

MATRIMONIAL GOODS AMONG THE ATOENDE
KUSASI: 'MATRIMONIAL PRESTATIONS AND
EXPLOITATION' PART III

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In Part I, attention was drawn to jural marriage prestations which Fortes (1962) termed as 'prime.' He distinguished between this set of prestations and the contingent ones. The latter were discussed in Part II. I attempted to show from these papers that Fortes' distinction has some validity although there are cases where prestations have an ambivalent character and that transformations do occur. The discussion on marriage prestations will however remain inconclusive without an examination of the issue of exploitation. It is very pertinent to ask whether the actors perceive any hardship when these prestations have to be carried out, and particularly to determine who benefits and who loses. This paper attempts to examine 'exploitation' in the light of Kusasi marriage practices. Insights will be drawn from the marriage practices of neighbouring peoples such as Mamprusi, Bisa, Kasena-Nankana and Mossi. I shall also argue that matrimonial prestations have repercussions for inter-ethnic relations.

Some exploitation is involved when marriage is institutionalised through transfers of comparatively large matrimonial prestations. This undoubtedly is the case among those Upper East societies where several herds of cattle have to be transferred in the course of a marriage. In exploring the nature of the exploitation cognizance must be taken of the fact that in the Upper East, cattle rearing is only one of the features of the mixed agriculture found in this region. Cattle are scarce and when they have to be obtained from the market, high prices may be paid. The high market prices relate to a huge national demand. Cattle and other Upper East livestock are exported to the southern part of Ghana where demand is great and prices high.

Cattle are also scarce because they are treasured as wealth and though rearing should ensure an appreciable increase in population the conditions for cattle husbandry are not of the best. Feed and water are scarce in the dry season and cattle diseases are prevalent. Livestock owners have to contend with frequent livestock thefts as the entries in the Civil Record Books amply demonstrate (cf. ADM 57/4/19, ADM 57/4/20, NAG.). In recent years livestock have suffered from repeated bouts of anthrax in the Kusasi district. Cattle and other livestock are also put to ritual uses when they are sacrificed to the dead.

It can be argued that attractive as Meillassoux's claim may seem, namely, that matrimonial goods are matrimonial coupons, the Atoende Kusasi situation shows that this is not always the case. One set of matrimonial goods does not survive intact for use in a subsequent prestation. Atoende Kusasi practice stipulates that the oxen which are included in the transfers be sacrificed to the girl's deceased parent or paternal grandfather. Thus, although possession of enough matrimonial resources does not mean that a person will automatically obtain a wife, there is a genuine difficulty when it comes to finding the necessary bridewealth goods to carry out the primary matrimonial prestation.

The difficulties facing married men who have to provide for huge bridewealth transfers have been noted and commented upon. "The Conference on Customary Dowry" held in May 1987 in the Northern Regional capital, Tamale, is the most recent forum for the discussion of bridewealth systems in Northern Ghana.¹ The press reports of proceedings in the two national daily newspapers, Ghanaian Times (G.T.) and Peoples Daily Graphic (P.D.G.) suggest that the mood was not in favour of the continued existence of these prohibitive matrimonial prestations which were viewed as outmoded. Although there is no immediate indication that

those directly affected by the giving of 'huge' matrimonial prestations would listen to and be guided by the suggestions of the Law Reform Commission delivered at Tamale by the Attorney-General, the chief of Bawku was able to react. This came in a paper presented by C.A. Avoka on the chief's behalf in which he objected to any policy aimed at unification of 'dowry' practices. He also indicated that he and his people would accept a reduction of the bridewealth cows from four to two i.e. a return to the Major Moreton policy of 1928.

Compared to the loud criticisms of matrimonial prestations heard at the Tamale conference, where external observers had been most vocal, paradoxically local people tend to be less critical, in any case their criticism is muted. This is because it is not always the case that there are overall losers and gainers, for those who have to make these prestations at one time are beneficiaries at another. However in the interim some categories of people could be said to stand to gain by a reduction in bridewealth prestation or even by its abolition. Chiefs, because they are the arch-polygynists in Kusasi society, constitute one such group. While it is by no means the case that all Upper East chiefs would have a vested interest in the reduction or abolition of matrimonial prestations, chiefs who are not exempted from making these prestations on account of their position would benefit from any decrease. This will happen only if such chiefs have outstanding matrimonial obligations or if they hope to marry more wives in future. On the other hand polygynists may also have unmarried daughters each of whom should attract matrimonial prestations.

