



Exploring the Issue of Marriage Rites in Selected African Novels

Professor Augustin Ainamon, Célestin Gbaguidi, Associate Professor, Messan Kodjo Agonglovi,
a PhD candidate

Abstract: For generations, marriage has been one of the major events in the life of an African. Young adults must do whatever it takes to reach that level of his or her life in order to climb the African social ladder. The issue of marriage in African literary works has been complex because it is on part of African life that has undergone transformation in the various regions in Africa. This is due to the encounter with different cultures and diverse horizons. This article explores the issue of marriage as one of the major rites of passage in African life through some selected works by prominent African writers. The exploration of marriage in this article is done to shed light on these vital periods in the life of Africa, from pre-colonial to post-colonial.

Keywords: Marriage, Bride Price, African traditions, Christianity, Globalisation

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage in traditional African society is performed with great importance and dignity. Marriage is a social institution which acknowledges both universally and socially the union between a man and a woman. In the traditional African society, the bride and the groom marry to procreate and provide children for their family. The custom of marriage is a significant component in the African culture and is also one of the most thought about issues in African literary works. The main purpose of marriage in traditional African society is to help the husband's family grow and to obtain companionship.

The African culture has historically been brimming with assorted practices that have been passed on for ages. The ways of living in African social orders were displayed around a solid clan as well as more distant family ties. The clan has consistently had a significant say in accepting a marriage partner, specifically on the grounds that marriage implies the welcoming of a new member into the tribe. Africans on occasion will even say that it is not two people but two groups that wed.

It is worth mentioning how a family or clan's contribution to a marriage can influence the freedom for the individual or the couple. The pressure from one's family could unquestionably place some fear in an individual regarding the marriage. This was most likely the case of the greater part of traditional arranged marriages. It may have also been that the vast majority of these marriages worked out quite well, and the partners may have remained thankful for the pressure which had assisted them in having a strong marriage and home. Examples of pre-arranged marriage are read through various African novels including Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976), to mention a few.

2. PRE-ARRANGED MARRIAGE IN PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA

In pre-colonial times, many African societies allowed polygamy. Men were entitled to have as many women as they could afford to. Emphasis is put on those days when relatives had to have their words in the choice of the spouses that is to say that in those days, marriage was not an affair between two individuals but a contract between members of extended families. For instance, when a young man saw a girl whom he wanted to have as his wife, according to traditions, he informed his parents or relatives, whose duty was to investigate the background of the prospective in-law's family. This was done to ensure that the girl came from a family with a good reputation, that no members of the family were not quarrelsome or thieves, and that there was no hereditary or communicable disease in the girl's family. In Chukwuemeka Ike's *Toads for Supper* (set in Nigeria), the hero's father says something to illustrate the importance or the role of the family in the alliance of their offspring:

She is a girl everybody likes. I have not heard of her passing any elderly person on the road without saying a word of salutation. She has been brought up very well, and under our eyes. As you know, she has lived with us many years of her life and

your mother has taken every trouble to train her into respectful and obedient wife for her son. We know the history of her ancestors which is as good as ours; there has been no trace of madness, white skin or any other evil disease in their family. Her father and I have been friends from our youth. Her mother and your mother are very good friends. We believe that our children will live happily together (Ike 83-84).

In its present condition, the phenomenon of knowing the bride and her family very-well before marriage is also depicted in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* through the character of Nnu Ego. Here the writer shows the importance of potential spouses knowing each other very well before marriage to avoid possible issues that could destroy the good reputation of the family when a new individual joins. This new individual is the new wife who should work to not spoil the good reputation of the family. Emecheta writes:

I am really happy to see you, Nnu Ego, the daughter of Agbadi. Please take that lost look from your face. If you wear a look like that for long, do you realize what people are going to say? They are going to say, "You know the beautiful daughter of Agbadi, the one mistress had for him, the one who had a woman slave as her chi, the one who tried to steal her mate's child, the one who tried to kill herself and failed on purpose so as to get sympathy – well, she is now completely mad." You know our people, you would not be the only one to suffer; your father would never live it down. All your many sisters would find no husbands, because it would be said that madness runs in the blood. Do you want all to befall your people? (Emecheta 78).

From the above quotation, one can understand how the deeds of one member of a family, especially a woman could affect the female members of that family. For instance, Nnu Ego's stupid actions would affect her other sisters in the family. Apart from that, the mentioning of the word "madness" is also very important, as it is sometimes seen as a communicable disease that most Africans then try to avoid for the safety of future generations. In Africa, children are treasures that are cherished and preserved for the benefit of communities. Avoiding a woman whose family's reputation is linked with madness can be likened to the recent times where the sickle cell is purposely avoided by most people for the future health of their families.

The next stage after courtship was when the representatives of the two extended families assembled and prescribed 'fees' in the form of money, drinks and trunks filled with cloths and other valuables to be given to the bride's father by the bridegroom's. After this, the representatives of both families met on an appointed day to finalize the most valuable thing they had been working on over a period of time, the marriage. The groom paid the bride price and gave more presents including special money paid to the bride's mother for bringing up her daughter so well from babyhood. Other sums of money were also paid to the bride's brothers before they would symbolically allow their sister to be taken away. A brief account of African marriage is given through Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

Very soon after, the in-laws began to arrive. Young men and boys in single file, each carrying a pot of wine... Obierika's relatives counted the pots as they came. Twenty, twenty [...] then more pots came. Thirty, forty, thirty-five [...] After the pot-bearers came, Ibe, the suitor, and the elders of his family [...] then the bride, her mother and half a dozen other women and girls emerged from [...] Obierika presented kola nuts to his laws. His eldest brother broke the first one. 'Life to all of us', he said as he broke it. 'And let there be friendship between your family and ours' [...] 'We are giving you our daughter today. She will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town.' [...] 'This is not the first time my people have come to marry your daughter. My mother was one of you.' [...] 'And this will not be the last, because you understand us and we understand you. You are a great family.' [...] The kola was eaten and the drinking of palm-wine began. Groups of four or five men sat round with a pot in their midst. As the evening wore on, food was presented to the guests. There were huge bawls of foo-foo and steaming pots of soup [...] It was a great feast (Achebe 83-84).

