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THE PRICE OF BRIDE PRICE? CONSIDERATIONS

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***Abstract**: The purpose of this essay is to consider the practice of bride price and some of the various outcomes of the practice. Of interest is better understanding cultural tradition, meaning, potential changes in meaning and their associations with the lives of young women, both adverse (e.g., relationships with poverty, domestic violence, etc.) as well as positive outcomes (e.g., higher levels of education, elevated levels of happiness, less tolerance of interpersonal violence, etc.). Considerations and implications are explored as related to the advancement of young women and girls.*
***Keywords**: bride price, gender, traditional sexual script, conditioning, culture*

1. Introduction: bride price

Tamaryn Green, Miss South Africa 2018 and Miss Universe first runner-up 2018, is now Dr. Tamaryn Green Nxumalo, completing medical school and her internship as an anesthesiologist (Naidoo, 2021). Busy, fulfilling her roles as Miss South Africa and Miss Universe contestant, Dr. Green was also medical student. Given she personally suffered in silence from tuberculosis (TB) in 2015, her work as a medical professional involves destigmatizing TB so that individuals feel comfortable beginning treatment regimens as soon as possible (*Coloured South Africa*, 2019). Beautiful. Personable. Intelligent. Educated. Dr. Green Nxumalo is to be acknowledged and respected, serving as a role model to many young women and girls.

Recently married, Dr. Green Nxumalo shared news of her engagement, *lobola* (bride price) negotiations, and marriage to entrepreneur Ze Nxumalo on her social media. Myriad news outlets also reported the nuptial news. "The couple made their relationship public in 2019

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and got engaged in April. Nxumalo later took the next step in their love story when he paid lobola for Green in June. But the icing on top has been their umembeso ceremony that was held in Cape Town....” (Seemala, 2021, para. 2). A lobolo is a bride price. “‘Umembeso’ is a gift-giving ceremony” (para. 4) associated with “the traditional Zulu wedding process. This usually happens after the lobolo has been paid, and it involves the groom and his family bringing gifts to the bride’s family” (Joyce, 2021, para. 4 & 5). Related to the umembeso, Singh (2021, para. 2) writes, “For those who don’t know, umembeso is part of Zulu weddings and comes after the lobola negotiations. At the ceremony, the groom showers the bride’s family with gifts.” Traditionally, the concept of lobola was and is to unite the families.

Bride price is commonplace and a tradition in many African and Asian cultures, although it might be nuanced differently in African versus Asian contexts (Chen & Pan, 2023). Chae et al. (2021) conducted a recent study on bridewealth with over 1,500 women in sub-Saharan Africa and found that the practice has evolved considerably in the 20th and recent 21st century. Specifically, the authors argue that more of the bridewealth responsibility falls onto the groom vs. the family, that bridewealth involves money more often than livestock, that the amount of bridewealth can be considerable and that the practice of bridewealth has declined over time. Moreover, the authors found that women in bridewealth (i.e., lobolo) marriages tended to be in wealthier unions, are less likely to divorce and also less likely to engage in paid work outside of the marriage as compared to women in non-bridewealth marriages. The authors suggest that practice of bridewealth is central to custom and tradition, thereby recognizing the validity of the marriage and contributing to its constancy. Independence in making decisions as well as birth control use was similar among women in the sample, regardless of being in a bridewealth vs. non-bridewealth marriage. The authors concluded that the study results suggest a shift in bridewealth from family power and oversight to a greater reflection of autonomous status and wealth.

Similarly, research exists (e.g., Ashraf et al., 2020) suggesting that bride price, particularly a higher bride price, encourages families to invest in their daughter’s education as an educated daughter demands a higher bride price, thereby increasing a woman’s educational level, independence, and reduces the bride’s/wife’s willingness to tolerate a dissatisfying and/or abusive relationship. From a cultural and traditional standpoint, it has been argued that bride price gives the marriage recognition and legitimacy, thereby contributing to a woman’s sense of worth and value. These perceptions might be amplified as the bride price amplifies

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(e.g., the husband and his family are willing to pay a high bride price because he and his family recognize that he is marrying a very educated and valued individual).

