

# **Flux and strain in marriage contraction: The changing face of bridewealth in contemporary Ghana**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper uses semi-structured in-depth interviews with traditional rulers and community leaders in Ghana to examine the current role of bridewealth in marriage and the implications of changes in the practice of bridewealth for unions. We find that bridewealth still occupies a central role in marriage in Ghana. However, social, cultural, and economic changes have led to a breakdown of norms surrounding marriage contraction and the marriage process becoming more expensive than it was in the past. These have given the leeway for the women to contribute to the bridewealth payment, leading to a shift in the power base of marriage and that may lead to marital conflict, and instability. It is suggested that the role of love in modern marriages is explored and men are engaged in the process of developing healthy masculinities as avenues to counter the effects of these changes in marriage contraction.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Marriage is a fundamental part of many societies and considered a rite of passage in most cultures. Despite broad changes in marriage in many parts of the world, concerning aspects as varied as age of marriage, marital rights and duties, gender roles within marriage and ceremonies and rituals, it continues to be a coveted institution. In Africa, marriage, in spite of its changing form and role, is still considered as the expected, or at least, the ideal state for adult men and women. Notwithstanding changes in marital timing, rates, and practices, it is still normatively expected to be the context within which childbirth occurs (Gage-Brandon & Meekers, 1993; Bledsoe and Cohen, 1993). Given that many African nations are pronatalist (Bongaarts & Casterline, 2013) with an average total fertility rate of 4.6 compared to 2.4 worldwide (Population Reference Bureau, 2018) fertility is an important aspect of African life. Thus, on the continent, the institution of marriage continues to be relevant.

Bridewealth is exchanged in a majority of African marriages and serves as the seal to legitimize the marriage. Anthropological literature from the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century shows that it was widespread in many parts of Africa (Evans-Pritchard, 1934; Goody and Tambiah, 1973; Ogbu, 1978). Even now, there is evidence of the practice still being prevalent on the continent (Anderson, 2007; Dodoo, Horne, & Dodoo, 2019; Heckert & Fabric, 2013; Ghana Statistical Service, et al. 2015), though due to a lack of representative data, statistical estimates of its prevalence are unavailable .

Some have argued that bridewealth is an irrelevant practice, and in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, it has even been abolished by law (Ogbu, 1978). In other countries in Africa, researchers and social commentators have said that its significance has been lost (Johnson-Hanks, 2007), or that it no more holds the influence that it used to hold in culture (Ansell, 2001; Posel & Rudwick, 2014; Posel, Rudwick, & Casale, 2011). This, coupled with other cultural and economic changes, has led to a rise in cohabitation and non-marital childbirth (Yarbrough, 2018, Posel et al, 2011).

The practice of bridewealth has been blamed as derogatory to women. It has been labelled a major curtailer of women's reproductive rights (Horne et al, 2013; Wendo, 2004); women's general autonomy, as husbands see themselves as having bought their wives domestic labour and respect (Davies, 1999; Rudwick and Posel, 2014) and a contributor to female domestic violence (Ansell, 2001; Sedziafa, Tenkorang, Owusu, & Sano, 2017; Hague & Thiara, 2009; Davies, 2002). On the

other hand, there are positive aspects of the practice (Dyson-Hudson et al, 1998). It has been associated with better sexual and reproductive practices in Zimbabwe, for instance (Wojcicki, 2010), and is reported to be a stabilizing force to unions (Kaufman et al, 2001). Yet, it is a practice that is backed by deep-rooted norms and beliefs (Posel and Rudwick, 2014; Rudwick and Posel, 2014; Yarbrough, 2018), and understanding it and its relevance in contemporary times is important to be able to deal with the real or implied negative consequences. However, in countries apart from South Africa, little study of the current practice and meaning of bridewealth has been carried out.

This paper interrogates the centrality of bridewealth in present day marriage in Ghana, with a focus on continuity and changes in aspects of the practice and the implications of these for marriage. It finds that, in spite of changes to the practice, marriage ushered in by bridewealth payment is still considered an important tradition. In the light of current social and economic changes, this normative expectation, and the adjustments made to fulfil it, have consequences and implications for women's empowerment, the meaning of masculinity, marital stability and norms pertaining to marital roles and responsibilities.

### **The Bridewealth Context**

Bridewealth is a marriage tradition that involves a payment of goods and/or cash from the man's family to the woman's family. These may include goods such as livestock, clothing, fabric, beads, household goods, jewellery, drinks, and money (Aborampah 1999, Mulder, 1995). Vaughan (1977), estimated that about 80 percent of African societies practiced bridewealth. At present, there is no reliable estimate of the proportion of African peoples that practise it, though there is evidence that it is still prevalent in all the regions of sub-Saharan Africa (Dekker and Hogeveen 2002, Frost and Dodoo 2010, Prazak 2006, Wojcicki, et al, 2010).

