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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

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Bride Wealth among the Dinka Anglicans in Southern Sudan

Martin Olando

Bride wealth is a major concern among the Dinka Anglicans of South Sudan. The Dinka are the largest ethnic group in that country, their population being about two million.¹ However, this figure is open to question, because no proper census has been carried out since 1954.² The majority of Dinka are Anglican and they form seventy per cent of the Christian population.³ The Dinka were among the first Sudanese ethnic groups to be evangelized, by Roman Catholics from 1887 and from 1906 by Anglicans. Anglicanism in South Sudan spread rapidly and the first African Anglican priest was ordained in 1943.⁴ Despite the growth of the Anglican Church in South Sudan, there is also a strong presence of the Roman Catholic Church, the African Inland Mission, Presbyterian denominations and African primal religions.⁵

Anglicanism in Sudan

The Anglican Church is known as the Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS). The ECS has witnessed growth in South Sudan, Kenya and other parts of Africa due to the diaspora produced by civil war at home.⁶ The Dinka of Southern Sudan have turned to *Nhialic* (God) because he understands their pain.⁷ When the war broke out, many Dinka sought refugee status in America, Australia, Canada, Uganda and Kenya. During the war the Dinka lost everything, but their hope was in God. The ECS grew because the Dinka live in close-knit groups.⁸ The Dinka have continued to live together and extend their sense of kinship into church life. Because of this, Dinka Anglicans have stuck to some aspects of their culture that are untouched by the influence of western missionaries. The Anglican Church in Sudan is not a transplant of western church culture because it is independent in decision making. Before the late twentieth century, the Anglican Church in Africa was dependent on the west for decision making and monetary support. This began to change in the 1960s with political independence, followed by cultural independence when Anglican churches in Africa demanded autonomy.⁹ Unlike churches in the west, which emphasize individuality, the ECS is centred on the community.¹⁰ ECS members are strong because they have embraced the togetherness of African brotherhood in their daily

living. This is contrary to the western concept, which according to a leading Anglican theologian, Grant Lemarquand is more Cartesian: ‘I think, therefore I am.’¹¹ The emphasis is more individual than communal. The ECS in Sudan is independent of the west in its decision-taking, and this makes the African voice in the Anglican Communion stronger. Whatever action is taken by the Dinka Anglicans in Sudan concerning theological issues carries weight in the communion. At the first Lambeth conference of 1887, the 76 bishops in attendance were all white. In 1878, 110 bishops attended and the sole black bishop was from Haiti. But, at the 1988 conference, black bishops were in the majority. In 1998, white bishops were in an even smaller minority.¹² This reflects the black numerical dominance in the communion, the importance of which trickles down to Sudan. For example, Anglicans in Sudan have their own way of worship that is embedded in vibrant African rhythms and connotations, especially in their singing. Their Anglican Dinka worship is enlivened by singing that dates back to when young Dinka were taken as slaves by Arabs and they sang songs of salvation expecting deliverance from God.¹³

Bride wealth among the Dinka Anglicans

One feature of traditional Dinka life that has affected the Anglican Church in Sudan is the bride price (or bride wealth) system, which plays an important role in the distribution of family property and in the creation of alliances among families. ‘This institution specifies that a prospective husband, usually with the help of his relatives, must provide a substantial sum of money or highly valued goods to his future wife’s family’ before entering into a marriage contract.¹⁴ Among the Dinka the bride price is understood primarily as a payment made in order to acquire rights over the children of the proposed marriage. The practice is especially important among the Dinka because it determines how children born out of that marriage will be acknowledged and treated. In the western world marriage gifts are given to support the couple to start up their home. In Africa, the bride gift gives the husband authority over his wife and gives the wife the right to be buried at her husband’s home.¹⁵ Bride gift items differ from one place to another.¹⁶ They range from foodstuffs and drinks to money, cattle, sheep, goats, utensils, ornaments and tools. Among the Dinka, haggling over bride wealth is only the first step in celebrating the marriage of the couple. For the Dinka people, the bride price is usually paid in cows and depends on the height of the bride—the taller she is, the more cows she can demand.¹⁷