Alternatively, research findings (e.g., Adjei & Mpiani, 2018; Mbaye & Wagner, 2016), to be addressed later in this piece, argue against the practice of bride price, citing negative implications such as commodification of women, objectification, and adverse health (encourages early fertility) and educational (encourages early marriage, thereby discouraging further educational attainment) implications, to name a few. Also of consideration is the notion that the bride will have to assist her husband in paying off the bride price, sometimes over the course of years, which could cause economic hardship for her (and her husband). Related, also contended is the escalation of bride price has made marriage unobtainable for some men and their families; that is, although the couple may be in love, the marriage might not happen due to the bride's family requesting a high bride price and/or raising it – thereby possibly turning the custom into a competition and commodifying the bride (Yan, 2023). As a result, some countries, such as China, have called for reform, with suggestions such as "simplifying weddings" (para. 6) and engaging in steps "to rein in 'sky-rocketing' bride prices through training and organizing collective weddings" (para. 7). Similar calls have been made in African countries, calling for an end to the "extortion" (para. 9) of young men as related to bride price, not to mention potentially adversely affecting a woman's self-respect (Iremeka, 2023).

Overall, and being an outsider to such cultural traditions and expectations, the notion of bride price is intriguing on a variety of fronts. Approaching the subject naively as an outsider, from a western perspective, one might wonder if someone like Dr. Green Nxumalo, as a modern, educated, self-sufficient woman, might participate in the bride price practice and tradition; however, as reported, Dr. Green Nxumalo embraced the practice of bride price and bride price (lobola) was paid (more ceremonial information in Betty, 2020).

Similarly, as an outsider, a non-anthropologist, and non-native of practicing countries and cultures, when one looks through a western lens, questions of consideration swirl as to whether or not bride price treats women as a commodity – as goods for which a valuation is determined and a price is paid? Is a woman's worth reduced to a price tag? Does the payment of bride price imply the husband's ownership of the wife? What are the short- and long-term implications of the bride price practice? Is the practice reductionist and patriarchal? Does the practice reduce the value and standing of young women and silence or shush her voice? All of these questions swirl, questions sparking from the influence of westernized cultural scripts. Similarly, questions also exist about tradition, symbolism, culture and custom. Adjei (2019)

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suggests that there exist myriad considerations, from honoring tradition, what the symbolism of the bride price practice is supposed to represent, potential variance in interpretations of what the practice is supposed to represent, and negative and positive outcomes of the practice as related to the well-being of girls and women. Mordi (2019) argues much of the aforementioned – that bride price commodifies and holds adverse implications for women on a variety of fronts. Mordi continues, in specific relation to Nigeria, that it is possible to eliminate traditions harmful to girls and women and still honor the beautiful things the Nigerian culture has to offer. Similarly, research by Akurugu and colleagues suggests that eliminating bridewealth as a practice might actually worsen a woman's position (Akurugu et al., 2022; Akurugu et al., 2021). Instead, Akurugu and colleagues suggest that, rather than eliminating the bridewealth practice, to preserve the cultural practice, but return to a more community-based, indigenous approach to justice (Akurugu et al., 2022, p. 13) and traditional court (Akurugu et al., 2021). To that end, the purpose of this manuscript is to explore implications of the practice as related to outcomes for women.

Research exists addressing the adverse outcomes of bride price, such as treating young women as property and commodity (e.g., Mujuzi, 2010), potential increases in interpersonal violence (Adjei & Mpiani, 2018), or potential increased fertility expectations (Mbaye & Wagner, 2016). That said, there also exist research findings (see Ashraf et al., 2020) indicating that bride price, particularly high bride price, incentivizes investment not only in the daughter's education, but also in school construction, her school attendance and her educational choices. That is, Ashraf et al.'s research outcomes suggest that bride price, at least educationally speaking, is related to positive educational outcomes for young women and girls. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2018) examined many of the aforementioned potential negative outcomes of bride price (e.g., domestic violence, fertility implications) and found bride price to be associated with positive outcomes for young women.