The primary overarching purpose of bridewealth is to create an alliance between the two kin groups of the bride and groom (Dekker and Hogeveen, 2002; Ekong, 1992). Further, Ogbu (1978) details five specific functions of bridewealth payment in Africa. First, bridewealth payment gives the husband legal rights over his wife (Evans-Pritchard 1934; Fortes 1962; Radcliffe-Brown 1960). In this sense therefore, once bridewealth is paid, society recognises that the husband is now responsible for his wife, and she is answerable to him. Second, bridewealth payment gives the rights to the domestic and sexual services of a wife over to her husband (Fortes 1962; Goody 1973; Mair 1971; Radcliffe-Brown 1950). Third, the payment gives the rights to children borne by the woman to her husband (Ardener 1962; Evans-Pritchard 1934). The fourth function of bridewealth is to guarantee that the arrangement under which the man gains these rights and services, ie, the marriage, is ratified as permanent (Gluckman 1950, 1953; Leach 1953). Finally, bridewealth payment compensates the male kin of a wife for the loss of the labour she would have continued to provide (Murdock 1949; Radcliffe-Brown 1950).

Bridewealth payment has been evolving in Africa over the last few decades. Traditionally, the payment was composed of livestock and other valuable goods and objects. However, during the middle and late colonial era in Africa when cash became the predominant medium of exchange, payments in many communities began to include cash, and in some cases the bridewealth was completely monetized (Grosz-Ngaté, 1988; Mulder, 1995; Ogbu, 1978; Posel & Rudwick, 2014). There is evidence that the practice is on the decline in some countries both in terms of coverage and value. Payment values generally began to decline in the post-colonial period (Anderson, 2007). Further, some countries instituted civil marriages not requiring bridewealth payment, which couples, especially in urban areas, may choose over traditional bridewealth-requiring ceremonies. Some countries, Ivory Coast (Ogbu, 1978) Cameroon (Calvès, 2000) and Zimbabwe (Anderson, 2007) for instance, have removed the requirement for bridewealth even in customary marriages. In other quarters, there is evidence that bridewealth payments are being delayed until well after the couple

begin cohabitation, sometimes until even after the death of one of the spouses (Yarborough, 2018), and in some communities, cohabitation, rather than marriage is the current modal state of union (Posel and Rudwick, 2014).

## **Marriage and Bridewealth in Ghana**

According to Ghana's last census, 53% of all persons aged 12 years and over were married (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). In fact, for the 35-39 age group, an age by which most Africans would have begun a marriage, the proportions of men and women who had never been in union was 14.0% and 6.8%, respectively. Thus, in spite of general declines in the overall rates of marriage, (Heaton and Darkwah, 2011) it is still widely relevant in Ghana.

There are three separate legal paths to marriage in Ghana. Customary marriage, Islamic marriage and marriage under ordinance (Kuenyehia, 1986-90; Oti Adinkrah, 1980). However, because of the nature of African marriage, which is essentially a contract between families rather than the two individuals getting married, customary marriage is culturally considered a prerequisite to the other two forms of marriage. According to Kuenyehia, 1986-90:

“... there is hardly any marriage celebrated in Ghana ... or abroad under some other law, which is not preceded or followed afterwards by performance of all the essential rites of a valid marriage under customary law”.

Bridewealth payment is therefore involved in customary marriage amongst virtually all Ghanaian ethnic groups and is almost universal amongst Ghanaian marriages (Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). The last nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey reported a bridewealth prevalence for married women aged 15-49 of 82%, with the regional variation ranging from 98% in the Upper East Region to 66% in the Greater Accra Region, which includes the capital city (Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), Ghana Health Service (GHS), and ICF International, 2015). The items and level of payment are generally uniform within communities, although it may be higher for individual women due to higher education or social standing of their family (Casale and Posel, 2010; Horne et al, 2013). In the past, there was evidence that the level of payment in patrilineal communities was much higher in matrilineal mainly because of the transfer of children ensuing from the marriage to the former, but not the latter (Castilla, 2013; Takyi and Gyimah, 2007). In recent times however, there seems to be the indication that the amounts involved even in matrilineal communities have increased substantially.

The traditional marriage process in Ghana generally comprises two stages. First, there is a formal process in which the groom's family will ask for the bride's hand in marriage, commonly referred to as the 'knocking ceremony'. Traditionally, this used to be held in advance of the actual marriage ceremony- sometimes, as long as several months or years ahead. The knocking formally announces the groom's interest in marrying the bride, and usually entails a bottle or two of alcoholic liquor and a token amount of money. Second is the marriage ceremony during which the bridewealth is transferred. In recent times, the two ceremonies are often held on the same day, the former immediately preceding the latter (Fayorsey, 1992/93; Okyere-Manu, 2015).