After the two families agree upon the dowry, people perform traditional Dinka songs. The Dinka view cattle seriously and even have a myth depicting that man's work has been to tend cattle since time immemorial.¹⁸ Dinka value cattle so much that it is impossible to buy them from the Dinka at any price. Even insurance claims in some parts of South Sudan are paid in cattle.¹⁹ The Dinka love cattle, whose main social use is the payment of bride wealth. Bride wealth is normally paid in cattle, but because of the social changes brought about by the movement of the Dinka to other parts of the world, it is now sometimes paid in cash. Nevertheless, the value of a man in Dinka society is calculated in terms of the cattle he possesses.²⁰

Is bride wealth a practice compatible with Christianity or not? Dinka Anglicans participate in it and so do other church leaders across South Sudan. These leaders give various reasons why they participate in this practice. One of them is that it gives the groom status in society, since by paying it he has shown he is capable of taking care of his family. Status in society is very important to all the Dinka, irrespective of their Christian background. Saint Paul the apostle asserts that if you cannot take care of your family then you are worse than a non-believer, and the Dinka interpret bride wealth in this context.²¹

During the exchange of the bride gift the Dinka man is dependent on his relatives. This is because traditional African societies are well known for sharing whatever they have and doing things in common.²² Cattle for bride paying are acquired from the family members because they are Dinka. Since there is a common cause at stake, all Dinka, and especially the relatives of the groom, assemble whatever resources they have to support one of their own.

Dinka also preserve their culture through their songs. These songs are important to their spirituality, which is reflected in every aspect of their lifestyle.²³ In bride price negotiations they sing songs, which are an expression of what is in their heart and mind. The Dinka songs point to Dinka theological reflections in response to their changing social and political environment.²⁴ These changes have occurred largely because Dinka in the diaspora have borrowed a different culture from other communities.

Dinka offer up prayers to *Nhialic* through *Yecu Kritho* (Jesus Christ). In bride wealth negotiations, prayers are made through Jesus. Jesus is a reconciler among

the Dinka as they negotiate the bride wealth process. They see the presence of Jesus Christ in everything they do and their traditions find an echo in what they believe is the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. The paying of bride wealth is therefore acceptable to the Christian community since they believe that Jesus Christ reveals himself in both the Old and the New Testaments. As they see it, any Dinka who worships *Nhialic* has no reason to reject bride wealth culture.²⁵ Jesus Christ is a teacher, Saviour and paternal uncle to all in the Dinka community, since they trace origin from Deng.²⁶ If Jesus is the revelation of God in both the Old and New Testaments, then there is no harm in the bride gift custom. This is because *Nhialic* approved bride wealth in the Old Testament in the life of Abraham's son Isaac and grandson Jacob.

Dinka Anglicans have thus based their teaching on Scripture and have used Anglican forms of worship in their lifestyle. Dinka have interpreted their faith in God and the understanding of the Anglican liturgy as they were guided by the Bible. This can be seen from the following Dinka expression:

Ye Baibol yeenju ee?
Baibol ee dhol e piir
De Dukoor;
Ok aaci kuer lo nhao yok.

Trans:

And what is the Bible?

The Bible is the way of life

For an inquirer;

We have found the road to heaven.²⁷

They strongly believe what the Bible says because it is the inspired word of God both now and in the world to come. Any person who goes against the Bible is not doing the will of God and is an enemy to a society which believes in taking collective responsibility for all that its members do. They follow the Bible to the letter and observe holiness as the Bible commands. At one time some Dinka Anglicans refused to take part in eucharistic worship because of differences between church members and stayed away until the differences were sorted out.²⁸ This shows how Dinka are committed in their resolve to take seriously the word of God.