The purpose of this essay is to consider the 'price' of bride price, although not nearly comprehensively; rather, perhaps more as questions to ponder. To begin, the essay is not exhaustive as there exist myriad considerations and capturing them all in totality would prove futile. That said, this essay begins by considering the tradition of bride price, the difference between a dowry and bride price, research findings addressing positive and negative implications for young women as related to bride price, parental incentives and disincentives for daughter educational investment, and future considerations.

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2. Bride price vs. dowry

Dalton (1966) addresses the complexities of variation in terminology, markets, economies among western and non-western societies and how the connotation of "bride price" is not necessarily synonymous with the connotation of "bridewealth" (p. 732). Bride price and dowry are also often referred to interchangeably, although the practices are not synonymous. Variations of dowry and bride price also exist (Stol, 2016). Relying on Murdock's (1981) work, Ashraf et al. (2020) review variation regarding bride price (e.g., bridewealth, token bride price, etc.). Mzinga's (2000) work, involving several interviews, addresses the difference between bride price and bridewealth, noting that bride price suggests that the woman is being sold, whereas bridewealth is an acknowledgement of consideration to the bride's parents for investing in her upbringing. According to Anderson (2007), dowry involves payment (e.g., money, goods) from the bride's family to that of the groom. This practice is more commonplace in southern Asia. Bride price, on the other hand, involves payment from the groom and groom's family to that of the bride (Anderson, 2007). Bride price is more commonplace in Africa. Adjei and Mpiani (2018) write:

> Payment of bride price remains a common and valued cultural practice in most African countries. The practice is particularly prevalent in more than 90% of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Ngutor, Yendev, & Arumun, 2013). For example, between 1980 and 1990, 88% and 79% of marriages contracted in rural and urban Uganda respectively involved payment of bride price (Huzayyin & Acsádi, 1976, as cited in Anderson, 2007). (p. 921)

3. Perspectives on bride price

A recent piece in Nigerian news outlet *The Whistler* included feedback about bride price from men and women of various professions in Nigeria. Specifically, respondents were asked whether bride price should be continued or phased out. All respondents supported the continuation of bride price, noting aspects such as authentication of the marriage, symbolism, covenant, and commitment on the part of the groom to take the marriage and his role as husband seriously, to name a few (Kalu, 2019).

Adjei and Mpiani (2018) further that the payment of bride price is a common, cultural practice with longstanding tradition, going back centuries, and represents myriad things, such as the bride's family's loss of their daughter, compensation for raising her, and contributes to recognizing the authenticity of the marriage and subsequent offspring, to name a few. Payments can be substantial and can vary across countries (Anderson, 2007). Bride price can encompass

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things such as cash payments, furniture, jewelry (Mbaye & Wagner, 2016) to iPads, cell phones, laptops and other electronic devices (Adjei, 2019). It appears that there exist a wide range of resources to be exchanged, from cattle to computers to cash. Myriad factors can affect bride price, from the groom's wealth and position to the bride's educational level (Adjei, 2019). Bride price is complex and woven into the fabric of cultural and gender identity in many nations (Adjei & Mpiani, 2018).

Chisango et al. (2022) examined the intricacies of bride price (lobola) as framed by ambivalent sexism theory (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 2001). Chisango et al. acknowledge the hostile and benevolent components of ambivalent sexism, with a focus on benevolent sexism as related to bride price. On the surface, one might conclude that benevolent sexism comes across as men's protection and cherishing of women, particularly their wives. Yet, more deeply, the authors argue that benevolent sexism can nevertheless impede women's progress, independence and career goals. The authors further note that, when examined in a purely traditional sense, the intention of bride price was to offer hospitality and unity between the marrying families and recognize the legitimization of the marriage. However, the authors contend that over the years, in Zimbabwe, for example, bride price has become commercialization. In a study of over 400 male and female university students, the authors found the embracing of lobola (bride price) and benevolent sexism restricted women's behavior through paternalistic chivalry. Related, the relationship between embracing lobola and paternalistic chivalry was mediated by benevolent sexism. In an examination of locals' feelings about bride price, a 2015 piece published by the BBC addresses bride price similarity and variance across numerous African nations in light of Uganda's top court ruling that bride price is legal, but banning the refund of bride price in the event of divorce. Although more cursory versus in depth, various BBC Africa partners weighed in about bride price meaning and practice in various African nations. For example, Pumza Fihlani of South Africa notes:

> A bride price here is known as "lobola", where the groom's family presents either money or cows or both to the bride's family as a gesture of his willingness to marry her. The payment of lobola is a sign of the man's commitment to take care of his wife and is seen as a symbolic act and a necessary part of upholding culture, rather than a purchase. (2015, para. 4 & 5)

Similar to South Africa, bride price is also known as lobola in Zimbabwe. BBC African correspondent Kim Chakanetsa comments:

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> The term "lobola" is also used in southern Zimbabwe, but in Shona communities it is known as "roora" and while the tradition is to give cattle, this is now often replaced by cash – the amount is subject to negotiation. There are several stages to the tradition and it is seen as a way of thanking the bride's family for bringing her up, but there is no sense that the bride is being bought. (2015, para. 6 & 7)

Correspondent Abdourahmane Dia of Senegal adds:

> The payment of bride price is customary in Senegal but largely symbolic.
> A small amount of money and a kola nut is given to the bride's family at the mosque, after that the sum handed over can be anywhere from less than $100 to tens of thousands. (2015, para. 8 & 9)

BBC Africa correspondent Angela Ngendo addresses the nuances in Kenya, where bride price is constitutionally nonobligatory, yet practiced:

> The Kenyan constitution outlaws the obligation to pay a bride price but it is widely understood that it will be paid. Pastoral communities insist that it is paid in cattle and it has been cited as a cause of cattle rustling, whereas families in other communities will accept cash. There is a sense that a transaction has taken place over the bride. (2015, para. 10-12)

Similarly symbolic in Burkina Faso, correspondent Leone Ouedraogo offers:

> The bride price is commonly paid in Burkinabe culture and is largely a symbolic act.
> There is no set amount and a little money is given, but it is mainly in goods such as kola nuts, drinks, cigarettes – and some ethnic groups may give a goat.
> However, a bride's family is not normally too demanding. (2015, para. 13-15)

Finally, BBC Africa correspondent Aichatou Moussa adds from Niger:

> In Niger there is an official maximum rate for a bride price of 50,000 CFA francs ($83, £54) but many pay much more than this. The price is agreed between the families, but it is seen as a symbolic act rather than about buying the wife as Nigeriens say no matter how much is paid you cannot buy a human being. (2015, para. 16 & 17)

Although the aforementioned reflect individuals' varied perspectives on the practice, Indonesian author Harefa (2022) tells her story of personally experiencing bride price as a Nias woman and the feelings associated with the practice. Harefa explains that, although she was the soon-to-be wife, she was not able to partake in the bride price negotiations between her family and her soon-to-be husband's family. She explains her feelings of objectification and commodification and as a non-participant in the process; yet, the recipient of the outcome. Harefa continues that the process felt discriminatory toward women. Harefa asks:

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> I therefore ask: why is this bride price tradition still practised by Nias people? For some, it solidifies marriage; for others, it improves social status. Another reason is that it increases interdependence between groups. These reasons appear to benefit society, but my question is: why is a woman always offered as a victim to be sacrificed in the name of establishing a long-term relationship? Does the bride price practice also benefit women economically as wives? Does it support equal participation in marriage? (2022, p. 81)

4. Perceptions of bride price

Is the practice or perception of treating young women as a commodity associated with reduced personal voice, reduced agency and being treated as bartering chip in the relational marketplace? That is, does the practice not only represent a transfer from father's hand to groom's hand in the marriage, but also a transfer of goods in the sense that a price is paid for the relational exchange? Might it be argued that traditionally, commodification was not the intention of the bride price practice (Adjei, 2019); rather, the intention of the practice was to honor the marriage covenant, take husband responsibility, and unite families? Does the term *bridewealth* suggest recognition of and appreciation for the bride, per Mzinga (2000), as opposed to the commodification connotation tied to the term *bride price*? Complexities of tradition, culture, religion, potential perceived necessity (e.g., poor, rural households) exist regarding the practice and, as noted, variance exists within the practice.