## **METHODS**

This paper uses semi-structured in-depth interviews with traditional rulers and community leaders- the custodians of culture- in Ghana to examine the process marriage and meaning of bridewealth, as well as the implications of the practice. In all, fifteen interviews were conducted, five with chiefs, one with a Queenmother, one with a linguist, one with a traditional priestess and six with community

leaders/elders. Of these respondents, eight were male and seven females. These respondents were chosen for two reasons: First, rules regarding traditional marriage rites are usually dictated by the leaders in each community, and they also settle disputes that may arise regarding marriage contraction and between families. Second, elderly people were interviewed because there was the need to get a record of bridewealth practices in the past and compare them to the present. Thus, respondents were all aged above seventy, except for one chief. Even then, in his case, the interview was conducted with his much older linguist in attendance, and the linguist helped to clarify some historical issues during the interview.

Because the nature of questions was not personal, but rather about customs and norms, there was not a strict adherence to interviews being conducted in strict seclusion. Also, traditional leaders usually have a linguist who is their official mouthpiece, present at all meetings of the chief. These linguists were in attendance for three of the five interviews with chiefs, and for the interview with the Queenmother. Further, in traditional Ghanaian society, leadership of communities usually falls to men, with Queenmothers playing a supportive and advisory role. Matriarchs who were identified as community women's leaders were also interviewed.

Interviews were conducted in villages and small towns in the Eastern Region of Ghana (population sizes ranging from approximately 500 to 10,000. These were Akan and Guan communities. (with populations ranging from about 500 to about 10,000) worked with local administrative personnel who helped us identify communities in the Anum Traditional Area (Anum and Tosen); Akwamu Traditional Area (Anyasu and Akwamufie); and Akwapem Traditional Area (Abiriw and Mampong). The primary economic activity in these areas is farming for men, and sales or farming for women. Women in the Akwamu and Anum areas are predominantly small scale farmers and those in the Akwapem area are mostly in the petty trading business. Mean age in the Eastern Region is 24 for males and 26 for females. Mean years of education are 7.5 years for women and 8.6 years for men (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). For women aged 15-49 in the Eastern Region, 57.0 percent are currently married; 11.1 percent are in polygamous marriages. Among men in the Region aged 15-59, 49.4 percent are currently married; 4.8 percent are in polygamous marriages. The mean age at first cohabitation in the Region is 19.9 for women and 25.1 for men (Ghana Statistical Service, 2015). All interviews were conducted in Akan. Fieldwork took place in January 2018.

Subsequent to fieldwork, the interviews were translated and transcribed into English, imported into the qualitative analysis software NVivo and coded and analysed using thematic analyses techniques. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Ghana's Ethics Committee for the Humanities (ECH). Informed consent was obtained and documented for each participant prior to the interview.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings of the study are organised into four major areas. First, there is an examination of the meaning and significance of marriage in contemporary Ghana. The second area covered by is that of bridewealth's role in marriage. Here, the question of whether bridewealth still plays the central role in marriage that it traditionally occupied is answered. Third, I examine the marriage process, highlighting the things that have changed and have stayed constant in the process. The final section of the results examines the payment of bridewealth and the items involved in contemporary Ghana.

### **Bridewealth's Role in Marriage**

Customary marriage involving bridewealth is still understood to be the 'real' marriage. Respondents said that irrespective of what other ceremony the couple wanted to do, bridewealth must be paid first.

Before you see a woman, if you want to have a wedding, immediately after seeing her, you will go home and perform the necessary customary rites before the marriage is blessed in a church. ... The actual marriage is the customary marriage. ...

Traditional Priestess (Female)

Bridewealth continues to serve several purposes in the marriage. First, and most important, it legitimizes the marriage:

...the relevance is that if you marry a man and he has not performed your marriage rites then he is not your husband he is either your friend or he has stolen you. So your family can take him on.

Female community leader

Second, it serves as a witness that the marriage has occurred:

So when you do everything in the presence of the father then the marriage will be complete. That will be a witness that you've married the woman.

Male Chief

Third, it shows that the woman is valuable:

The reason why the marriage ceremony is significant is because you cannot give a woman out as a gift to a man. I hope you have understood me. The man must know that she is also someone's precious being.

Female priestess

Fourth, it honours the woman and her parents and family:

In order that it will honour your family. You see, it is not that your parents have given birth to you, but they won't benefit from you. It honours your parents. 'This woman's daughter respects herself'. Do you understand?

Female community leader

Fifth, bridewealth also gives both the man and the woman responsibility for each other, and the man authority over the woman:

So if something happens to the woman, even with the man if something happens to him, the woman is held responsible. But the woman's responsibility (authority) is less

Male Chief

So, in sum, the exchange of bridewealth, witnessed by those present, is the formal seal to the marriage, conferring those rights to the man and ratifying the contract between the two parties.

### **Changes in the Marriage Process**

Several components of the marriage process have changed, beginning from the way that partners are chosen to the way that the ceremonies are conducted. In this section, we discuss partner choice, process initiation, ceremony timing and mood and the conduct of the ceremony itself.

