

THE REAL COST OF BRIDE PRICE

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INTRODUCTION

What really is the cost of getting married in Papua New Guinea? As a native Melanesian, I have no regret in asking such a question. Melanesians may not realise the many consequences of our bride price system. The real expense of bride price, dowry, and the wedding, costs far more than most people realise. Perhaps we do understand, but, due to some insatiable greed, and the “big name” mentality, we have let the bride price get out of hand. We never bother to analyse, and reason out, things completely. For the world is changing, and we need to educate our people accordingly. This will enable us to move along with the rest of the world, in terms of civilisation.

Our society has been infected with a serious disease that is not being treated. This disease is having a negative effect on our country. It is contributing to the escalating crime rate. Our economy is going down. This disease is a factor in the increase in AIDS, and is spreading at an alarming rate in our young nation. Unless this root disease is diagnosed, and treated with a proper medication, we are headed for real trouble. That disease is called BRIDE PRICE! We should think of our youth. Insatiable greed has caused hindrances that have victimised our youth and our country. Should we work for a better PNG? Or do we remain as we are in the trap of tradition and culture, which stops us from progressing? We must assess our traditional ritual of bride price.

REAL COST OF BRIDE PRICE

Let's look a little closer at the maths, when it comes to bride price. Papua New Guineans only consider the amount of cash marked for the bride price. That could be thousands of kina. We never consider the value of pigs, cows, or any other form of live animals that are also required. We do not usually count the wedding expenses either. The total value of one particular bride price can be triple, or even four or five times, as much as the actual cash bride price. We have not taken all these factors into account. We only think about cash bride price. Some bride prices are paid up front, while others are paid in instalments. Other bride prices are paid over a period of time. "A man from Daribi, Karimui (Simbu Province/Eastern Highlands District), must continue payment to the father and the brothers of his wife for the duration of the marriage; they are paid intermittently during casual visits."¹ Male members of an ethnic group within Melanesian society, according to their culture, are paying bride price continuously to his wife's relatives.

When talking about bride price, we are talking about valuable items: money, pigs, cows, cassowaries, chickens, coffee machines, cars, outboard motors, garden tools, and garden foods. Some of those are given regularly, on top of the bride price paid up front. Can someone calculate the actual total of bride price paid by a Daribi man? Let's start from the beginning, to the time of his death. It will cost him up to K50,000 in bride price for a single lady. That is from his remote place down in Karimui. Now, think of an educated, and employed, or a wealthy, Daribian. His bride price might rise up to K100,000. So, when discussing bride price, we should think critically, and evaluate things, for an understanding of what it really costs.

Bride price is a method of payment for a bride, as we all know. However, there are many other interpretations that go together with the meaning. "In many Papua New Guinea cultures, the bride price ceremony is a public act to show the couple is married. It also opens new ties between relatives of the

¹ R. M. Glasse and M. J. Meggitt, *Pigs, Pearlshells, and Women*, Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969, p. 71.

couple.”² Another reason for bride price, which Ossie Fountain states, is, “The clan of the man to be married usually gave the most valuable gifts, because the bride was often thought of as being lost to her own clan.” Let’s look at one more example from a different culture. This comes from an African culture. “The basic thinking is that, this dowry will compensate the family for the loss of their daughter. Furthermore, dowry cements the agreement, and prevents an easy divorce in the marriage. Thus, dowry helps to stabilise marriage, and protect the wife from unreasonable oppression or rejection by the husband. The dowry was a kind of seal, showing that the marriage has been legally and properly contracted.”³

The following questions need to be asked. Isn’t Papua New Guinea a Christian country? Are we independent? Are we civilised, or are we still in the Stone Age? Papua New Guinea, it’s already midday, and the sun is high above our heads! We are not in the early stages of development in our society. We should think critically, and talk constructively, to move along with the rest of the world, in terms of civilisation. We need to do the maths, and know the real cost of bride price.