The more westernized marital ceremony is also steeped in tradition and controversy. For centuries upon centuries, marriage was performed more out of necessity than as a function of romantic love. Indeed, romantic love coming into the equation is quite new in the historical scheme of things. Within the last century or so, many changes have occurred within the U.S. involving the woman's right to vote, birth control, and legal recognition of marital rape that have changed the landscape of marriage and perceptions of ownership, identity and rights (The Week Staff, 2015). Customs also exist with long cultural and religious traditions (e.g., father gives the bride's hand to the husband, the wife still often takes the husband's last name, tradition can still recognize the husband as the head of the household, etc.). Chen and Pan (2023) argue that, although bride price might be commonplace in many African and Asian cultures, the impact might not be as adverse on Asian women. That said, the authors nevertheless argue that negative implications exist related to stifled growth for Asian women. Specifically, in Chen and Pan's qualitative study on bride price in China, the researchers found that, while bride price might enable women to challenge tradition and absence of equality between the genders, the practice cannot be viewed as necessarily liberating for women.

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5. The price of bride price?

Several studies exist examining the potential negative and detrimental effects of bride price. For example, Kaye et al. (2005) conducted focus groups and in depth interviews in Wakiso District, Uganda, and found several adverse implications for bride price:

> …respondents perceived a strong connection between bride price payment and domestic violence, age differentials between spouses, early marriage, poor sex negotiation, contraceptive non-use, high fertility, unwanted pregnancy and induced abortion. Bride price payment was perceived to worsen existing gender inequalities and inequities, especially regarding reproductive health decision-making. In different societies, the importance of bride price is dependent on what form it takes, when is it paid (stage of the woman's life cycle), how payment is made (lump sum or installments), whether there are situations for repayment, and community perceptions of implications for such repayment. (p. 302)

In more recent research, Adjei and Mpiani (2018) examined the relationship between bride price and interpersonal violence (IPV). Conducting a series of interviews in Ghana regarding bride price practices and associations with cultural and gender identity, the authors found some support that paying a bride price came with the perception that the wife must obey her husband, even if abusive, and it wasn't the family's place to intervene given the bride price exchange had been made. The woman was now seen as a wife and in the care of her husband – his responsibility, as opposed to holding the identity of daughter and being in her family's care and watchful eye. Of consideration is that if something happens to the daughter (now bride), the family will be upset because, with the bride price, the husband assumed responsibility for her wellbeing. To ensure her wellbeing, she needs to be under watch so nothing happens to her, thereby upsetting her family. Related, Rees et al. (2016) conducted a survey regarding bride price and mental health distress with over 1,000 female respondents as well as conducted interviews with 77 female respondents hailing from both rural and urban parts of Timor-Leste in sub-Saharan Africa. Their findings indicate escalated mental health distress within the marriage, with the family, and escalated bouts of anger and experienced poverty. The authors called for mental health professionals to consider the negative impact of bride price on bride mental health, to consider it in mental health interventions, and to recognize bride price as a mental health risk factor, particularly among young women in poverty.

Other research suggests that bride price motivates a family to have their daughter marry young to gain family wealth. Mbaye and Wagner (2016) found that fertility pressures exist in arranged marriages and in polygamous relationships with low bride price in Senegal, but the same pressures did not demonstrate in monogamous or non-arranged marriages. For the girls

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and young women who are married off early by their families, implications beyond fertility include their education being stunted given these girls were pulled out of school early to be married and get the family paid. Related, the younger a woman is, the more likely she is to have a long road ahead in terms of repeated childbearing. Similarly, Sambe et al. (2013) found negative effects for marital stability, particularly when high bride price was involved, and increased the likelihood of domestic violence given the wife-as-property perception. The authors called for policy changes limiting the ceiling on bride price in response, regardless of the groom's socio-economic status. Related, Oduro et al. (2022) examined bride price and partner justification for domestic violence. Additionally, the authors examined a woman's likelihood of accepting domestic partner violence as related to her education level and wealth level.