In the past, partners used to be chosen by parents. Even if the man himself noticed a lady he wanted to marry, his parents were very much involved in the whole endeavour of making the final choice and brokering the marriage deal. This involved an elaborate investigative process that ensured that the correct spouses were chosen for children. Also, strategic partnerships linking families could be formed through marriage.

In the olden days when our fathers were the ones that plan marriages ... So when he was due for marriage and he was not confident enough, he could inform the parents that “papa, I’ve got to the stage where I want to get married.” So he will say that to his family and they will realize that this my son is truly a grown up and has wisdom for coming to tell us this. So they will also meet alone while he is somewhere else and discuss it between themselves. (Then) they will call their child again to ask him that “which woman have you seen that you’ve shown interest in to marry?” So if he points out that woman, his parents, that is his mother, will go to the woman’s mother and the father will also go to the woman’s father...

Male Chief

However, at present young people choose their own spouses. In practically all of the interviews, this was lamented as a fundamental change that was not helpful to marriage. In having parents choose marriage partners, the control over choosing the ‘right’ partner was the purview of the parents’ generation. These elders generally thought that young people often do not have the ‘common sense’ to make the best choice of partner as the priorities of young people were outward beauty and other social graces rather than in-depth knowledge of the person and their family background.

But these days, I see Akosua in front of Legon, her calf looks beautiful to me so, someone should get me her number. I call and then we meet at a point, talk once. We don’t get to know each other. No elderly woman asks where Akosua hails from, I don’t know her background, she also doesn’t know my background. Do you understand? So we get married because I met her and she was beautiful, she knew how to dance, I have seen that Akosua is beautiful, she has big calves and so it ends there.

Male Chief

It appears however, that in some circumstances, the traditional process of choosing a partner for a man may still hold, as this middle-aged chief recounts his own experience:

...so as for the tradition, it is there. So currently, when you are coming to marry in this town, there is a procedure to follow. With my current wife, while the homework was being done, I didn’t know, the woman didn’t know either. So they did everything, they call something “*abisaa*” that is when you are going to ask for the woman’s hand. They did all those things before they gave me the permission to go and speak with the lady. Now we have two children and we are living peacefully, so it still exists.

Male chief

This investigation has stopped now for virtually all marriages being contracted. Even in the case of the chief recounted above, it may be that it was because of his royal roots that this investigative process took place. In the opinion of these leaders, the current mode of partner choice, particularly the lack of investigation of each other’s character and background is a leading cause of marital instability.

Parents also initiated the marriage process in the past. This is rarely the scenario now. According to these respondents, coupled with the change in who initiates the marriage process is the change in research done about the prospective spouse and their family. The investigative process covered areas such as a family history of chronic disease or chronic mental illness, infertility, other negative traits

that were believed to possibly run in families (wickedness, abusive men, lazy women), and individual character traits of the prospective partners:

Maybe there may be some sickness which we will not want to come into our family. Others are also, excuse me to say, theft, wickedness, fear and some things that don't make individuals progress. So that is what will be [done] first. When the woman brings the man, we will welcome them. Then we will ask him to go so that we will think about it. 'When you are entering into marriage ask' [quotes a proverb]. Before we will accept it, we would have made our own investigation.

Male linguist

Both of these changes do not augur well for stable marriage. For many of these elderly respondents, the lack of research and allowing young people to make their own choices is one of the leading causes of divorce, which is on the rise in Ghana.

In this case, the issues that come after that are many...you can say that I am an extremist. Maybe Akosua is also an extremist so we both cannot meet [are not compatible], so we don't even have to go in. Or in that house, the men are abusive, and Akosua is a lady, so why will you give a lady to someone who is abusive to kill her? You see, that is why divorce is as rampant as the rain!

Male Chief

The ceremonies marking marriage itself have also changed, according to these leaders. In the past, the main components of the marriage process were the knocking ceremony and bridewealth payment. Now, due to westernization and the influx of Christianity, 'white' Christian weddings, conducted immediately after the traditional marriage, have become the 'standard'. These Christian ceremonies, though in themselves not bad, are characterised by expensive wedding clothes, and large crowds with an expensive reception afterwards.

Things have changed of late. Formally the church wedding was not inclusive...Bible and ring were not inclusive. You can realise that when I was saying it I didn't mention them. But recently it has been added to it. At first when you get married and you want to put a ring on your wife, [get married under the ordinance] you do that after you have finished giving birth. That is called "blessing", and that is when you go to church.

Male community leader

These additions have made marriage more expensive and also less meaningful, according to these respondents. In fact, some respondents were of the view that the 'white wedding' is considered as more important by young people than the traditional marriage. However, a traditional marriage needs to be done before a civil or religious ceremony. It appeared that it was the Christian ceremony that was blamed mostly for this changes. However, these communities from which the interviews were conducted were mostly Christian – none of these respondents was Muslim, and so it is likely that they spoke from the experiences of themselves and their communities.