Another group of likely beneficiaries of any decrease in bridewealth prestation are the literates - people who earn incomes from white collar and allied jobs and who operate outside the lineage based subsistence economy. On the whole this category of people does not specialise in producing matrimonial goods and services. Though they may not always be denied access to conserved lineage resources when these are needed to support their marriages, they do not have a ready claim on lineage wealth if their support of the lineage is considered negligible. On the other hand if they have to acquire these resources from the market they must pay exorbitantly for them. Thus matrimonial prestations constitute a heavy burden on this category and they, more than other categories, resent the making of bridewealth prestations for reasons of self-interest.

In the dialectics of bridewealth prestations the opposition centres between wife-givers and wife-takers. The former favour matrimonial prestations since they are gainers while the latter who have to find the goods have reason to wish for a reduction. There is also another opposition which cuts across the wife-giving and wife-taking groups and polarises seniors and juniors. The opposition is pervasive in Upper East societies and matrimonial prestations provide only one form that the exploitation of juniors takes. The senior generations control land and preside over ancestral and other spiritual forces that guarantee the physical, spiritual and material wellbeing of the community. This situation ensures that the seniors also have control over the labour of the youth as the latter have to be submissive.

The collective product is appropriated by the seniors who also redistribute it; however, as far as its use to meet matrimonial prestations is concerned the seniors who have more wives benefit more than their juniors. Since the seniors, whether as managers of wife-giving or of wife-taking groups, control pubescent girls as well as matrimonial resources, juniors have to ingratiate themselves with their seniors if they are to be allowed the opportunity to marry. The seniors have thus a double leverage over the juniors. The contingent prestations are thus a manifestation of this dependence and subjugation; and although it may benefit the wife's parents, its feminine equivalent, the daughter-in-law's services, benefits the husband's parents. In the Voltaic cultural zone, which includes the Upper East, Mossi marriage practices illustrate clearly this arrangement. In that society, according to Skinner (1964: 22), the lineage heads negotiate with one another for pubescent girls for their groups. No substantial bridewealth as a primary

prestation is ever made, what is important are pre-marriage or extra-marital prestations given and reciprocated between the allied groups, and these derive ultimately from the juniors of the lineage - those who must depend on the goodwill of their senior agnates for wives.²

The Mossi marriage practice is interesting; while it contrasts with Atoende Kusasi marriage practice in that it dispenses with the primary prestation of matrimonial goods like livestock, it is nonetheless exploitative of youth and juniors - particularly those of inferior political status, as the pogsioire institution illustrates. It becomes evident that even without the use of economic resources to mediate in marriage formalisation, it is still possible to exploit some sectors of society by managing pubescent girls. Equity will remain an illusive goal unless the reduction of the prime prestation is accompanied by marriage liberalisation and relaxation of the hold senior (parents) maintain over pubescent girls. It appears that education of girls in schools and institutions undermines this firm hold on girls which makes it possible to manipulate them. Unfortunately school enrolment in Atoende have not improved substantially since the 1960s and girls more than boys have suffered from the paucity of educational facilities in the area and their deterioration after 1966.³

Critics of matrimonial prestations have often emphasized that primary prestations when viewed cumulatively are even more burdensome. Given that prime prestations cannot always be distinguished from contingent prestations in all cases as I have already indicated above, any unilateral abolition or reduction in primary prestations quite apart from being impossible to enforce could lead to an intensification of contingent prestations. The Mossi practice which is sustained by prestations that are contingent in nature is more exploitative and may in fact have evolved from a situation where prime prestations had been abolished perhaps at the instigation of the chiefs who are the main beneficiaries of the abolition.