In the evening of the same day, some elderly women from the girl's family, carrying a lamp, took the new bride to the husband's house. If it was the girl's first marriage, these old women would go to the husband's house at dawn the next morning to find out whether or not the bride had been a virgin.

The night was already far spent when the guests rose to go, taking their bride home to spend seven market weeks with her suitor's family. They sang songs as they went, on their way they paid short courtesy visits to prominent men like Okwonko, before they finally left for their village. Okwonko made a present of two cocks to them (Ibid 85).

There is the need to know that in the olden days, girls were given in marriage before they came of age. This was generally done to cement the ties of friendship existing in the two families. Such marriages were sometimes unsuccessful since the girls normally refused to accept the prospective husband when they actually grew up. They preferred the boys of their own choice. However, some of these marriages proved successful. A typical example is given again through Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, when Ekwefi cannot marry Okonkwo because he is too poor to afford her bride-price and she instead gets married to her first husband, Anene. But a few years later, when Okonkwo struggles hard to become a respectable and rich man in his village, Ekwefi deserts Anene for Okonkwo who is now capable of refunding the bride-price of her first husband (Achebe, 77-78).

There is a similar important example about a parent's choice of a spouse for their child which is well-developed in the novel *The Concubine* by Eleche Amadi (1966). Amadi depicts through his novel the various ways marriages are set up in the traditional African societies. He makes it abundantly clear that parents or relatives are still important in the choices made as far as marriage is concerned. Amadi writes:

Ahurole was engaged to Ekwueme when she was eight days old; Ekwueme was then about five years old. The initial ceremony was simple. Ekwueme's father, Wigwe, merely put some kola nuts and the shoots of young palm wine saplings into the vessel from which Ahurole drank. Thereafter he kept an eye on her casually. As both children grew they were made to understand their position. Nothing was done beyond this until the children were of age. Indeed all it meant practically was that no other suitors would bother Ahurole's father. All marriages were not contracted in this way, but when they were they flattered the parents of the girl. Clearly only the baby-girls of trusted parents could be engaged in this way (Amadi 88-89).

Parents can engage their children in marriage negotiations without the consent of their children. The narrator above mentions that the bridegroom was five years old then while the bride was eight days old. He goes further by narrating through an explanation that it was not all the marriages that were contracted in that way. The parents must know themselves very well in order to come forward with this idea. He then continues:

And so Ahurole's parents were just proud of their daughter's engagement. For years they had exercised extra care and vigilance over her. The time has come at last for formal negotiations. Negotiations might very well have started two years back but Wagbara said he was not in hurry, which implied two things: firstly that he was not keen on his daughter's bride, which implied he was well off; secondly that he was sure of his good influence over his daughter (Ibid).

When analyzing the normal ways of negotiating marriages in traditional African societies, this type of marriage between the children of Wigwe and Wagbara is special because in the novel there is no part when mentioning any action leading to courtship. Here also the parents did not give time to the children when growing to know each other. And from this prospective, Amadi indirectly shows through this part of his novel that the traditional ways of marriage have many preliminaries to follow before the marriage itself. The failure to complete the necessary steps leading to a marriage has led to the failure of the pre-arranged marriage between their children.

3. ELOPEMENT IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN MARRIAGE

As mentioned earlier, there is another way by which family involvement in the arrangement of marriages has affected individuals' freedom in African marriage. In the event that the conjugal

calamity emerges like a major circumstance, a squabble between the companions that undermined the marriage with breakdown prompting divorce, the families would intercede with an end goal to save the marriage. The parents or the family members of the life partners, and later perhaps the older folks of the tribe, will talk with the concerned couple. A case of mediation between Uzowulu and his in-laws is settled by the clan in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years no single day passed in the sky without his beating the woman. We have tried to settle their quarrels time without number and on each occasion Uzowulu was guilty [...] The law of Umuofia is that if a woman runs away from her husband her bride-price is returned. But in this case she ran away to save her life [...] We have heard both sides of the case [...] Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle dispute (Achebe 66-67).

Traditional African society would be a solid help to the couple in trouble, and a solid consolation and bring up the resolutions expected to defeat the challenges. The passage of time often gave the couple the necessary perspective to see that what had first appeared to them as unwarranted family interference or pressure was in fact family support without which their marriage would not have survived. Here again one has an example of family or society presented as a powerful influence on individual in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*:

Ekwueme himself endured a few lectures from his mother and he did his best to take her advice. For all that, the domestic tension was lessened. Ahurole expected far more gentleness than her husband could give. On the other hand Ekwueme's ideal wife was a composed stable woman who could get on without too much help from him. More, he wanted a woman who could not only receive praise and encouragement but also give them in return; a soothing and loving. A woman would act for him in an emergency if he were away (Amadi 138).