### **Changes to Bridewealth Items and Payment Regimes**

Several aspects related to bridewealth payment have also changed. These connected to the cost and quantity of items as well as the fact that women usually now contribute to the bridewealth payment.

Bridewealth is usually negotiated. The amounts of money and specific items may be decided on by communities, and two of the Chiefs mentioned that their towns have standard lists of items that are

used in marriage. However, the list is subject to change or negotiation according to the conditions and finances of individuals and families involved in each marriage, these respondents said.

Um, let's say you want to buy this mobile phone. The owner of the phone is the woman's father. He says the phone is 1 cedi. You also say the price should be reduced. You the buyer say it should be reduced. That is how the situation is. Because you want the woman, whatever they say, if you can provide, you must do. If you can't meet their needs, then you can plead with them and tell them what you can afford.

Male chief

Another occurrence that might happen is that of bridewealth being paid in instalments. This is not an accepted thing, traditionally, but exceptions may be made in extenuating circumstances for this arrangement. The most common reason for bridewealth being paid in instalments seems to be when the woman is pregnant or has had a child with the man already. In such a scenario, because the woman's family might want to secure the man for their 'daughter', they are usually willing to accept either the knocking drinks and fee or a part of the bridewealth payment so that the man is committed to the woman.

No! You cannot bring half of the items but you can plead that we are children and maybe the list is costly (xxx) so we can provide in instalments. If the family members agree, then you bring it. But if you do not come and make any request and you bring half of the items, you might not have it easy at the gathering. They might ask you to go back and prepare adequately before coming back. But this seldom happens.

(I): Nana does this mean tradition allows for one to pay the bridewealth in instalment when you come and plead?

(R): No for the instalment, you come and plead that maybe "the list that we came for, Nananom we are pleading that we are children and so we will reduce some of the items". "Maybe instead of 2 drinks, we will bring one". This will pave way for mutual understanding. You don't come and plead during the gathering that you are providing half and bring the rest another time. No, it is not done in such manner.

Queenmother

In sum, the negotiations for these must be done well before the date set for the ceremony. It is not at the gathering that these negotiations now take place.

For some communities, it appears that the basic items required as part of bridewealth payment have not changed. However, for the most part, these items cost much more money than they used to in the past. Further, the amounts of money involved have changed in most places. In the past, the money added, especially in matrilineal communities, was often just a token sum. However, at present, a much more substantial amount of money is usually required.

"As for that one there has been a change. If you look at the past, things were less costly but now things are expensive. Those are the changes that have occurred. (Things) like the knocking, the speech gratitude and the others and the father's cloth, the money you will add to the liquor for the marriage (are the same). However, it is the prices that have changed."

Male Chief

Also, some of the things that are not absolutely necessary for the marriage to be brokered have been added to the 'mandatory' list. (These additional items are described by Fortes (1962:9) as 'contingent prestations', in comparison with the 'prime prestations', which are the basic bridewealth items. See also Yarbrough (2018) describing a similar occurrence in South Africa).



“nowadays stop oo. Last time I calculated someone’s marriage cost it was around 15 million [about \$ 400.00 at the time of the interview] but that is cheap, I went to Bom to marry one of my children off, that was almost 25 million [approximately \$600.00], physical cash oo before drinks and oooo, that place they made us buy aaa we even bought cosmetics, hmm jewels, sister.”

Male Chief

Finally, as mentioned previously, some items have been added on due to the influence of religion and Westernization. Some of these are a ring for the woman and a bible and hymnbook, if the woman is a Christian.

### **Consequences of high cost of bridewealth**

The cost of bridewealth payment in present times have led to two things that are contributing to marital instability, in the opinion of these elders. The first of them is incomplete payment of bridewealth. Even in Akan communities that traditionally had relatively low bridewealth payments and in which because children accrue to the woman’s family, the practice of waiting until childbirth to complete payment was not the issue, the present cost has made partial payment rampant. Often, when a man or woman say they have not completed payment, the meaning is that the knocking ceremony has been done, but the bridewealth itself has not been paid. The knocking ceremony informs the woman’s family of the man’s interest in marrying her, and they are allowed to live together after that, and even to have children. However, they are still not considered properly married.

Traditionally, in the past, you cannot make partial payment. You will perform everything. Unless your in-law likes you and considers you to do that. Even in such cases the woman can use that as an insult anytime. The man can also use that as an insult. You see how the situation is? So you must force the man to perform your marriage rites fully.

Female priestess

Another reason why the knocking ceremony may be done and the bridewealth not paid is when a pregnancy occurs before marriage. In this case, the man will send a compensatory drink together with the knocking drinks to the woman’s family and may then start living with the woman as if married. In fact, in many communities, it is not right traditionally to perform marriage rites for a woman whilst she is pregnant. The proper thing in the event of pregnancy before marriage is to have her deliver the baby and conduct the child naming and marriage rites thereafter:

(R): So over here most of the things are not static but the truth is that if you have not finished performing all the rites for the woman then she is not your wife...If you are my daughter and this man has brought two bottles of schnapps and has brought some things, maybe 100 Ghana cedis (\$25.00) and says “I have started performing the rites” and she goes to have an affair and the man comes to complain I will tell him, “gentleman, but you have not finished paying?” (~~~).