When sons and daughters reach the stage of adolescence, the immediate family prepares things in advance for marriage. It normally takes six to seven years to raise pigs, save money, and make gardens. Preparation for bride price and wedding expenses usually takes some number of years. If the bride price system was eliminated or reduced to a reasonable amount, most Papua New Guineans would be wealthy. Most of their earnings from their hard work are wasted on bride price. Please, can Papua New Guineans, who charge a high bride price for their daughter, refrain from referring to this as culture? Money just came into Papua New Guinea yesterday, and so it doesn’t have anything to do with the past. Can’t you just tell the truth, that

² Jeanette Conway and Ennio Mantovani, *Marriage in Melanesia: a Sociological Perspective*, Point 15 (1990), p. 79.

³ *A Bible Approach to Marriage and Family in Africa*, Machkos Kenya: Scott Theological College, 1994, p. 20.

you need the money to start a business, and also buy a PMV or a car?⁴ Today, the bride price is considerably higher. It consists of more valuable items than we can think of. How can the groom find the money for the bride price? More than 80 percent of the population is not employed outside the family farm. Three-quarters of this unemployment figure are made up of youth. When such a situation occurs, we are indirectly pushing the youth into criminal activities. They go out onto the streets and do detestable things. They get involved in breaking and entering, stealing, robbery, rape, drinking JJ (homemade alcoholic fruit drink), or even using marijuana to run away from their problems.

Now, we are encountering more problems than in the old days, due to adaptation of customs from many different cultures. The wedding expenses need to be counted as a part of the bride price. When considering all the things involved in a wedding, one discovers that the wedding expense exceeds the actual bride price. Weddings are becoming more complicated, due to the fact that we are using customs from many cultures. “As Western influence spreads, it is common to see a wedding follow a Western pattern. The bride, attended by bridesmaids, will be dressed in white, with a veil, and a bouquet. After the exchange of vows, the bridal party will line up to have photos taken. A wedding reception will follow, complete with the cutting of the cake and toasts.”⁵ The many cultural expressions about weddings, used in Papua New Guinea, are producing a more-expensive wedding. This is being put on top of the cost of bride price.

Our custom in Papua New Guinea is to expect interest on loans for everything, including bride price. This is a Melanesian way of exchanging things. The debts on bride price and wedding expenses will be reimbursed with interest. “Two men specifically said that higher bride wealth imposes a

⁴ Dan Jorgensen, “From Sister-Exchange to ‘Daughter-as-Trade-Store’: Money and Marriage in Telefolmin”, in *Catalyst* 18-3 (1988), p. 255.

⁵ Marilyn Rowsome, “A Traditional Wedding: Dua – ‘The Bride’”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 17-2 (2001), p. 30.

heavier burden on the bride's parents, who must supply pork."⁶ Customarily, those relatives, who contributed towards the bride price and the wedding, had their share of pork. But their contribution must always be reimbursed, when they need it. This is one of the cultural traditions that is of great concern. If we assist a brother in need with bride price, then we get our share of pork at the wedding feast. The problem is that we also expect our contribution to be reimbursed with interest. When looking at bride price, the demand is alarming, in comparison to the bride price in the old days. During those days, only pigs, kina shells, cassowaries, and stone axes were paid as bride price. However, today, the bride price has gone beyond to an unaffordable rate. It includes quite a number of expensive items, in addition to the wedding, as elaborated earlier.

The reality is that Papua New Guineans are at a crossroad. Some stick to the traditional culture, while others adapt to the Western culture, and some follow the Christian principle. When a family meets to confer about a bride price, one family member comes in with a Melanesian idea. Another suggests a Western-style of wedding. Christian family members speak strongly for a church wedding. All sorts of suggestions are thrown in, for the same issue. To avoid conflict, they merge their suggestions. The end result leads to a much bigger burden for the family. The contribution for bride price can be as much as K10,000 in cash. The total value for the animals contributed may reach K15,000. The wedding service expenses can total nearly K6,000. As these figures illustrate, the bride price today is more like robbing another person. "The words of one father, whose daughter's marriage had just netted him some thousands of kina: 'She is my trade store', a statement given substance by his establishing a trade store with the proceeds."⁷ We are treating the image of God in our daughters as an object for sale. Daughters are now something that we can sell and buy, just to satisfy our greed.

