adaptation or Incarnation*. New York: Chapman Publishers, 1975.
- Unger, Merrill F., et al. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1984.
- Waal, Annemarie. *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion*. New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2001.
- Werner, R., W. Anderson, and A. Wheeler. *Day of Devastation Day of Contentment: The History of the Sudanese Church Across 2000 Years*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications – Africa, 2001.
- Wheeler, Andrew. *Land of Promise: Church Growth in a Sudan at War*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications – Africa, 1997.

Interviews

- Aluel, Mary. Interview by author, Kakuma Camp, Kenya, 17/1/08.
- Daau, John Chol. Interview by author, Nairobi. 10/3/08.
- Galwak, Samuel. Interview by author, Nairobi, 21/3/08.
- Khuer, Joseph. Interview by author, Nakuru, Kenya, 9/12/07.
- Matiop, Daniel. Interview by author, Kakuma Camp, Kenya, 14/1/08.
- Nun, Abraham. Interview by author, Kakuma Camp, Kenya, 22/12/07.