(I): Why did the father accept those items?

(R): Because you have initiated something. Maybe you may have had a child with her. We consider something “*dumfa*” or “*kwasiabuo*” [compensation]. If I charge you[impose a fine on you], it does not mean my daughter is your wife. No, not at all.

I: And so please for someone, let us take for instance that the man has started with the rites and for someone who has not started anything, are they both the same?

(R): The same scale oooo. Do you see? They say “Drink deep or taste not.”

Male chief

The second consequence of the high cost of bridewealth is that women contribute to their own bridewealth. Traditionally, it is the man’s family which brings the marriage prestations to the woman’s family. The man’s father and other relatives could be the provider of the items, or they could be from the man to be married himself. Whatever the case was, the items were presented from one family to the other. Now however, it is quite common for women to contribute to bridewealth payment, especially when the cost of the items is high. There are different factors that have facilitated this. First, women are more active in the formal economy now, and second, women are generally getting married later on now than they used to. In the past, marriage was early and women were much younger. Many did not have jobs that earned them cash before marriage. In addition, the way that marriages were contracted meant that it was not likely that the man and woman knew each other so well that they could come to an agreement to contribute to the marriage items. Finally, in Akan communities and even these Guan ones in this study, the bridewealth was not very costly. It was therefore not difficult for the man’s family to acquire and bring the items required to the woman’s family.

If it was my parents who initiated the marriage, then why will the woman pay part of it? At first the man who is getting married does not do anything. It is the father who initiated the marriage who uses his own money

Male Chief

All respondents who talked about women contributing narrowed the reasons for the woman contributing to something she is traditionally not supposed to love and the woman not wanting the man to go off to marry a different woman. It is supposedly, the man’s duty to return whatever a woman may have given him towards her bridewealth to her. However, this does not always happen.

R: that’s why I said we should stop saying that issue. So it is the women- it’s your choice; Kofi is nice and with his profession, you would want to have him as a husband. Maybe he works in an office and you are a trader. You won’t sit there to allow another woman to take him. So you’ll just say, “Kofi take [get] 30 million (\$750.00) and use it to go and perform the marriage.” We will also not make it public.... it always happens. And the woman also does that because of love. It is because of love that the woman did that.

I: so do you accept that?

R: you have to pray that the love you started with should flourish till the end.

I: please traditionally, is that how things are supposed to be?

R: it is not supposed be to that way. That is not the appropriate way.

Male Chief

Traditionally, since it is the man’s family that is supposed to bring the bridewealth, it is not made public- not even revealed to the family by the man that his bride-to-be contributed to the marriage prestations. It often is when things get sour between the couple that it is revealed that the woman contributed to the bridewealth.

This only happens when there's a misunderstanding between the couple. It is mostly the men who are the cause of this revelation. After the man has finished [married the woman], he takes another girlfriend, which will make you the woman angry. When you complain he will say, "Leave that issue. Were you not the one who gave me money to marry you?" The man will say that to you. The woman can also say that "I am also the one who gave you money to go and pay for my bridewealth".

Male Chief

The ultimate corollary of women's contributing to bridewealth is that there is often increased marital instability. Almost all of the interviews in which respondents gave first-hand accounts of instances when they know of couples in which women had contributed to bridewealth payment reported that soon after the marriage was instituted, there were rough times for the couple. For some, it was because the man was not refunding the money the woman contributed to her bridewealth, often triggered by his having or her suspecting that he was having an extramarital affair. Other respondents attributed this instability to the man losing respect for the woman because she had done what traditionally he was supposed to do. Yet others simply said that once the woman contributed to the marriage, 'just a little thing will bring about anger':

just a little thing will bring about anger. What shouldn't have brought about anger will just bring out anger. "You are fortunate for me to have given you money to go and marry me so this is what you are doing?" If the man is someone who lives a promiscuous life, he will go in for lovers. Those are the things that bring the challenges.

Male Chief

There is a strong underlying thread in many of these interviews that the changes in the marriage process, especially with females contributing to bridewealth payment, have resulted in a shift of traditional gender norms and ideologies concerning marriage and marital roles, rights and responsibilities. It appears that it is this uneasy situation that leads to the instability that the elders refer to.

## **DISCUSSION**

In summary, the meaning of marriage has not changed. Neither has bridewealth's central role in the marriage contraction process. However, the social and cultural changes that have occurred in the communities included in this study have led first, to a breakdown of norms concerning partner choice. Second, economic conditions combined, again, with social and cultural changes to the marriage ceremonies and bridewealth items, have resulted in the marriage process becoming much more expensive than it used to be. Finally, female economic empowerment, coupled with the fact that partner choice is often now determined by the parties to be married themselves, have given women both the opportunity financially, and couple, the leeway for the woman to contribute to the bridewealth payment, and this seems to happen quite a lot.