Yet, other research findings demonstrate that a high bride price benefits a woman's educational outlook as the more educated she is, the greater bride price the family can demand (Ashraf et al., 2020). The more educated a woman is, the greater the likelihood that she will be intolerant of abusive relational conditions. Moreover, an educated woman likely has more labor market options at her disposal. It could be that more impoverished families are incentivized to marry the daughter earlier, whereas another family invests more in the daughter's education; thereby she resides at the family home longer, with the family obtaining a larger bride price in the end. Specifically, receiving bride price when the daughter is young equates with the family no longer being responsible for her food, clothing and shelter – the groom is – and that is a reduction in family financial responsibility for her upkeep and maintenance. This is weighed with what she contributes to the family home in terms of resources and labor. For some, bride price is not seen as commodification; rather, it is viewed as compensation to the family for doing a good job in raising the bride. Also, bride price is an acknowledgement that she is leaving her family structure, the family labor force, etc. and joining that of her husband's (Mulder, 1995). Thus, for example, if the bride helped her family agriculturally, or in the family store or restaurant, or helped with household chores or childcare, the bride price is meant to acknowledge that she is being taken away from that and the family will lose that labor force or assistance. As well, if a man wants children to carry on his lineage, he must pay the bride price to be married; thus, the bride price is an investment in lineage (Lowes & Nunn, 2018).

Anderson et al. (2018) examined whether a higher bride price paid at marriage is associated with marriage at a younger age, greater levels of fertility, increased acceptance of violence within the home, reduced likelihood of the wife leaving her husband, poorer marriage

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quality, and lower levels of wife happiness. The authors also examined whether the custom of having to pay back the bride price upon divorce causes wives to be trapped in unhappy and low-quality marriages. The authors found that high bride price did not have detrimental effects on young women; rather, high bride price demonstrated more positive effects on them. Specifically, wives in these circumstances were happier and experienced fewer issues with domestic violence. The one exception was situations where a high bride price had to be paid back in the case of divorce. The authors found that the only strong predictor of bride price was her education.

6. Parental (dis)incentives for daughter (and son) educational investment

That said, however, there also exist socio-economic factors and constraints that might affect the family decision and/or ability to invest in their daughter's education. As argued by Bau (2016), education offers a woman upward mobility that might take her away from home. As such, as Bau acknowledges, some parents might be disincentivized to invest in their daughter's education because it could increase the likelihood that they will not have her physical immediacy and care in their old age. The daughter's upward mobility might affect familial ties and familial proximity. Similarly, monies invested in the daughter's education might mean depletion of the family nest egg – monies that parents were counting on in their golden years for survival.

Yet, as noted, women spending earlier fertile years in school versus childbearing can reduce their risk of dying during childbirth due to young age (Bau, 2016). Each year in school increases a woman's wages by seven to 11 percent, as well as the likelihood that her eventual own children will be healthier and better educated. Even an extra year of schooling can mean a lot for the young girl/young woman. Bau notes that rates for young girls completing elementary school can be "as low as 30% in some sub-Saharan African countries" (Bau, 2016, para. 4). Yet, during her collaborative work in Zambia and Indonesia, more educated women garnered a higher bride price, with a 60% bride price increase in Indonesia for completing elementary school alone (Ashraf, Bau, Nunn & Voena, 2020; Bau, 2016).

In addition, and, perhaps, not immediately apparent, is the notion that there exists a connection between higher bride price and school construction and proximity. Specifically, Ashraf et al. (2016; 2020) found that new school construction within proximity to girls' and women's home increased their likelihood of attending school. The authors found that girls and women who hailed from strong bride price cultures were more likely to be receptive to school

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proximity and attendance. Specifically, in Indonesia and Zambia, the authors' research findings indicated that girls' educational enrollment rose in districts where schools were being built if the girls hailed from ethnic groups with strong bride price traditions. However, for girls who hailed from ethnic groups in both countries that didn't practice bride price, the relationship between school construction and enrollment was negligible (Ashraf et al., 2016; 2020).