After all, a few marriages have failed because in moments of crisis the spouse lacks support or involvement of the community. So, instead of being helped over the difficulty and into a more generous and mature approaches from the members of the community, they let themselves go for a failed marriage.

Sometimes, as far as marriage is concerned, there are instances of elopement if marriages are not well negotiated with the agreement of the spouses on certain points about the marriage. For instance, the choice of the male or the female spouse by the family is a crucial thing that the family must seek the advice of their child for. Parents sometimes disagree with the choice of their children or there is the pre-arranged marriage between and the children have gently countered their parents because the parents think they have made the right choice for their children. There is always a reason why parents oppose the choice of their children, and the subsequent elopement. The primary reasons are: a spouse being too poor or a difference in religious beliefs which sometimes put one of the lovers as an outcast and issues that have resulted from the introduction of Christianity and Western type of education. These are the main reasons which prevent the marriage and lead sometimes to the elopement of the lovers in most of African novels.

In *The Bride Price* (1976), the author chronicles Aku-nna and her odyssey from her very childhood to her short-lived motherhood set at the stage of traditional African society of Ibo and Lagos in the late 1950s. After the passing of Ezekiel Odi, Aku-nna's dad, she alongside her mom and sibling are acquired by their dead dad's senior sibling Okonkwo Odi in Ibo. Aku-nna's schooling is permitted to proceed by her new dad believing that it will bring a decent bride price. Nonetheless, Aku-nna runs away with her educator, Chike Ofulue whose progenitors were pariahs. The novelist demonstrates that Aku-nna's action breaks her step-father's fantasy about turning out to be a Chief from what he will get from her wedding especially her bride price. Her step-father repudiates her and he does not collect the bride price from Chike. The eventual end result of it is Aku-nna's death when she gives birth to her child. Emecheta shows the reader how traditions can break women down mentally, emotionally and psychologically in African societies.

Like Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, as it is described above there is also another case of elopement in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. In the novel, Flora Nwapa gives discernment into the

predicaments of African ladies in a society where men are the tyrannical power. However, the main character of the novel can be described as a symbol of change: she replaced Adizua, her first husband whom with love she had run away with, and she also walked out of the life of Gilbert, her second husband without a reprimand from traditional custodians. To go against traditions, Efuru has eloped with Adizua and later as the novel unfolds; Efuru's pride-price was to be paid much later in order to legitimize her union with Adizua after the elopement. And the pride-price has been paid by Efuru herself. Apart from the scene of elopement between Efuru and Adizua, the author makes it believed through superstitions that Adizua eloped with another woman because it runs in his blood for the reason that he acquired it from his father since his father did the same thing to Efuru's mother-in-law.

4. THE EFFECT OF CHRISTIANITY ON AFRICAN MARRIAGE

The traditional beliefs and values have been transformed by Christianity and western education. Clearly speaking, Colonialism is responsible for many of changes that African writers account for in their fictive works. Some of those changes are due to the proliferation of western systems of education and Christianity which spread during the conquest of the African continent by Europe. The ideas and the customs taught in the African schools by the European teachers and missionaries often contradicted the traditional African values, beliefs, and habits, thus wreaking havoc in individuals, families, and entire communities. These changes were most noticeable in socio-cultural, economic, and political arenas.

A very important impact Colonization had on traditional African culture is Christian marriage. The acceptance of western culture and lifestyle is seen in many African novels. As Chinua Achebe mentions in *Things fall Apart* that the white man did not only bring a lunatic religion, he brought also other European institutions like commerce (trading store) and a government (Achebe, 1958:128). Therefore, there might also be a civil system of marriage which was recognized then by the colonial administration. So to be in accordance with that, the modern African sometimes goes through the three types of marriage: the traditional African marriage, the Christian marriage and marriage by court or legal marriage. Here is what Buchi Emecheta writes in *The Bide Price* about it:

In his lifetime, Ezekiel was a typical product of this cultural mix. He would preach the Gospel on Sundays, he would sing praises to the European Living God, he would force his children to pray every morning, to pray before and after meals; but all this did not prevent him calling in a native medicine-man when the occasion arose. In fact, behind his door there was a gourd containing a magical potion which served as protection for the family; a man must not leave his family unprotected. The gourd was well hidden, out of sight behind the church wedding photograph of him and his wife Ma Blackie. He was buried in the same way that he had lived: in a conflict of two cultures (Emecheta 26).

Before the coming of the Europeans and the missionaries into Africa, most of the families are based on the polygamous marriage and many African writers deal with that through their works. For instance, in *Things fall Apart* the main character, Okonkwo, has three wives and thirteen children. And in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, the father of the main character, Mara, has many wives and her father uses her bride wealth to marry a new wife. But with the introduction of Christianity in Africa, a new type of marriage was introduced which is monogamy and is imposed on the African Christians through various ways as it is described in Timothy M. Aluko's *One Man One Wife* (1959). This is also illustrated through the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta through the character of Nnaife who keeps his monogamous life intact to maintain his job as a washman to the white couple Mr. and Mrs. Meers following the Christian principles of marriage introduced by the white and to register for marriage in the white man's church. However, there is contradiction when Nnaife becomes a polygamous once he becomes jobless after the couple Meers leaves the territory. He then accepts to inherit his brother's wives and children which becomes a heavy problem for Nnu Ego because she has more mouths to feed. Emecheta sheds light on how Christian marriage was imposed on Africans by the white conquerors:

'Well, if you are pregnant – and believe me, I hope to God you are – there is still one problem. What will they say in the church? We have not been married there. If I do not marry you in the church they will remove our names from the church register

and Madam here will not like it. I may even lose my job. So keep it quiet, will you? Ubani the cook had to marry his wife in the Catholic Church to save his job (Emecheta 51).