Because the tradition of marriage, accompanied by the norm of bridewealth payment, continues to be the gold standard, and there seems to be a consensus amongst these leaders (and assumedly in the larger society) that it is not right for women to contribute to bridewealth payment, couples who are caught in the web of the woman having contributed may be conflicted over this state of affairs. Ultimately, this is perceived by the elders to be a precursor for marital instability. This situation is strongly suggestive of a shift in the power base of marriage as the dissonance between spouses created by women doing what traditionally is the duty of the man to do, may lead to her questioning the rights that bridewealth payment traditionally cedes to men. The questioning may be regarding marital roles and responsibilities, gender norms within marriage and the undisputed authority that the man has "because he is a man and he has married you". Eventually, it is these that may lead to marital conflict, and instability

The findings in this study need to be situated within a wider discourse. These elders think that they are only lamenting what is happening in their communities to change their culture and ruin the rules that have been set down from ancient times, but in fact, this narrative and ‘problem’ fits into the schema of similar happenings in many parts of the world. Cultural change is rife in much of the developing world and economic changes, globalization, urbanization and female education, empowerment and access to formal labour markets, have affected many traditional tenets of marriage. In South Africa, for example an extensive study led by Dorrit Posel has documented the changing face of marriage in the context of economic constraints and persistent belief in payment of bridewealth (lobola) (Casale and Posel 2010; Posel and Rudwick 2011; Posel, Rudwick, and Casale 2011; Posel and Casale 2013, Rudwick and Posel, 2014a, 2014b). They write about changes in marriage meanings and norms, a rise in cohabitation and non-marital fertility because of high bridewealth payments and the ensuing cognitive dissonance for individuals and communities, as there is still the normative respect for the custom. In Cameroon, Johnson-Hanks (2007) discusses how, in the midst of economic changes that have resulted in low marriage rates, young educated urban women who seek foreign husbands via the internet still hold on to the normative construction and ideals of bridewealth marriage and the honour it bestows, as their standard. In Nigeria (Akanle et al, 2019), in Guinea Bissau (Temudo, 2019) and in Kenya (Parkin and Nyamwaya, 2018) also write about transformations to marriage and its cultural meanings. However, for every one of these cultures experiencing these vicissitudes, not situating these changes in the context of global change has implications for how these will be dealt with on the local as well as national and global levels. For most of these cultures, globalization and economic crises have led to changing practices, and without concomitant adaptation of ideologies and norms to these, there will continue to be cultural and social unease.

First, globalization and ‘westernization’ have brought with them knowledge about other cultures and ways of doing things that have permeated all areas of the world. In this context, they have contributed an influx of the ways of other people (religious ceremonies causing extra financial burden and increasing bridewealth items). Now the things that did not use to be ‘prime prestations’ (Fortes, 1962) but may have been optional items, have been institutionalized. Further, these factors have also introduced young people to wanting to marry for love and wanting to choose their partners themselves (Cole and Thomas, 2009; Hirsch, 2008; Keefe, 2016, Smith, 2001).

Closely linked to these are migration and urbanization. Because many more young people migrate to other areas for education, and employment, the control over partner choice that used to exist in the past have been weakened. Further, migration and urbanization allow young people from different ethnic groups, even countries, get into contact with each other. This increases the partner pool, and coupled with less cultural control by elders who may be in the villages, gives the opportunity for partner choice, negotiation of terms of marriage and opportunity for women to contribute to bridewealth payment.

There is also a strong female education thread underlying these changes. Female education has been known to improve and increase women’s empowerment in many spheres (Bandiera et al, 2014, Harper et al, 2018). In this case, education affords women the opportunity to be more assertive about partner choice and marriage decisions even before marriage. It also exposes women to being more assertive within marriage, wanting to change, or at least modify, their traditional roles. Finally, education gives women a greater opportunity to be involved in the formal labour market. This enables women to earn more cash, giving them the chance to contribute to marriage prestations-bridewealth in this case, but also even household upkeep during the marriage. Of course, education and being included in the formal labour force also have implications for women’s fertility (more years in school means later initiation of childbearing and usually lower fertility, and being in the formal labour force means less time to care for children at home and may lead to fewer children). They also have implications for gender roles and responsibilities within marriage, either because a woman believes that the man should help out with housework, childcare and other traditional female responsibilities, but also possibly because the demands of spending time out of the home in the

formal labour force will impose practical limitations on the time she has available for those traditional roles. Via any of these pathways, women may question the traditional roles in marriage, and men who are deeply entrenched in traditional roles may feel threatened, potentially breeding conflict.