The Dinka are subdivided into Bor, Agar, Ngok and Rek Dinka among many others.²⁹ All these Dinka groups value bride wealth and many men have not married because they cannot afford to pay it. Most of the Dinka in Kenya are Christians of the Anglican tradition. The Dinka who live in America are popularly known as ‘the lost boys’ who come to Kenya to marry and pay their bride wealth in Kenyan shillings or American dollars.³⁰ Some of these ‘lost boys’ have inadvertently made the bride wealth payment more expensive. Many of the local people believe that living in America, Australia and Canada is a sign of wealth. Therefore, any young Dinka man who is living in America is charged a high bride wealth price.³¹

Determined to get wives, the young men pay what they are asked. Most young Dinka boys in Kakuma and Nairobi dream of going to America for better life. Dinka men living in America come to Kenya and pay the bride wealth without any difficulties.³² Those who are not able to pay bride wealth often decide to elope, which is fast becoming the trend among young Dinka in the diaspora. Elopement can also be attributed to the tedious process involved in bride wealth payment. In other instances, elopement occurs when many men compete for a girl. The man who first proposed may elope with the girl to avoid competition.³³ However eloping can be avoided if the prospective groom negotiates with the bride’s parents as to how the payment can be made.³⁴ Some Dinka Anglican young men fear that the competition will leave them unable to pay bride wealth. Even some church leaders have eloped because they cannot pay bride wealth. But church leaders who elope are suspended from leadership, which makes it necessary to develop a Biblical perspective on bride wealth and apply it consistently in the life of the church.

The African definition of bride wealth

In African societies, marriage is a package that includes courtship, betrothal and bride wealth payment.³⁵ Africans value their culture and will probably oppose anything that seems to interfere with it. Bride wealth is among the cultural practices that Africans value. Bride wealth is money or goods given to a bride’s family by the bride groom especially in tribal societies.³⁶ Bride wealth or bride price is a sign of affection to the girl by giving goods or money. It affirms the new found relationship between the two families. It makes everyone aware that the young man is serious and wants to win her for marriage.³⁷ The institution of bride wealth and polygyny is present in many African societies today. This

practice involves a variety of wealth forms, where special items are exchanged. In other areas, there are particular valuable items that are used. Most African societies use cattle as a form of bride gift exchange. The bride wealth cattle 'are transferred from the groom or his family to the bride's father or brother.'³⁸ It is believed that gifts in any form bind the two families together. Bride wealth exchange payments have been understood in various ways depending on the members of the community involved. It is not payment for the wife, but an appreciation by the husband to the parents of the way they brought the girl up. Bride wealth should never be thought of as a purchase, but rather as an exchange of gifts to enhance friendship.³⁹ It was the early missionaries, with their colonialist perspective, who demonised the bride wealth practice by regarding it as a financial transaction.⁴⁰

Biblical precedents for bride wealth practice

African Christians have argued about whether it is Biblical to pay bride wealth. Biblical references have been given to argue both for and against this practice. Jacob had to work for many years to get Rachel, the woman he loved. He had contracted to serve Laban for seven years so that he could marry her,⁴¹ but in the end he had to work for fourteen years because she was the younger daughter.⁴² Laban was anxious to get a good bride price for her. Unlike his grandfather's servant who went to that same territory with a similar purpose, Jacob went empty handed. He was not able to offer Laban a monetary sum as a bride price, but was willing to serve Laban for seven years instead.⁴³ This raises many questions about marriage in a patriarchal society. Was it regarded as a form of purchase, an agreed price being paid by the husband to be, or by his family to the girl's father? If so, did Jacob, who was unable to pay the accepted price, offer his services to Laban in lieu of payment? In Hebrew society, a person who had a debt could offset his debt by working for six years and then in the seventh year he would be declared free.⁴⁴