Young women indeed are the victims of high matrimonial prestations for it is they more than young men who are denied the choice of a spouse. Several participants at the Tamele Conference on Dowry equated the lot of high bridewealth wives with domestic slavery, a condition, which they maintained, provided no exit if the marriage turned sour. The implication here is that marriages based on high matrimonial prestations are indissoluble. Because the wife-taker had transferred a substantial marriage prestation the wife-giver is bound, out of self-interest, to ensure that the wife remains permanently wedded since divorce would lead to a refund of wealth which the wife-giver no longer has in reserve or is reluctant to refund. While it cannot be denied that wife-givers who have received a substantial matrimonial prestation have a vested interest in stability it is by no means always the case that high bridewealth makes marriages permanent. The participants in question did not consider the fact that the primary prestations might be in several instalments spread over a period and that their completion may be post-mortem at which point only the stock reveals that a high prestation has accumulated. The Atoende Kusasi case in fact shows that the vested interest of the wife-giver notwithstanding, divorce is possible and fairly common even after the transfer of the entire primary prestation. The transfer of four cows does not make "the bride's right to divorce unrealistic" as one of the participants claimed. The Atoende case illustrates further that refund is not automatic once divorce has occurred. There are conditions where no refund or only partial refund could be anticipated, and divorce under certain circumstances could well redound to the material benefit of the wife-giver who gets to keep the entire bridewealth already paid as well as claiming a new independent set. By age sixteen most Kusasi girls would be married and beginning to bear children. A woman could have had four issues by age thirty and should she divorce her husband thereafter her eligibility for marriage would not be questioned and should she do so, her lineage would be entitled to a full complement of the primary prestation while the divorced husband claims no refund.

Indeed, it could be argued that a high matrimonial prestation enhances the wife's value to her husband and guarantees that she will enjoy better treatment. In a system where the refund of matrimonial goods is conditional, both spouses may be brought to behave responsibly, in order not to have to bear the blame and the cost of a broken marriage. Among the Atoende Kusasi, if the husband misbehaves his wife could abscond to her natal lineage and remain there for as long as the husband does not beg her to return. No refund can be demanded so long as the wife does not remarry and even after remarriage the refund of bridewealth, if it is claimable, will have to be made by the current husband or his lineage. It must also be borne in mind that when bridewealth refund is made no consideration of interest is entertained in spite of the fact that the original livestock might have multiplied after several years. To this must be added the fact that the refund does not mean the recipient will be able to take another wife immediately, for bridewealth is not really of equivalent value to women.

Absolute marital stability may appear to some as a denial of a basic freedom of choice but there are those, as the Catholics do, who see it as desirable. Atoende and neighbouring peoples see it as an ideal and a necessity to be endured for the sake of one's children whose wellbeing is catered for by a stable marriage relationship. In some parts of the Upper East it is not uncommon to see a woman admitting to the necessity of continuing an unsatisfactory conjugal relation for the sake of her children. It is one of the personal sacrifices for which a parent could say to a child "how I suffered to beget you." As this etc view favours stable conjugal relations high bridewealth transfers can be said to have a positive quality for the people still confined to the traditional sector. Reference has already been made to voluntary transfers in excess of the minimum, Awedoba (1989). A similar consideration explains the stereotypes which the Kasena-Nankana hold about Builsa marriages. They regard Builsa marriages as mere cohabitation.

While high bridewealth prestation may be seen as one of the factors influencing marital stability, it must be mentioned that in some ways the rigid control of pubescent girls and matrimonial goods also contributes to elopements which in turn lead to unstable marriages.

The aim of elopement is to present an unwilling wife-giver with a *fait accompli* marriage. If the wife-giver, particularly the wife's guardian, relents all may yet be well but where he maintains his unflinching opposition the marriage must run without his moderating influence the presence of which contributes to more stability. Parents have been known to curse daughters who marry men they disapproved of or to sever kinship links with the disobedient couple by prohibiting their participation in the parent's funeral rites and celebration. Such implacable opposition usually works in the long run when the bliss of marriage life has jaded and the problems of every day conjugal relations have asserted themselves.

Eloperments have implications for broader social problems such as urban migration, just as the possibility of emigration to urban areas has no doubt influenced the frequency of elopements. In pre-colonial times elopement merely implied taking the fiancee home without authority and leaving to his lineage the task of intervention and negotiation with the girl's lineage.

Since the colonial era and the break out of *pax Britannica* it has been possible to elope to Southern Ghana where there was need for unskilled labour. Southern Ghana has provided not only a refuge from the anger of the wife-giver but also temporary reprieve and even the opportunity to work and accumulate a private fortune from which the cost of the customary prestations might eventually be met. A judicious use of such a fortune might also transform the opposition of the wife-giver for better.

