

# In the Name of Tradition: Reflections on Bride Wealth Negotiation in Southern Nigeria

Jane Diala<sup>1</sup>

It was a sunny Friday afternoon in Eziamma, a sleepy town in Southern Nigeria. The entire compound had received thorough cleaning to welcome the expected guests. A group of women bustled in a corner of the compound, cooking different, mouth-watering dishes. A smaller group of men occupied the other side of the compound, chatting, laughing, and setting up chairs and canopies. Children ran around, helping where they could. Music played softly in the background. There was a distinct feeling of joy in the atmosphere – the joy only a big traditional wedding ceremony could generate. Cynthia,<sup>2</sup> the bride to be, was all dressed up, beautifully adorned, and grinning from ear to ear as she anxiously waited to be declared Mrs Johnson. However, this could only happen after payment of her bride wealth.

Johnson duly arrived with his family and friends, all dressed lavishly. Unlike Cynthia, his smile was restrained, for he was nervous over the outcome of the bride wealth negotiation. His expression encapsulated the mood of grooms in Southern Nigeria, a region that witnesses the highest rates of bride wealth payment in Nigeria.

Bride wealth is the legitimating symbol of a customary law marriage.<sup>3</sup> In the past, it often manifested as labour or service from the groom to the family of the wife for an agreed period.<sup>4</sup> Often, this labour or service was accompanied by a small cash payment and drinks. However, this form of payment has been eroded by urbanisation, labour migration, economic stratification, and other socio-economic changes. Today, bride wealth payment takes the form of cash and other materials of very expensive value, which are listed on a marriage list and handed to the groom on or before the wedding day. In places such as Mbaise in Southern Nigeria, the marriage list is sometimes so long that it rivals an Aramaic papyrus. Johnson's fears were confirmed soon after his arrival, when his kinsmen and potential in-laws began haggling over the items in the marriage list and how much was to be paid as bride wealth.

I looked for Cynthia. She was nowhere to be seen, for tradition forbids her from partaking in her bride wealth negotiation. Johnson was present, but merely a passive participant. His voice in the negotiations was represented by his eldest brother who, as an elder put it, "*has his best interest at heart.*" As the subject of the negotiations, Cynthia was represented by her father, with her younger brother

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD Candidate, University of Cape Town (UCT); LL.M (UCT), BL (Nigerian Law School, Enugu), LLB (Madonna University).

<sup>2</sup> All names used here are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Uche Isiugo-Abanihe, 'Bridewealth, marriage and fertility in the East-Central states of Nigeria' (1995) 51 (3/4) *Genus* 151, 152.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective* (9<sup>th</sup> edn, Wadsworth Publishing, 2011) 224.

passively participating. It had not been easy for me to obtain permission to monitor the ceremony.

Cynthia's family insisted that all the items enumerated in the marriage list be provided before their daughter would be handed over to Johnson in marriage.

Johnson's brother, Mike, obviously a man with a short fuse, stood up and shouted. *"These items are too much! You cannot expect us to provide all of them! If you wanted to open a provision shop, you should have said so directly. Are you selling your daughter or what?"*

Sensing danger, one of Mike's kinsmen tugged him back to his seat.

Undeterred, Mike continued. *"Johnson, please come back home and marry from our village! Is it a crime to marry?"*

Cynthia's father was unfazed. He had participated in numerous bride wealth negotiations and knew how to defuse tension. *"Training a daughter is expensive,"* he said genially. *"We are not selling Cynthia; if you truly love her, you should be happy to pay up."*

I asked Johnson why he was not contributing to the increasingly heated haggling. He stared blankly at me.

*"I mean you provided the money for this occasion,"* I explained, *"yet you have no right to explain why, for example, you bought only five fabrics out of the ten demanded in the marriage list, or question what happens to ten yams out of the 50 you bought."*

*"Ah,"* Johnson exclaimed. *"Culturally I am not allowed to participate, so even though I am allowed to be here, I am not allowed to talk."*

Johnson went on to explain that he trusted his family to do right by him. I left him to look for Cynthia.

I found her at the back of the house, called her aside and asked her why she was hiding at the back of the house rather than partaking in her bride wealth negotiation. She shrugged. *"Culturally, I am not supposed to be there; my father and brother are there and will represent me."* She went on to explain that she did not mind the loud haggling going on in the other side of the compound.

\* \* \*

Bride wealth negotiation raises the question of women's agency and, of course, gender equality. Ironically, my findings reveal that men are more opposed to the practice of bride wealth payment than women. On the one hand, Johnson and his family had complained that the amount requested from them was too much. On the other hand, Cynthia and her family believed that the items did not compare to the cost of raising her. Women's passivity in challenging cultural barriers of patriarchy, evident in their absence from bride wealth negotiation, is obviously significant for the persistence of

gender inequality. Although Johnson was a passive participant, Cynthia dared not show up. Although her absence suggests that bride wealth negotiation is an exclusive affair of men, field evidence shows that in the past, the groom was also excluded.<sup>5</sup> The fact that Johnson could observe proceedings is arguably the result of changing perceptions of men's ability to exercise agency and influence tradition to be more accommodating of their interests in bride wealth negotiation.

