



## BRIDE WEALTH IN GHANA: A DETAILED ANALYSIS

**Dr. Ashutosh Trivedi**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science,  
Satyawati College, University of Delhi, Delhi (India).

### ABSTRACT:

The institution of marriage is an integral part of custom, tradition, and culture of any society. Under the aegis of globalization, on one hand, traditions, and customs in some parts of the world are witnessing changes, while some customs are still continuing. Bride-wealth is one such custom or tradition, which is still in practice, widely in African continent including Ghana. This article is an attempt to understand the finer nuances of the practice of bride-wealth, especially in Ghana. The study will provide a holistic overview of the practice by showcasing its positive as well negative aspects.



**KEY WORDS:** Types of marriage, bride-wealth, bride-price, polygamy.

### INTRODUCTION

In the Akan mythology of Ghana, “the earth (*Asase Yaa*) itself is considered a woman” (Mbiti, 1998, 69-82). This adage reflects how women play a central role in African religion, mythology and proverbs and held high status in society. Women play a crucial role in family and most African societies. They are active participants in providing support to themselves, their families including children. However, restrictions based on the structure of power relations and some traditional practices and customs often limit their access to resources (Stoeltje, 2002, vii). One of these practices is known as ‘bride wealth’, which has been in intellectual debate for a long time. For some, this practice demonstrates a high status attached with women, while some criticize the system. But, before discussing about the tradition of bride-wealth it is important to understand the various types of marriages in Ghana, since this practice is associated with marriage.

### MARRIAGE CUSTOM IN GHANA

Basically, there are mainly three types of marriages in Ghana. First, is the ‘*marriage under customary law*’. This is the most common type of marriage. It includes the possibility of polygamous marriages and bride-wealth. But it could vary among different ethnic groups. This oral contract results into alliance between two families. Through this alliance the man gains right over his wife and may even marry additional women (Fallon, 2003, 162-163).

Second is the ‘*marriage ordinance*’, which is based on a registration system for monogamous relationships. It doesn’t involve the participation of extended family members. It is primarily used for

the purpose of forming nuclear families. Divorce in this type of marriage is settled through courts (Fallon, 2003, 162-163).

Third, type of marriage is under religious laws. This includes '*mohammedans ordinance*' or 'Christian'. In such ordinance, marriage and divorce are registered under religious laws. For example, under the Islamic law, the husband has to pay a bride-wealth to the wife's family. He may also take up to four wives and may have additional mistresses (Fallon, 2003, 162-163).

Ghanaian people choose to marry according to one of these three types of marriages depending upon their ethnic group and religious beliefs.

### WOMEN AND BRIDE-WEALTH IN GHANA

There are different terms used for 'bride-wealth. It is also referred as 'bride-price', 'wife-purchase', '*lobola*' or 'purchase-money'. April A. Gordon also believes that bride-wealth in Africa is a custom that requires a transfer of money and goods from the husband's family to the wife's family or to the bride (Gordon, 1992, 204).

However, it is different from the system of 'dowry', which is prevalent in some parts of Asia. Both terms refer to the payments associated with the tradition of marriage. But both contrast with each other. "Bride price is paid by the groom's family to the bride's family, whereas dowry is paid by the bride's family to the groom" (Encyclopedia.com). Therefore, dowry could be considered as groom-price. Bride-wealth became a symbol of validating customary marriages in many parts African. Prior to 1867, when Ghana was not colonized, bride-wealth was not based upon cash. Instead, due to non-introduction of cash in Ghanaian economy; castles, bottles of schnapps, ornaments, clothes etc. were given as bride-wealth (Adjei, 2019).

But the colonial rule and introduction of cash economy had a negative impact on people of Ghana especially on women. Infact, the interference of colonial powers in the social and cultural traditions had put women into a disadvantaged position. During the era of colonialism change appeared in marriage customs, which is perpetuated even today. The introduction of cash instead of cattle etc. paid in bride-wealth has had negative impact upon women (Obbo, 1980, 34). It is also noteworthy that the tradition of bride price also changed since people did not have the space to keep the cattle. Thus, cash not only emerged as a token payment during marriage but at the same time denied the bride and her family, the ceremonial cattle they once received, the capital assets, the social and economic security and the ritual power that they represented (Siegel, 1992, 192-193).

In the contemporary practice, a list is given to the groom by the bride's family. This list entirely depends upon ethnic groups in Ghana (Adjei, 2019). According to Stylus Ghana, "the list of Ewe, Ga-Adangbe and Akan tribe are considered to the three most expensive bride-price or marriage list in Ghana" (StylusGh). As estimated by SidmartinBio, "bride-wealth could be assumed around 5000 to 6000 Ghana Cedis i.e. around 1300 dollars" (SidmartinBio, 2021).

It should also be noted that bride price could be both a onetime payment and can be paid in installments. As far as payment in installment is concerned, recently a news came up from Uganda where bride wealth has been abolished. In September 2021, a father has taken away his daughter, because his son-in-law failed to pay bride wealth in instalments even after having five kids. (Pulse.com.gh, 2021).

### ARGUMENT IN FAVOR OF BRIDE-WEALTH

Scholars has given several arguments in favour of bride wealth.

First, for some scholars, this practice demonstrates the high status given to women in the society. In this regard, April A. Gordon believes, "the practice is not about selling daughters. Rather, it indicates the high value attached to the women in African societies" (Gordon, 1992, 204). "As the girls will bring wealth to the husband's family, so the girl's family must be compensated for the loss of their daughter" (Obbo, 1980, 34). In fact, "African women often work together to arrange suitable marriages and to maximize the bride wealth" (Awedoba, 2001, 138-143).

Second, according to another view bride-wealth gives stability and security to the bride's family. Therefore, in case of problem in marriage relations, the bride could return to her family and get her due respect and position. (Siegel, 1992, 185).