Measures that Ameliorate the Hardship

To the observer lacking a close acquaintance with the operation of matrimonial prestation systems, that institution holds nothing positive. The people whose lives are affected by the institutions are however less critical because ways exist for accommodating hardships resulting

from these prestations. The whole prestation may not have to be made at one go and as no interest is demanded for delayed transfers, wife-takers have time to accumulate the necessary resources. Among Kasena-Nankana a man is not obliged to give the bridewealth cow on his wife's behalf if that for his mother has not been settled. Among Atoende Kusasi it sometimes falls to the son to give the primary prestation on the mother's behalf. Both practices suggest that it is possible to postpone these transfers. Statements of bridewealth quantities are often based on the ideal norm which inflates the size; actual experience however is often different. When Atoende Kusasi say that they give and take 4 cattle, it is not realised that donkeys which are of lower value may be acceptable in lieu. One is reminded of the Pedi practice of insisting that bridewealth prestations are in the currency of livestock when the reality is that they had long ceased to present cattle and only cash is transferred (Sansom: 1976). Furthermore, by a notional over-valuation of that cash present vis-a-vis livestock, they are able to claim to have transferred more livestock than the physical cash prestation could have purchased at the livestock auction.

It has also to be borne in mind that today's losers in terms of bridewealth prestations are tomorrow's or yesterday's gainers. It is for this reason that these Atoende people interviewed on the issue said they preferred an equal number of sons and daughters as offspring. Every person in theory belongs to both a wife-giving and a wife-taking lineage. Among Kasena-Nankana where the matrimonial prestation is considerably less mothers and fathers prefer sons to daughters. What comes in on behalf of sisters or daughters goes out when brothers and sons marry. It has to be remarked at this juncture that the wife-taker does not always have to acquire a completely fresh primary prestation; he may make use of cattle and other livestock which may have been obtained from a daughter's or sister's husband. The burden on the wife-taker is not therefore as great as it may seem in view of the circulation of bridewealth goods. In making this point I am not expressing complete agreement with those students who present a much idealised situation where the same sets of matrimonial goods circulate from one affinal group to the next and so on throughout the society. Indeed if this were the case bridewealth prestation would not be perceived as irksome at all. Bridewealth livestock may increase naturally, some may die, be sacrificed or sold to meet pressing lineage needs.

Inter-ethnic Marriages and Bridewealth Prestation

If matrimonial prestations are seen as a means of rationing women, as Goody (1973: 5) implies, then these prestations can have the effect of restricting intermarriage to the ethnic area, and discouraging intermarriage with neighbouring people who do not have or do so produce the items that comprise the matrimonial prestation. Kusasi may intermarry with such neighbouring peoples as the Mamprusi, Nabdum, Bisa, Tallensi and Prafra etc. who are similar in many respects. They forbid intermarriage with Fulani and according to Rattray with Mossi.⁴ The reason for shunning intermarriage with Fulani is simple. Fulani are migrants who have entered the area from further north, but have not really settled or attempted to integrate with established communities. Though they have enough cattle to enable them to marry Kusasi girls, it does not appear to be their custom to marry with cattle. What is however even more important is that the services which constitute contingent prestations among Atoende Kusasi can best be rendered by settle people - agriculturists rather than by pastoralists. A Fulani son-in-law would be too elusive to be of use to a Kusasi father-in-law. Besides, a Fulani girl married to a Kusasi farmer might not easily cope with a farming life and vice versa for a Kusasi marrying a Fulani herdsman.

While Nabdum, Tallensi, Bisa, Prafra etc. all have a system of prime matrimonial prestations comparable to Kusasi, Mamprusi appear to differ here yet intermarriage is not forbidden. Their primary marriage prestation is low in value. Rattray quotes an informant to the effect that 'No

man is so poor but he can afford to have a wife' (Ratray, Vol.2, p.460). Nevertheless Kusasi-Mamprusi intermarriages are common. Those ethnic Mamprusi in Kusasiland operate a subsistence economy that is identical to that of the Kusasi and have the resources required by Kusasi wife-givers. Kusasi marrying Mamprusi girls have to provide less by way of matrimonial prestations, from which it would appear that Mamprusi women should appeal more to Kusasi men. There is however the snag that those Mamprusi in Kusasiland not only regard themselves as descendants of princes and therefore of a superior station but are also mostly Moslems who would not acquiesce in a marriage between a Mamprusi girl and a non-Moslem Kusasi man. Marriage based on a much reduced bridewealth could thus be a means for attracting Kusasi to Islam.