In her piece for *The Conversation*, Natalie Bau (October 5, 2016) discusses unexpected or unintentional outcomes for women as related to their education. For example, Bau explains that, in her Indonesian research, daughters who hailed from families where the parents had pension plans in place (and, therefore, had less reliance on the daughter to care for them in their old age), were less likely to receive education and were 13% less likely to finish secondary school. Bau found that this outcome was accentuated in areas with more pension plan offices. Similarly, Bau found kindred results in Ghana, but for boys. Specifically, when comparing patrilocal to non-patrilocal boys in Ghana, patrilocal boys in Ghana whose parents had a pension plan in place were less likely to receive formal education. Sons in this situation had an eight percent less likelihood of completing their primary education (Bau, 2016).

As addressed throughout this essay, there exist many considerations related to bride price such as symbolism, tradition, parental investment and perceived return on investment. As noted, some research indicates that when parents invest in their daughter's education, they can not only demand a higher bride price (which could better position the parents financially), but their daughter benefits given she is more educated, more marketable as related to employment and less likely to tolerate an abusive or dissatisfying marriage.

Some of the findings shared in this essay indicate that an educated woman garners greater monetary payout to the bride's parents from the groom. The more educated she is, the more the parents are compensated. Education contributes to girls' and young women's agency, voice and standing. Knowledge is power. These forces, theoretically in terms of a woman's power, are grated against by the incentive behind the educational provision; that is, her market value goes up, which arouses the consideration of commodification vs. an empowerment move. Considering the aforementioned, Bau (2016) reflects on work and research with Ashraf et al. (2016), "All this shows that culture matters. While bride price traditions may have significant downsides, our findings suggest that bride price helps insure that daughters are educated" (para. 27).

7. Conclusion

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As noted at the onset of this essay, this piece is nowhere near being exhaustive nor does it come near in capturing the cultural or gendered complexities (Adjei & Mpiani, 2018) of bride price practices or traditions across nations, cultures, religions, etc. On the surface, it can be argued that practices that adversely affect young women stifle their voice, suppress their agency, and increase their susceptibility to outcomes such as interpersonal violence are concerning. That said, practices that increase girls' and young women's likelihood of a good education, increase their position in the labor market and decrease their likelihood of tolerating domestic violence are considered as valuable to the advancement of girls and young women. Family unification is also of importance. There are so many complexities and traditions to consider, as well as policies and pathways toward the elevating of girls and young women. To be taken into account, among other things, are concepts of tradition, symbolism, family unification, who benefits, who doesn't, and questions of whether such practices should be reformed or abolished (Conteh, 2016; Kalu, 2019), policy and practical implications.

Looking through a western lens, of interest is to learn more and understand more as an outsider non-participant. The United Nation's (2022) "Sustainable Development Goals Report" calls for elevating girls and women, frowning upon forced marriage, trafficking, rape, and loss of educational and reproductive rights. Leaders from over 100 world nations joined to commit to prioritizing girls and women. The UN Secretary General also called for prioritizing girls and women in light of the pandemic, noting that women have been and are overwhelmingly and adversely affected as they often hold the frontlines in healthcare, childcare and domestic care (United Nations, 2020). Of complexity is that a practice, such as bride price, is associated in the research with both negative outcomes, such as forced marriage, forced fertility, or increased interpersonal violence, as well as positive outcomes such as increased education, increased labor market options, and less tolerance for domestic abuse.

Bride price is complex and woven into the fabric of cultural and gender identity in many nations (Adjei & Mpiani, 2018). Regarding bridewealth, Mulder (1995) contends: "bridewealth payments are deeply embedded in culturally constituted systems and not motivated *simply* by commercial or economic factors" (p. 573, original emphasis). For example, in a demonstration of making the practice their own, couples report engaging in the custom to acknowledge culture and roots, but modifying the custom such that the bride price paid to the bride's parents will be returned to the newly married couple after their marriage (Michelle, 2020). At the end of the day, as argued by Mordi (2019), and, again, with swirling questions for an outsider, of consideration are: how might culture and tradition be acknowledged while synonymously

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elevating the position of girls and young women? Further research and conversation regarding celebrating culture and custom while simultaneously being mindful of autonomy, agency, health and welfare are encouraged.

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