Third, it is also said that through the tradition of bride-wealth girls and women get more opportunities in terms of education. According to Anirudh Gupta, "some parents want their daughters educated so that they can fetch more bride wealth. A graduate girl may fetch as much as 1,000 shillings, while an illiterate girl could fetch maximum 100 shillings" (Gupta, 1978; Southall, 1961, 65).

**Table: Bride Wealth**

<b>Educational Background</b>	<b>Approved Bridal Presentation</b>
Illiterate	3 bottles of gin + ₵ 15,000.00
Middle School	3 bottles of gin + ₵ 30,000.00
Trained Teacher (Post Primary) Secondary School level	3 bottles of gin + ₵ 50,000.00
University Graduate	3 bottles of gin + ₵ 1,00,000.00

Source: (Awedoba, 2001, 139)

The table explains the trend of bride-wealth in Ghana. It indicates that since educated girls may fetch more bride-wealth, it would push families to educate their girls.

Fourth, it is also said that the bride wealth helps in making strong matrimonial ties. If supposedly, husband is cruel and abusive, he may lose his bride wealth. Additionally, he would be compelled to arrange bride-wealth if in case he wants to marry another lady (Siegel, 1992, 185). The same holds true for the wife as well. The wife cannot divorce her husband on petty issues or indulge in extra marital affairs, as in such cases the bride's family has to refund the bride wealth. Therefore, it is also said that the high bride-wealth payments result into low divorce rates (Siegel, 1992, 185).

Fifth, it is a tradition, sanctioned and accepted in many societies across Ghana. Although, some people believe that it promotes negative stereotype, but still the practice has wide acceptance both among males and females. A study conducted by Stephen Baffour Adjei in Ghana, reveals that male and female both participants believed "in the necessity of the practice" (Adjei, 2019). Female participants considered it as "part of womanhood and dignity in marriage" (Adjei, 2019), while for male it is associated with the male identity (Adjei, 2019).

In the light of the above discussion, it seems that bride-wealth is the symbol of relative autonomy and high status of women in Africa." (Gordon, 1992, 204). For some scholars, the practice does involve some positive aspects. In the words of April A. Gordon, "It is among few customs, which helped women in asserting their identity as individuals" (Gordon, 1992, 204).

### **ARGUMENTS AGAINST BRIDE-WEALTH**

First, in most African societies, especially in rural areas it is considered that educating a girl is a waste of time and resource, as eventually she must get married. However, the irony is that they are considered valuable because they bring wealth to the family in form of the bride- wealth. In some societies like the Wasukuma of Mwanza, a girl can fetch as much as 50 head of cattle (or more) and this varies with the level of their beauty (Mlay etal. 1996, 127). This ranges from 20 head of cattle in Swaziland up to 200 cattle among the Dinkas of southern Sudan (Adepoju, 1997, 9). As a result, many girls are forced by their parents to leave school, get married and earn bride-wealth to their family. There are instances when teenaged girls are married off with much older men. Many times, such marriages are performed even without the consent of the girl (Mlay etal. 1996, 127).

Second, since bride-wealth appears as incentive for some parents, it might lead to leads to early marriage and prolonged span of female fertility which might increase the population.

Third, it is also argued that the bride price, which is paid to the girl's family, legitimates her husband to treat her like a property. (Mlay etal. 1996, 127). With price tag attached with the female, the

husband considers himself as the owner in the matrimonial relationship. This results in husband getting the right to do anything and everything with the wife.

Fourth, some scholars believe that “the tradition of bride-wealth has reduced the institutions of marriage into commercial proposition” (Gupta, 1978, 255).

Fifth, there is also a provision of returning the bride-wealth if the woman dissolves the marriage, particularly if she could not have children within the wedlock, or if the marriage turns violent or for some other reasons. However, there are instances where due to inability to repay the bride wealth, the bride’s parents force her to continue the matrimony.

Sixth, often, economically weak parents demand high bride wealth which young men are unable to pay. Sometimes, this led to ‘marriage by abduction’. In such a case girl or a woman is kidnapped and sometimes even raped to reduce the bride price. (Modern Ghana, 2017).

Seven, it is also believed that this practice promotes polygamy. Wealthy men who could afford bride wealth, enter multiple marriages, and consider their wives as property. It is argued that bride wealth gives unlimited powers to the husband to treat his wife as a beast, first to work on his own land and second to produce children (Siegel, 1992, 184). It is even more disturbing to find that, at her husband’s death, the wife is often forced to marry her husband’s brother.

The above arguments illustrates that these old conservative customs serve only to reinforce the concept that a woman is no more than a piece of property (Mlay, 1996, 128). A study conducted by Stephen Baffour Adjei revealed that the practice would “reinforce negative stereotypes by promoting male domination and female subordination” (Adjei, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

In the end, we can posit that there are different arguments regarding the said tradition. For some scholars, the practice of bride wealth involves positive aspects with women considered as an asset. For some, it carries negative connotation, with women treated as a property. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the younger generation should strongly oppose this traditional practice. However, a new hybrid feature has appeared in this regard recently. This is that instead of bride-wealth given to bride’s family; gifts and money received during marriage are given to the couples. This new hybrid feature appeared into practice in 2020, when during the marriage of one Geoffrey and Angela, the couple decided to alter the tradition and instead of giving bride-wealth to the bride’s family, it was gifted back to the couple. (BBC News, 2020). This is true that it is difficult to change or replace traditions overnight but acts like these are always a welcome step towards progression. Government, administration as well as civil society (primarily elders) should encourage the younger generations to oppose this traditional practice of bride wealth and help restore the dignity and value of women in the society.

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**Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Satyawati College,  
University of Delhi, Delhi (India).**