The above quotation clearly depicts the importance and relevance of indigenous religion as well as Christianity in the lives of Africans in general and for the Igbo of Nigeria as reflected in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. But Emecheta again through *The Bride Price* depicts the importance of the traditional and Christian marriages in lives of the African Christians when she emphasizes at the beginning of the novel the father of Aku-nna- who thought he deserved more sons since he had married the mother of Aku-nna not only in the traditional ways but also in the ways of the church. Even Aku-nna dreamt of getting married in the two same ways as his father did to her mother. She translates her two ways of getting married like this: 'one for the beautiful goddess of Ibuza and one for the white man's god in church' (Emecheta, 1976: 3). This situation is also demonstrated in Asare Konadu's *The Return of the Falcon* (2001) where the emergence of Christian churches misconstrues the values of the tradition and the effect of modernization on the African societies. Konadu writes: "But why do you want to take the child into church? You yourself do not belong to it. You have two wives while the church insists on only one, yet you go to church regularly as if all is well" (Konadu, 1969: 15).

Furthermore in *The Return of the Falcon*, the principle of the monogamy instilled by the Christian religion is seriously taken into account when Master Serber, a character in the novel was asked to leave the town of Drobonso because as a singing master of his Adventist church, he had an affair with a female member of the church. It is said that:

It was no wonder therefore when three months later he was put before the church council of the Adventists for putting the leader of the alto part of the singing band in the family way. He was the singing master and most of the evening singing practices were held in his house. When the case had been heard he was called by Papa Moses one day and asked to resign his post. "We have to carry our doctrine of one man one wife to our schools," he told him. [...] And the Adventists in fact carried this to the letter. Not only was it the rule of the day that all their school teachers should be members of the church but until marriage was properly contracted and blessed in the church any backyard misappropriation of the abundant unmarried young women in the church was met with immediate dismissal. And Master Serber could not be an exception. The young woman was suspended from the church (Konadu, 1969: 134-135).

Another aspect of African traditional marriage in some societies is when the woman disagrees with the marriage proposal and the groom in consultation with some of the relatives of the girl, force, kidnap, or marry her forcefully. This is done in some African traditional communities and this is one of the tactics used by some African men to show the weakness women in Africa. Emecheta justifies the submissive nature of such women in the domineering world of men through the character of Aku-nna: "This is the end of all my dreams", she thought. "They are kidnapping me" (Emecheta, 1976: 3).

Emecheta again shows the brutal and savage demonstration of Okoboshi [a man] towards Aku-nna, a lady when she reported that she was not a virgin. He even hit her threefold:

Okoboshi hit her across the face with all his strength. 'You dirty animal!' he shouted. 'Do you think I want to touch you now? Slave-girl!' He hit her again [...] Soon I shall marry the girl of my choice, and you will fetch and carry for her! Now get out of my bed! He hit her once more. She fell onto the floor and lost consciousness (Ibid 56).

The Bride Price stresses on the virtue of African woman during the period of her marriage which does not only imply a higher bride price but also the assumption that an African woman be pure until she is married. An African woman who opposes this traditional law of the society is considered to have committed an atrocious crime. Emecheta exemplifies this through the marriage of the characters Okoboshi and Aku-nna, among others. The doctrines from Christianity are accepted and worshiped, but at the same time some aspects of African culture, which African Christians consider necessary, are maintained in their way of life.

5. COURTSHIP IN THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN CONTEXT

Normally in the traditional African context, before a bride price must be paid, there must be a thorough investigation between the future spouses to know each other very well before engaging themselves in a further negotiation leading to marriage. This process of visiting each other before the “knocking at the door” is called courtship.

Before tying the knot, a young man who loves a girl has the right to tell his relatives about her. The relatives in turn will examine and investigate the girl and her parental background. Some of the qualities the boy’s parents look for are: physical beauty, physical, mental and moral fitness, and then resourcefulness, a graceful temper, smartness and a general ability to work well.

It must also be noted that courtship is not a private affair since children live at home until they get married. They live their lives together and since families are closely knit. The family of the young man invites the girl over several times in order to let her study the man and his family while they, in their turn, observe and admire her ways. This is done to avoid the possibility of vices being introduced into the family. Once the inquiries have been satisfactorily completed both families work toward to the settlements of the bride price.

If the courtship has not been well-carried out, there may be many vices introduced to the family that will ultimately end the marriage. Many brides then use love potions to solve this problem.

The phenomenon of the love potion has been rampant since the pre-colonial period in most of West African countries. In order to win someone’s love, individuals sometimes put some medicine into the food or the drink of the desired person. The love potion is a medicine that is given to one of the lovers in a couple so that the one who has taken the medicine should love the giver of the medicine. It is given in secret and without one’s consent.