⁶ Jorgensen, *Sister-Exchange*, p. 270.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

EFFECT OF BRIDE PRICE ON THE CHURCH

What is the effect of bride price on our youth and our church? Bride price has cost our youth and the church greatly. There are many negative consequences surrounding the issue of bride price. A boy and a girl were in the church, ever since childhood. Their parents were also members of the same church. At the stage of adolescence, the youth loved each other deeply, but they could not get married. “There are two results of this: one is that the bride price is becoming unreasonably high. Another is that there is great pressure on the young man to find the money and goods for himself.”⁸

It is difficult for a youth to find such a huge bride price. If they were employed, they could manage to collect half. But the rate of unemployment in this country is rising; therefore, the problems of bride price are increasing. “It is a bad thing, if it means that, two people cannot get married, because they do not have enough money for the bride price. It is possible to be in love with each other, but not be able to marry, because the man cannot find money for the girl. This may mean that the girl will sell her body to men, in order to earn money, because the bride price is too high for anyone to marry them.”⁹ In another instance, a delayed wedding means youth may have secret affairs with each other. Sometimes, unexpected things may happen. The girl may become pregnant following pre-marital relations. This results in losing youth and pastors in our churches. I have witnessed many youth and pastors, who have been suspended from churches, and from college. Some of those quit Christianity, and are now backslidden. “Could the church also play a role in the matching of partners? The Western fashion of individual choice, based on emotions, may not be the ideal. Christian parents, pastors, and church leaders could be acting positively, in taking the initiative to arrange Christian marriages, with the approval of the young people. The church certainly has a

⁸ Ossie Fountain, *Melanesian Belief and Problems about Marriage*, Wewak PNG: Christian Books Melanesia, 2000, p. 8.

⁹ Harold Taylor, *Things about Sex, Love, and Marriage*, Rabaul PNG: The United Church Tok Save na Buk Dipatmen, 1977, p. 33.

responsibility in providing suitable courting activities, before God, for its young people.”¹⁰

The wedding of Pastor David and Pastor Della Dorome is an example of a new attitude regarding bride price. The wedding was held at Emmanuel church, Kudjip, on January 31, 2004. The up-front payment was below K1,000, and two live pigs. The wedding was so wonderful and fantastic. I have never seen one like it before. The bride and the groom, with their attendants, were dressed up neatly. The wedding service was conducted professionally, with more than 1,000 people in attendance. After the wedding service, a delightful meal was served for over 1,000 people, who were in attendance. It was estimated that the cost of wedding was about K7,000.

The Dorome wedding is a fine example for Christians, pastors, and Christian parents, for the following reasons. (1) Pastor Della’s relatives do not consider bride price a priority in their life. Most of all, they wanted her to marry a Christian. (2) Pastor Della’s parents understood precisely the responsibilities of parenthood. (3) They did what they could as Christians to make the wedding a meaningful event. (4) The expense of the wedding exceeded the amount of bride price. This wedding can be an eye-opener for Christians and pastors. As pastors, we should take this as an example, and teach our Christians to do likewise. “Some parents may object to the expense involved in a lovely church wedding, but it is interesting to note that a higher percentage of happier married couples were married in a church than those who were not married in a church.”¹¹ We do things to glorify God. We should not let any earthly things distract us from our Christian journey. Let’s observe a quotation here to view some Western ways of marriage. “The Western world sees marriage as a human and social reality, which entails an agreement between two individuals, who are mature and free enough to enter

¹⁰ Rowsome, *Traditional Wedding*, pp. 31-32.

¹¹ Cleveland McDonald, *Creating a Successful Christian Marriage*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1975, p. 157.

such agreement. This agreement is expressed publicly in an act that can be clearly documented.”¹² This is because they do understand relationship.

A SUGGESTION FOR THE BRIDE PRICE PROBLEM

The bride price issue is a chronic problem. It affects our youth greatly. And that is a cost to the churches. As the crime rate in the country escalates, you will find few or no youth attendance in the churches today. This paper is not trying to condemn the bride price. However, it is an issue that is constantly affecting our youth. And it needs to be solved somehow. Why can't we take some time to assess and analyse such an issue? We need to face it head-on, for the good of our youth, the country, and for the kingdom of God. “We are selling our beautiful gift from God, like selling beer and motor vehicles.”¹³ Furthermore, a quote from Irene Chan says, “Bride price generates the idea that the woman is a product on the shelf, an individual, with no feeling or thought of her own.”¹⁴ Some think that the bride price payment has withdrawn some of the woman's rights and privileges. In the eyes of the man's family, which pays the bride price, this is true. That is decidedly not true in the eyes of God. Both man and woman are equal in the eyes of God.