In the agrarian past when the custom of bride wealth emerged, parents were responsible for choosing spousal partners for their children. This is no longer the case, as young men and women now largely choose their partners. Arguably, their ability to choose is due to socio-economic changes such as education, migration, Christianity, and urbanisation. The freedom of women to choose their spousal partner plays an important role in determining the span of their sexual, reproductive, and economic freedom after marriage. In the past also, the groom's exclusion was justified on the ground of the group-based nature of wealth production.<sup>6</sup> Today, individual income generation is the norm, and prospective spouses could arguably use wealth as a bargaining tool for increased influence in bride wealth negotiation. Likewise, extending freedom for women to express opinions during bride wealth negotiation could go a long way in establishing their cultural identity.

It appears that women are oblivious of how their absence from bride wealth negotiation reproduces and perpetuates gender inequality, women's subordination, and arguably, intimate partner violence.<sup>7</sup> Cynthia appeared startled when I informed her how her presence in bride wealth negotiation could establish her independence and decision-making powers in as vitally important an issue as marriage. While women's increasing freedom to choose marriage partners is largely a product of the exercise of their agency, this agency appears to be missing in bride wealth negotiation. Notably, Cynthia is a practicing advocate. Despite her reasonable awareness of human rights, she is still hindered by tradition. It therefore appears that education alone does not enable women to challenge certain traditional norms like bride wealth negotiation due to their entrenched nature.

It is precisely the persistence of certain traditions in the face of agentic tools such as education, wealth, and religion that prompted me to embark on an investigation of structure-agency interplay in South-East Nigeria. Obviously, desktop research was inadequate for uncovering the socio-cultural power dynamics that shape bride wealth payment. I needed to understand how women use agency to navigate the cultural institution of bride wealth payment by 'blending' into the spaces in which women would traditionally not be allowed to enter. As a non-participant

---

<sup>5</sup> Uchendu Egodi 'Girls' Lives in Anioma' (2004) 19 *Asian Women* 175-195 at 176-184; JE Olowoye, FO Omololu, Y Aderinto, I Adeyefa, D Adeyemo, & B Osotimehin, 'Social construction of manhood in Nigeria: implications for male responsibility in reproductive health' (2004) 19 (2) *African population studies* 1-20 at 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Nwakamma Okoro, *The Customary Laws of Succession in Eastern Nigeria and the Statutory and Judicial Rules Governing their Application* (Sweet and Maxwell, 1966) 4.

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Odimegwu, and Christian Okemgbo, 'Gender role ideologies and prevalence of violence against women in Imo State, Nigeria' (2003) 5 (4) *Anthropologist* 225-236 at, 225.

observer, I wanted to use the opportunity of access to bride wealth negotiation parties to understand the implications of women's exclusion on gender relations.

\* \* \*

I asked Cynthia's father why he insisted on a huge amount of money for his daughter's bride wealth. He explained that she is the first daughter to marry in their family and that significant expenses had been incurred on her education. However, Cynthia had told me that from the age of ten, she had lived with one of her aunts, who took charge of her educational expenses until she met Johnson. Her father's excuse was therefore not the real reason for his family's high bride wealth demand. His real motivation was obviously poverty.

When I asked Cynthia's mother for her opinion, she replied that she only wanted her daughter to get married. She could only appeal to the women's group to take whatever items on the marriage list Johnson could afford. She too was not present during the bride wealth negotiation.

It is significant that legislation which seeks to reduce the quantum of bride wealth is treated disdainfully because informants believe that government should not regulate bride wealth. While I agree that bride wealth should not be legislatively regulated, I question the institutional structures which inform and reinforce the exorbitant items on marriage lists. In any case, law is not a panacea for high bride wealth payment.

My field experience enabled me to identify negotiating tools and strategies which women could use to improve their agency in bride wealth negotiation. I observed that women sometimes undermine their agency by being complicit in their invisibility in bride wealth negotiation. For women to have increased voice in bride wealth negotiation, they must negotiate greater access to bridewealth negotiation. To do this, they could use dialogue and, for women with financial muscle, economic coercion.

Finally, my observations revealed significant complementarity in the interplay of structure and agency. This complementarity is evident in the interdependent relationship between actors involved in bride wealth negotiation. For example, acting directly or through their husbands, brides' mothers influence their kin to accept lower bride wealth items. Also, brides could pressure their families by threatening to elope with prospective grooms. Brides may also help grooms with raising the funds for bride wealth. These examples illustrate how women's exercise of agency could reshape understandings of the structure versus agency debate. Ultimately, more research is needed on the economic, legal, and socio-cultural motivations that inform women's exercise of agency in issues related to marriage in Nigeria.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Mercifully, this area is receiving attention thanks to increased awareness of gender based violence and gender equality.