This potion generally concocted by a medicine man that has a vast amount of knowledge about such potions. There are many consequences if one uses a love potion. The results can be positive or negative depending on the intention or the knowledge of the one in charge of the concoction. Certain consequences are depicted in *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi, where he paints a vivid picture of the love potion through some of his characters, such as Ahurole, a new wife who thought that the groom does not love her enough and rather loves another woman, Ihuoma. Ahurole being extremely jealous goes to her mother, Wonuma to narrate the story about her unsatisfied love from her husband to her. Wonuma gives some pieces of advice to her and directs her to a very powerful medicine man that can make a love potion for her husband, Ekwueme. The first medicine man has fails her then the mother herself decides to go and see another medicine man who concocts a potion for her. Wonuma brings the potion to her daughter and the latter follows the advice of the former. The consequences are tragic ones: Ekwueme becomes mad because of the potion that has been giving to him by his wife, Ahurole, and latter leads to his death.

In *The Concubine*, Elechi Amadi tries to point out some of the consequences that are derived from the practices of this phenomenon in African countries generally as well as in West Africa in particular. In the course of this analysis, a thorough examination is carried out to depict the consequences of this phenomenon.

As African societies practice other forms of marriage such as polygamy in which a man marries more than one woman, the chance of creating jealousy and insecurity among the wives is high. Polygamy enables men to have some preferences toward some of his wives and this can lead to jealousy among the wives. A woman who does not feel the love of her husband will use a love potion on the man and the charmed man will turn his regard from the rest of the family and then concentrate all his efforts on the woman doing the charming. This phenomenon is either highly developed or hinted at it in many African novels.

In Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*, there are some instances when through some cases of polygamy; items that are paid for Mara’s bride price are used by her father to marry a new wife. And this new wife when she came into the family has changed the order of the day of the united family that existed before her coming in the family. Through the narrator’s voice, Mara made mention of this through the following lines:

My father was not even interested to see me because he had taken on yet another wife, a young hot-blooded widow who had so filled his head that mother even cried to me that she was certain that their youngest rival had done ju-ju on father to cause him to forget and disregard his other wives. And so convinced was she that she had even been to the medicine man to ask him to perform a counter ju-ju and as a result was wearing heavy waist-beads of cowries and dried bones (Darko 28).

This is another aspect of using magic to charm one's lovers to keep a place in the heart of the desired person. From the above quotation, one must understand that there was a harmony in the polygamous family before the arrival of the new wife. But the love of the father of the main character in *Beyond the Horizon* his newly-wedded wife is so strong that the other wives thought that she used charm on him. From this love, the other wives could have lost love from their husband and to counter attack this in order to find back her part of the love that has been taken away, the mother of the main character has to go to see a medicine man to set another charm to minimize that of the youngest wife.

Like *The Joys of Motherhood*, the same phenomenon is strongly depicted in *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) which set in Ghana and Europe. Both novels mention the use of magic or love potions to win the heart of a character's lover. The same story happens between the father and the mother of the main character in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nwokocha Agbadi is a very wealthy and prominent chief in Ogboli in eastern Nigeria and he has many wives and he cannot live a day without thinking of the village queen, Ona, a lady Nwokocha has spent all his strength courting until he gets her. Nwokochais the father of Nnu Ego, the main character and Ona her mother.

There is a long description of how Agbadi spent his life courting Ona, the village beauty. In the end, he succeeds in winning her. This success has become a treasure that needs to be kept by Agbadi, so he has to keep and cherish it. In people's mind, the lady has used a charm to attract that prominent chief in order to win his heart when in turn the chief has given too much of his intention to her more than the other wives. Nevertheless, the narrator makes an important illustration of how the love of Agbadi and Ona is seen by the people that surrounded them:

Nwokocha Agbadi would not have minded sending all his wives away just to live with one woman. But that was not to be. People said she had had him bewitched, that she had a kind of power over him; what person in his right mind would leave his big spacious household and women who were willing to worship and serve him in all things to go after a rude, egocentric woman who had been spoiled by her father? This story gained credence particularly when Agbadi's young wives showed signs of sexual neglect. He would be reminded to do his duty by them, then when they became pregnant he would not be seen in their huts until the time came for him to mate them again. But whenever he returned from his many wanderings he would go and stay with his Ona (Emecheta, 1979: 28).

In this part of the article three main words are used to show the true description of how certain rituals are used or performed to make someone love you; in sense that there is no one who will interfere in your relationship apart from to counter attack it through the work of somebody who has the same knowledge. The terms "love potion" in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, "charm" in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and "bewitch" in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* are used.

All the three novels mentioned above are from Anglophone West African writers namely Nigerians and one Ghanaian. This shows that the phenomenon is widespread in the West African region. One cannot speak of West Africa without referring to the francophone West Africa. It is in this regard that an emphasis needs to be put on a novel from francophone West Africa.

Mariama Bâ's *So long a Letter* (1981) explores the Islamic culture in Senegal through the main character, Ramatoulaye, Modou's widow. Her plight is that her husband deserted her for her daughter's classmate who was old enough to be her daughter. Many people thought Ramatoulaye's husband Modou had been bewitched by her daughter's classmate Binetou and was advised to consult some medicine man to counter attack it to win back her love, Modou. Bâ writes:

People talked of bewitchment. With determination, friends begged me to react: 'You are letting someone else pluck the fruits of your labour' [...] Vehemently, they

recommended marabouts, sure in their science, who had proved themselves by bringing husbands back to the fold, by separating them from evil women. These charlatans lived far away. Casamance was mentioned, where the Diola and Madjago excel in magic philtres. They suggested Linguere, the country of the Fulba, quick in vengeance through charms as through arms. They talked of Mali, the country of the Bambara, with faces deeply scarred with tribal marks [...] To act as I was urged would have been to call myself into question. I was already reproaching myself for a weakness that had not prevented the degradation of my home. Was I to deny myself because Modou had chosen another path? No, I would not give in to the pressure. My mind and my faith rejected supernatural power. They rejected this easy attraction, which kills any will to fight. I looked in the face (Bâ, 1981: 51).