There are those who support the practice of bride price. Harold Taylor states, “Understand the reason behind culture. The first thing is to try and understand the reason behind buying and selling. The girl is not sold, like a shirt. The purpose of bride price was to act like a cement, bringing together the two families.”¹⁵ Another similar suggestion is from Marilyn Rowsome. She says, “The bride price acknowledges the value of womanhood, and gives

¹² Conway and Mantovani, *Marriage in Melanesia: A Sociological Perspective*, p. 32.

¹³ Jorgensen, *Sister-Exchange*, p. 255.

¹⁴ The quote is from a speech given by Irene Chan on “Bride Price” in 1996, when she received the Papua New Guinea Youth of the Year Award, given by the Lions Club in Lae. A copy of the speech can be found in the Melanesian Nazarene Bible College library, in the Melanesian section.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Things about Sex*, p. 32.

expression of the girl's worth and quality. It acts as a stabiliser for the marriage. It provides security for each partner."¹⁶

From experience, and as a Melanesian, I have witnessed that bride price does not stabilise a marriage. I have not seen it cement together two persons, or families. It might have been so in days past, however, today, many influences have weakened the strength of bride price. This means the bride price does not have the power to stabilise, or cement together, two persons or families. Higher bride price, or any form of bride price, has not stopped any maritally-related problems. In fact, marital problems are often the basis for tribal fights. A tribal fight can start when:

- Women are chopped up, after having an affair with another man.
- A woman takes up with another man.
- A woman is sterile.
- A woman is not able to meet the basic needs of her husband.
- Bride price is not recouped, if a woman is divorced, or is unable to produce children.
- Husbands mistreat their wives.

“A woman may be left feeling that her bride price constitutes her value. While bride price may have affected the women's sense of self-worth, it has also affected the view that many men hold of women. This practice of presenting bride price to the girl's family is believed to give the husband, or the husband's clan, rights over the woman's reproductive capacity and physical labour. And the customary law is reflected in today's unacceptable rate of domestic violence and physical assault.”¹⁷

The bride price does not ensure a lasting and happy marriage. No person or culture can do so. However, **ONLY GOD CAN DO IT!!!** The Bible makes it

¹⁶ Rowsome, *Traditional Wedding*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Things about Sex*, p. 32.

clear that Christ is the right foundation for marriage. Ian Malins states, “A Christian marriage is more than just joining two people or two lines together, through a custom or church wedding. A third person must always be part of a Christian marriage. And that is God.”¹⁸ God is at the top of the relationship. He always is to be the joining link between husband and wife (Gen 2:8-24). That is where perpetual love exists in marriage.

The bride price system in our society has ruined most of the country’s wealth. The following example of typical expenses illustrates this point.

CASH	K10,000
LIVE ANIMALS	K15,000
WEDDING EXPENSES	<u>K8,000</u>
TOTAL	<u><u>K33,000</u></u>

The total cost for this bride price is K33,000 (not K10,000, as we thought in the beginning). This is just an illustration. Bride price is not always stable. It could be higher or lower, depending on the bride’s relatives, and the location. This is a waste of money, which belongs to hard-working people. Without paying bride price, this money could have been invested into some profitable businesses.

CONCLUSION

Bride price was intended to stabilise, or cement, two persons and their families together. Greed has destroyed this lofty reason for the bride price. We are on a crossroad of decision, uncertain of which direction to follow. But, since we have come to understand the real cost of bride price, we have to make a proper decision. This paper is suggesting a Christian and Western cultural-style of marriage. It can be kept simpler, and not as costly, if we do not let pride enter into the planning. The marriage will be sealed with love not money, and only death should separate the married couple. In this type of

¹⁸ Ian Malins, *Christian Marriage and Family Life*, Wewak PNG: Christian Books Melanesia, 1996, p. 10.

marriage, God, the creator of marriage, must remain at the centre of the marriage. It is God, and not a huge bride price, which can bring a happy marriage, and Christian family life. Removing God from His proper place in a marriage is the most damaging cost of bride price. Bibliography

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