Atoende Kusasi are predominantly non-Moslem, particularly the southern parts of Atoende where we researched; and because the area is more homogeneously Kusasi than Agolle, inter-ethnic marriages with Mamprusi are less common. There, it is the resident Bisa communities that tend to intermarry with Kusasi although Bisa appear to have a preference for ethnic spouses. Bisa informants also say that Kusasi matrimonial prestations are more irksome and that Kusasi wife-givers are insistent on immediate transference of the primary matrimonial goods. Bisa by contrast accept pre-marriage prestations from the girl's suitors who are expected to compete with one another and use such prestations to influence the eventual outcome.⁵ Kusasi by contrast do not have elaborate pre-marriage prestations comparable to these.

In multi-ethnic societies like Atoende and Agolle the matrimonial prestations are in fact one index of ethnic identity and differentiation. Thus stereotypes have developed about the nature of prestations associated with each group, which hinder inter-ethnic marriages. It is a curious fact that after more than a century and half of co-existence in Kusasi land, the Mamprusi elements who have 'Kusasisized' in language and culture still retain their separate identity and the ethnic problem remains a disruptive influence. It may be that inter-ethnic marriages have either not been frequent enough or affinity strong enough to influence the situation. Though the ethnic conflict between Kusasi and Mamprusi revolves around the chiefship of Bawku, the issue of bridewealth prestations may have an indirect contributory role. Strong allegiance to ethnic group is influenced by group investment in marriage prestations. As I have argued above there is a case for associating matrimonial prestations with 'childwealth' and furthermore when bridewealth demands are made in the context of inter-ethnic marriages there is less sympathy for the wife-taker, a fact which is bound to affect later reciprocities of the contingent kind. In this regard attention may be drawn again to the Bawku chief's willingness to have the Major Morton Policy applied provided there is no attempt at harmonizing or evolving a uniform system of matrimonial prestations for the area. Such uniformity is perhaps what a place like the Agolle district, and to a lesser extent Atoende district, stands in need of given the ethnic conflicts that have repeatedly wrecked Bawku town and which dates back to the late 1950s when party politics had first exploited ethnic differences. A uniform system of matrimonial prestations will tend to undermine ethnic barriers as far as choice of spouse is concerned. Though this must appeal to nation builders, in the short run those embroiled in ethnic tensions cannot always be expected to approve of such uniformity as the Bawku chief's statement shows.

Conclusion

I have drawn attention to the presence of generosity in affinal relations but the possibility of exploitation is ever present and although critics associate the prime or primary prestation alone with exploitation the contingent prestations could also be commandeered to serve the same purpose. It is furthermore the case that the distinction between 'prime' and 'contingent' prestations is not an absolute one, for there are instances when prestation might have a dual character or may be transformed from one category to another. This fact should advise those who favour reform to inspect all marriage prestations before adopting particular policies.

Footnotes

1. In Colonial era some British administrators had attempted to reduce the primary bridewealth prestation in Kusasi from 5 to 2 cattle as is reflected in official correspondence between the Acting District Commissioner (A.D.C.) for Kusasi and his Superior, the Commissioner for the Northern Province (C.N.P.) dated 24/9/28 and 1/10/28 cf. ADM 56/1/284, National Archives of Ghana (N.A.G.). This policy became known as Major Moreton's Policy in subsequent letters. It did not gain the support of the people as letter A.D.C. to C.N.P. dated 12/5/29 shows. The policy had to be abandoned.
2. Skinner indicates that there is in fact exchange of women between the allied lineages which is not immediate or simultaneous but delayed. Direct sister exchange is also forbidden. Thus the exchange is not of the 'balanced reciprocity' kind but has rather the character of 'generalised reciprocity.'
3. The Census Reports show that the rate of literacy is very low in Atoende and this has been borne out by observation. In April, 1987 the primary school in Zongoiri, one of the chiefdoms of Atoende, had on roll 78 pupils only 11 of whom were girls. Class One alone had 52 pupils of whom 9 were girls and the local C.D.R. claimed the credit for this relatively huge enrolment; but how many of these will complete school? After more than three decades of existence Zongoiri Primary School had no pupils in Class 5 and 6 in April, 1987.
4. The majority of Atoende informants did not mention any prohibition on intermarriage with Mossi but all agreed that there was such a prohibition on intermarriage with Fulani. The general explanation was that Fulani exude an unpleasant bodily smell which would inhere permanently after bodily contact with them.
5. These pre-marriage or courtship prestations are not refundable to those suitors who fail to marry the girl. They are not specified as to quantities thus making it possible for suitors to attempt a display of wealth through lavish prestations. Atoende Kusasi suitors may present a fowl to a brother of the fiancee in an attempt to secure his support but unlike Bisa not much else is demanded or expected from such suitors.

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