MariamaBâ once again proves that the phenomenon that is dealt with in this part is highly spread all over the West African region through the mention of the various people from Senegal through Mali to Niger and even beyond.

6. THE BRIDE PRICE IN THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM MARRIAGE

All traditional African societies have been characterized, at some point in their history, by payment at the time of marriage. Like any other communities in the world, the African societies have their own series of events that take place before, during and after marriage. Examples of such events are the courtship between the prospective bride and the groom which allows them to learn about each other and their relatives, and the widowhood rites which confers sometimes the inheritance of a widow and her family by the brother-in-law after the death and subsequent ceremonies of the husband. The ceremonial of paying the bride price is held after the courtship. The bride price is a symbol of acknowledgement of the parents of the groom to the bride's to show the appreciation of allowing them to have their daughter in their midst.

Marriage as a social institution and the culture of paying bride price are interlinked and form an important part in the lives of African men and women from whatever ethnic groups they come from. To observe strictly the culture of paying the bride price which is also called bride wealth, one must make sure to provide what is mentioned in the bride's family before the marriage is set. African men and women strongly hold onto this custom no matter how modern the society becomes. The bags of cowries were once used as a medium of exchange between peoples and generations in many regions in Africa and as well as other continents, therefore they were traditionally used to settle the bride price. Achebe, a Nigerian writer, writes:

'We are getting at last getting somewhere,' Ukegbu said, and then turning to his brother and his son he said: 'Let us go out and whisper together.' The three rose and went outside. When they returned Ukegbu handed the bundle of sticks back to Obierika. He counted them; instead of thirty there were now fifteen. He passed them over to his eldest brother, Machi, who also counted them and said:

'We had not thought to go below thirty. But as the dog said, "If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is a play". Marriage should be a play and not a fight; so we are falling down again.' He then added ten sticks to fifteen and gave the bundle to Ukegbu.

In this way Akueke's bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries. It was already dusk when the two parties came to this agreement (Achebe, 1958: 51-52).

Furthermore, Achebe shows that if "the bride-price had been paid [...] all but the last ceremony had been performed" (Ibid 95). The bride price seals the marriage and after that all other ceremonies leading to the wedding can be held in order to let the bride go and stay with the groom's family where she will learn skills from the women in the family, especially the elders.

It is also crucial to mention the role of the guide in the marriage negotiation as it is played most of the time by an experienced person in the family of bride. It may be the eldest of the bride's family but the most important thing he must be very experienced. This is the role played by Machi when negotiating the bride price of Akueke during her engagement. Through *The Concubine*, ElechiAmadi makes the same observation about the importance of the guide in negotiating the bride price. He writes:

In a marriage a guide is a very important fellow. He introduces the prospective bridegroom (or his representative) to important relations of the bride. He gives him a good idea as to their order of importance. More important still he fights tooth and nail to slash down the bride price. Although related to the bride, he is expected to side with bridegroom in all things. The choice of a guide makes all the difference in marriage proceedings (Amadi, 1966: 121).

When linking the above definitions of bride price to the African context, one must understand that bride price is one of the widely practiced social customs in Africa regarding the institution of marriage. Bride price is paid mostly in the form of money however; other items such as palm wine, cowries, yams, farmland, animals [cows, goats etc.] may also be given. Moreover, this culture of paying the bride price is a social duty which must be fulfilled in order to achieve the goal of the social practice of marriage which comes with other traditional customs which are very much indispensable in the African society without which the marriage is incomplete.

Elechi Amadi like Chinua Achebe portrays the African traditional marriage through their various novels through the paying of the bride price. But there is another point that needs to be dealt with. In the Amadi's novel *The Concubine*, the marriage between Ekweme and Ahurole is even settled before they come to age; this type of marriage is different from the one that is usually mentioned in most of African novels (Amadi, 1966: 98-99). In some parts of the African continent, underage girls that are given to old men at young ages in their childhood; but in this case the marriage is between two innocent children who know nothing about marital life. The boy is five years old while the girl is only eight days old when marriage is contracted on their behalf.

As mentioned earlier, the culture of paying the bride price before marriage is of great importance in the traditional African set up. For instance, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), there is a scene where a bride price is settled. In examining Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966), there is also a scene a bride price is paid. Like their male counterparts, African women writers similarly paint vivid pictures about the glorification of the bride in their novels, even the second generation of African writers. Ama Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) and, Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) both examine bride price.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, there are many instances where the token of paying the bride price is not disassociated from the marriage. It means that in traditional African marital system, there would be no marriage without paying the bride price. This is depicted through many African novels. Many parents who have female children are the luckiest because everybody knows that in the end some suitors will come for their daughters and the bride price will be paid. Emecheta writes:

The people of Ibuza were never to forget the night the people of Umo-Iso came for Nnu Ego. Her father excelled himself. He accepted the normal bride price, to show that he gave his blessing to the marriage. But he sent his daughter away with seven hefty men and seven young girls carrying her personal possessions. There were seven goats, baskets and baskets of yams, yards and yards of white man's cloth, twenty-four home-spun lappas, rows and rows of Hausa trinkets and coral beads. Her ornamented cooking-pot and gaudy calabashes were attractively arranged round crates of clearest oils [...] (Even today if a new bride is too mouthy about her people, she will be effectively challenged: 'but are your people more generous than Nwokocha Agbadi of Ogboli?' (Emecheta, 1979:28-29).