Finally, other factors that have resulted in more females entering into formal/paid labour would also be considered here. There is more social acceptance in current Ghana for a woman to work outside the home, and economic problems have often necessitated that a woman contributes to the household upkeep, even for things that were traditionally a man's purview (Sedziafa et al, 2017).

There are several implications of these changes. First, is that of culture and preserving culture. From the angle of most of these elders, these changes, especially concerning women contributing to their bridewealth, are not good as culture is being diluted. However, the more progressive respondents said that this was a good change. When a woman contributes financially to the marriage, there is the tendency that it will increase the woman's authority in the marriage and the partnership will be more equal. This has the potential to give the woman more of a say household decision-making, including the area of reproduction. The man may also value the woman more and 'respect' her more because of her contributions. Finally, the respondents said that there would be more love (or this could actually have resulted from there being more love in the first place), resulting in a stronger marriage. On the other hand, some other respondents saw these contributions of women to bridewealth as bad in the sense that it may increase marital conflict, thereby decreasing love, and also it had the potential of increasing the woman's power, thus doing away with the traditional patriarchal gender structure of the man being the 'boss'. Community leaders and elders are important when it gets to cultural norms and the perpetuation or otherwise of both negative and positive norms. Because their opinions are respected, especially in rural areas like these, their opinion are important for behaviour acceptance or change, and they influence even attitudes. Whichever way it is that these changes are going to be resolved by societies, it is important to incorporate community leaders' opinions and recognise them as key catalysts for cultural preservation or change.

There are also implications of these changes for women's empowerment, especially in marriage. As mentioned already, some of these changes are as a result of women's empowerment (economic, education-wise) in the general society. Marriage is one avenue through which control over women can be imposed most. If a woman contributes financially- both before (to contract the marriage) and during the marriage, it shifts the traditional gender roles (man is the provider) and has a great potential to shift power norms within the marriage. Thus, acceptance or rejection of these changes in the cultural and normative sense is an important indicator of whether individuals and society are willing to give women more of a chance within marriage to be empowered.

Finally, there are implications for the definition and acceptance of healthy masculinity in this, and other patriarchal settings. A lot of the onus to accept these changes, so that the potential conflicts mentioned by the respondents will be avoided, depends on men. Men should be willing to accept that they are no less manly if a woman (has to) contribute(s) to the bridewealth or to the household upkeep after marriage and should not feel threatened by a woman who feels that because she is a/an (equal) contributor, or just because she wants to, she should have more of a say in what happens in her home. If a man believes, because of what ideas patriarchal society espouses, that 'real men' should not have women contribute in the home, with the current realities of women needing to contribute to bridewealth and housekeeping, he might feel insecure and threatened, and that might make him more edgy and defensive, potentially resulting in consequences of domestic violence or abuse for the woman and the marriage being more unstable.

Several questions now arise about what could be a possible way forward. Could it be about reducing and abolishing bridewealth costs by law (as is happening in some countries)? Since it is such a deep rooted norm, would there be resistance? Would it still be practiced clandestinely (as is the case with female genital cutting and even honour killings)? If a reduction or an abolishment were accepted, would that reduce or increase women's power and autonomy in the home and in society? On the other hand, could it be about leaving things as they are and encouraging more love? Respondents repeatedly mentioned love as a possible deterrent of conflict – conflict from men having extramarital affairs and conflict arising because a woman is contributing to the bridewealth as it will not become a problem if the man cannot pay her back. In fact, some respondents said that if she loves him she will join him to plead from her family that the bridewealth demanded not be exorbitant. Further, the role of love, (Johnson-Hanks, 2017), or at least, marital closeness (Dodoo et al, 2019) in giving women more of a say in in the household has been hinted at and promoted by many. If there is 'love' a woman contributing to bridewealth might rather lead to her being more empowered in the marriage – in the words of one respondent 'you will respect her'.

## **LIMITATIONS**

These findings need to be viewed in the light of the following limitations. First, the data were collected from communities that are Akan (Akwamu) and Guan (Anum-Boso and Akwapim) in still traditional but rapidly urbanising areas in Ghana. Thus these results are not representative of all of the country, especially more rural communities and communities in the north of the country, which have very different social dynamics. Second, these elders were talking about their own knowledge, experience and interpretation of what is happening in society. It may well be that the instances of women contributing to their own bridewealth is not universal- even though every one of the fifteen respondents admitted that they knew this does happen, with at least half of them giving first-hand experiences of these.

## **CONCLUSION**

We have used information from community leaders in the Eastern Region of Ghana to examine bridewealth changes and implications of those for marriage in contemporary Ghana. Even though marriage contracted via bridewealth is still considered a relevant institution, cultural and economic changes have led to modifications in the practice, with implications for marital stability. In this changing context of marriage, it is important to strike a balance that will promote stability, mutual empowerment and progressive change in marriage in societies undergoing such changes. Two provocative potential avenues to explore for this particular environment may be the development of healthy masculinities and the encouragement of stronger marriages based on love.