The importance of marriage is very crucial in the traditional African system and Agbadi through his daughter's marriage wants to display his wealth as a chief and an important person in the community during the marriage. The symbolic acceptance of the bride price is that both parents of the spouses have accepted the marriage.

Furthermore, when the bride is unable to give birth to children for the groom, there comes a problem if it could not be solved this might also lead to divorce. Once again, it is worth mentioning that when the marriage is broken and both sides try to solve it and they could not mend that then there is the need to pay back the bride price to officially announce the divorce. That is what Nwokocha Agbadi who once displayed his wealth during his daughter's marriage, does in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The following lines are illustrative:

It was with pride that NwokochaAgbadi returned the twenty bags of cowries to his former son-in-law and he even added a live goat as a token of insult. He had not waited to listen to Amatokwu's protestations that he had not sent Nnu Ego away. However, the goat was too tempting for Amatokwu to refuse, though by the time he sent people to thank his former in-laws, he learned that Nnu Ego had left for Lagos (Emecheta, 1979: 39).

In some circumstances, when the marriage has come to its end and the woman wants to remarry, it is the new bride price which is paid to her by the new groom that is used to pay back her former husband. And sometimes, some additional stuff is added to show that the new groom is worthy to marry the daughter of the family. That is what Nnaife does to have Nnu Ego to be sent to him in Lagos. Conclusion can be drawn that the bride price by Nnaife is used to refund that of Amatokwu.

When considering BuchiEmecheta's *The Bride Price*(1976), there is another belief about the fact of not paying the bride price: this belief in African society is that if the bride price is not paid then, the bride will die when giving birth. African men and women strongly hold this belief no matter how modern the society has become in order to avoid death.

“Afterwards every girl in Ibuza was told the sad story of Aku-nna and Chike. ‘If you want to live a long time,’ they were told, ‘you must accept the husband that your people choose for you, and your bride price must be paid. If it is not paid, you will never survive the birth of your first child’ (Emecheta, 1976: 85).

As a socialist, Emecheta tries to inform her readers that when someone breaks the law of the society, there is always something tragic awaits him or her. This is depicted through the Aku-nna's fate when a groom's family fails to give the bride price to the bride's family at the time of marriage, the bride dies during childbirth.

The Bride Price(1976) depicts the connection between marriage and bride price without which each of these social events remains defective according to the norms of African society. Moreover, a particular picture of African marriage and the custom of providing the bride price are considered in BuchiEmecheta's novel. In *The Bride Price*, Emecheta espouses the art of writing to reveal the authoritarian traditions of marriage and bride price where it is the affair of only the male members who settle concerns of the family.

In some cases today, bride wealth loses its traditional value because it becomes purely a commercial transaction, introduced into engagement and marriage in violation of human dignity and rights – such as slavery. This is one of the negative aspects of the ritual of paying the bride-price. In the end, pressure on the bride by the family helps her to mature the spirit of sacrifice which is expected of African women. Opposing to what is pictured in the African woman, African women tend to be strong and mature: at times with very formidable personalities indeed. This can be seen through Nnaife, a character in BuchiEmecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. He says:

‘Why, yes, a good husband is expected to pay well for a good girl. That is the way to prove his manhood. If he cannot afford to pay, then he does not deserve a wife. But the Yorubas, they don't do anything like that. They just give the father a bowl of drink and buy the bride a few lappas...no, not enough for all the food the child has eaten since she was born. And her mother has trained her to be a good trader (Emecheta 243).

Nnaife opposes his daughter's marriage with of the Yoruba tribe, whose culture of paying the bride price does not allow him to get back what he has invested in his daughter throughout her life until she comes to age to get married. The differences among the cultures can be one of the factors that would not allowed marriage to be done between people of different backgrounds if the parents from the bride's side are very ambitious in getting a lot from the other side.

The process of Mara's marriage is characterized by the fact that in some traditional African societies, the young bride-to-be has no say in the choice made by their parents. Darko makes use of this fact through the following lines in her novel. She writes:

But that was before I was given away to this man who paid two white cows, four healthy goats, four lengths of cloth, beads, gold jewellery and two bottles of London Dry Gin to my family, and took me off as his wife from my little African village, Naka, to him in the city [...] all I did was grin helplessly because I clearly remembered the same good news as this that mother had given my older sister two years before [...] And my sister was now a wreck [...] Naturally, not all husbands made wrecks of their wives. Many women in Naka were extremely content with their marriages and their husbands and wouldn't exchange them for anything in the world. And some such good men still existed in Naka. But father, it appeared, had a different formula for choosing or accepting husbands for his daughters, which took more into consideration the number of cows coming as the bride price than the character of the man (Darko, 1995: 3-4).

In this situation, the father does not put the interests of her daughter first but his own because later on in the novel, she describes the situation- thus: "I don't know why of all eligible women in the village his father chose me. I only know that the choice, for my father, could not have come at a better time" (Ibid 6). Here, the main character does not even know why she was chosen. This is to say that in the traditional African society no one fully knows what happens to a young lady concerning marriage.

Sometimes, a prospective bride thinks of running when she is maltreated; but when she thinks of the bride wealth, she renounces at the idea. The renouncement to the idea of breaking away from the marriage appears when the woman thinks of how expensive the bride-price was, and subsequently, how difficult it will be difficult for her parents or relatives to pay back. Thus, the bride consents to stay in the marriage even though she suffers in it.

So seeing the situation as it was, I abandoned the idea of announcing my wish that the marriage be dissolved, something I had been intending since I considered that the goats and cows presented for my dowry had probably by now given birth to some more goats and cows so that my father could afford to return the original without loss. And as for the bottles of London Dry Gin I could finance those myself. Then my clothes and jewellery too were left untouched and I brought them along. But father had used the goats and cows to remarry, and he definitely was not going to agree to my wish. So instead I said after all the rebukes that I have just come to the village to have my child (Darko, 1995: 28-29).

There is another example given by another Ghanaian writer named Asare Konadu in *Ordained by the Oracle* (1969). He gives an explanation of how the protagonist of the novel and his deceased wife get married and settle their dowry. He explains:

Serwaah's father was advised of the decision of Boateng. The old man called his friends and relatives. He went into his room and appeared in a rich kente cloth. That was an expensive one he had bought for nearly ten gold weights, about £50. He wanted to give his prospective son-in-law the impression that he did not depend on dowries but it was a heavy dowry that he had in mind. Most of the time serwah refused to marry man after man, she became a burden on her parents and the old man started marking on his red clay wall a series of lines. Although there had recently been a new currency, the shilling and pounds, he still thought in cowries which had been the currency of his time. And each line represented a hundred cowries or £5. As he put on his kente cloth he quickly counted the lines (Konadu, 1969: 124-125).

Before marriages between any African communities occur, tokens in kind are exchanged as part of the transactions, to solidify or cement the social relationships and to seal the union among the relatives of the spouses. Such goods were at first mistakenly considered by some missionaries and anthropologists to be 'bride-price' implying that African marriage involved the buying of individuals. Marriage in traditional African societies was very different and not comparable to slavery.

7. CONCLUSION

With the issue of globalization, the traditional African marriage system has continuously undergone changes for generations. These changes occurred with time when Africans came into contact with

other cultures, which some of which Africans adopted wholeheartedly. The issue of marriage has affected the traditional wedding system because of some young Africans prefer to have a white wedding, which they consider to be more modern. Yet, these individuals often forget that white wedding are an innately Western practice that came to Africa during colonialism. Young Africans indulge themselves into marriage, they tend to forget that in the traditional marriage system, a wedding ring is not involved but they will try to have all the types of marriage that involve without knowing that it costs more than simple marriage.

It is safe to say that even though globalization has affected the marriage system in Africa, it is hard to disassociate the offer of the bride price from the other types of marriage-whether the marriage is held in a magistrate court or a church. The most painful thing that could ever happen to the traditional system of marriage in Africa is the adoption of other systems of marriage at the expense of the African systems resulting in a loss of part of African identity.

REFERENCES

- Acholonu, Catherine. Buchi Emecheta in Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the present. Lagos: Guardian Books Ltd, 1985.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Ed. William Heinemann Ltd. 1958. London: African Writers Series, 1986.
- Aluko, Timothy M. *One Man One Wife*. Ed. Nigerian Print and Publishing House 1959. London: Heinemann, 1967.
- Amadi, Elechi. *The Concubine*. Heinemann: Pearson Educational Limited, 1966.
- Bâ, Mariama. *Une si longue lettre*. Dakar : Les nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979. Translated as *So Long a Letter*. Trans. Modupé Bodé-Thomas. Heinemann, 1981. London : Pearson Educational Ltd, 2008.
- Chukwuma, Helen. *Positivism and Female Crisis: The novels of Buchi Emecheta*. Nigeria: Maltshove Press Ltd, 1989.
- Darko, Amma. *Beyond the Horizon*. London: Heinemann/Pearson Educational Limited, 1995.
- Emecheta, Buchi. *The Bride Price*. Ed. Allison and Bushy 1976. London: Heinemann/Pearson Educational Ltd: African Writers Series 1995.
- ... *The Joys of Motherhood*. Ed. Heinemann : African Writers Series 1979. London: Pearson Educational Ltd, 2008.
- Ike, Chukwuemeka. *Toads for Supper*. London: Fontana Modern Novels, 1965.
- Konadu, Asare. *The Return of the Falcon*. Accra: Adaex Educational Publications Ltd, 2001.
- ... *Ordained by The Oracle (1969)*. Accra: Adaex Educational Publications Ltd, 2006.
- Nwapa, Flora. *Efuru*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1966.
- Palmer, Eustace. *The Feminine Point of View: Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood*. African Literature Today. London: Heinemann Publication, 1983.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



Professor Augustin Ainamon, is the Scientific Director of GRAD Laboratory which is a research group on Africa and the diaspora at the University of Abomey-Calavi. With his 40 years of experiences in lecturing in various universities around the world, he still tries to explore some cultural aspects between Africa and her diaspora.



Celestin Gbaguidi, is an Associate Professor of African Literature. He teaches African literature at the university of Abomey-Calavi and attended international conferences in Nigeria, Togo, Burkina faso, France and US. His research interest is basically centered on gender issues.



Messan Kodjo Agonglovi, is a PhD candidate at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin. His field of research is based on African culture and participated regularly in the Pan-African Doctoral Academy at the University of Ghana where he still acquires skills needed for academic writings.

Citation: *Professor Augustin Ainamon et al. "Exploring the Issue of Marriage Rites in Selected African Novels" International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL), vol 10, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1-14. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1002001>.*

Copyright: © 2022 Authors. *This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.*