In Gen 24:10, when Abraham sent his servant to get a bride for Isaac, the servant took all kinds of good things with him as presents. He distributed costly gifts to Rebekah's brothers and mother. Although the word translated 'gifts' is not the technical word for bride wealth, in a society where marriage was a form of purchase there can be little doubt that that is what was intended.⁴⁵ The servant presented two expensive gifts to Rebekah. Rebekah thought these gifts were an expression of extravagant gratitude by the servant;

she did not realize he was treating them as bride gift.⁴⁶ Abraham wanted a bride for his son who would bring honour and glory to God. He therefore presented gifts like camels to the parents of the bride. The personal presents for Rebekah—a gold nose-ring weighing a half a shekel and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels, also of gold—indicate more than a reward for services rendered. They were intended to show the servant's further interest in her.⁴⁷

Many western missionaries came to Africa with a prejudiced image of the continent and a belief that God can only be found in specific communities.⁴⁸ This raised the suspicion that Christian theology can only be expressed through the medium of western culture,⁴⁹ though it can be affirmed authoritatively that God's revelation is expressed not only in the Scriptures, but also in cultural traditions.⁵⁰ It follows from this that God can speak in and through African cultural practices like the bride wealth payment. Africans live as a community and as a family of God. This idea of the family has strong roots in African tradition as an indicator of God's living presence in culture as well as in the history of redemption.⁵¹

The understanding of bride wealth practice among African theologians

Various African theologians have given their views of this bride wealth culture. African theology should address African needs and be based on Biblical faith. It should speak to the culture but at the same time reflect the orthodox doctrine of the Christian faith.⁵² Bride wealth has been practised since time immemorial and arose out of an African philosophy. Mary Amba Oduyoye says that the marriage gifts should show bonding and friendship between two families.⁵³ In her native Ghana, *Aseda* (thanks offering drink) and *Tinsa* (drink offering) were a seal to show that gifts had been exchanged between the two families. Oduyoye notes that *Aseda* and *Tinsa* never had any economic value. They set a stage for friendship, but not for an exchange of goods or the purchase of a slave. These bride gifts were for the sole purpose of establishing a covenant between the two families. African bride wealth should be taken as the appreciation or friendship that God calls for between human beings. Relationships within families on earth are a picture of the everlasting relationship to God's family in heaven.⁵⁴ Jesus is our friend and his friendship can be seen in our relationships with God through him. God is the source of all relationships and this should be expressed even in the exchange of bride gifts. We have a friend in Jesus and

there is nothing bad in encouraging friendships. The friendship motif goes hand in hand with the African philosophy of sharing what you have with those whom you want to befriend.

The African should not be forced to abandon the world view in which bride wealth culture is an integral part of life. In this case, the African world view should form the basis for developing a theology that speaks in a context that people understand.⁵⁵ Bride wealth is part of the African world view and a theology that speaks to the people should be developed around it. Jean Marc Ela maintains that African cultures do not need a Christian manual of ‘do and don’ts.’ The African continues to thrive according to his world view and needs a theology that can speak to it. Of course, there should also be a balance between the African world view and modern ideas. Unfortunately, many Africans have abandoned their world view at the expense of modern ideas, which is a great pity. One can easily dismiss bride wealth as an outdated practice,⁵⁶ but as Joseph Mugambi says, not everything in the African world view is bad. Mugambi asserts that in some respects, the African world view is superior to others. For example, it acknowledges the omnipresence of God.⁵⁷ As Osador Imasogie puts it, in the African world view God is present in all daily activities. This also applies to bride gift ceremonies because God is present and oversees them. The knowledge that God is in control at that particular moment reflects the belief that everything is under his control. Both Mugambi’s and Imasogie’s views prompt us to ask whether the practice of bride wealth should be accommodated within the Christian church or not. If we follow their arguments, then bride wealth is a part of African culture that should be viewed positively.

God does not look at any culture as inferior to others.⁵⁸ Wilbur O’Donovan, a non-African writing about Christianity in Africa, remarks that the Israelites were not chosen by God because they were better than other groups. It was due to God’s sovereign will that he chose them. It would therefore be unfair to regard any culture as inherently inferior. Bride wealth is a heritage that Africans should preserve and be happy about.⁵⁹ God is at work on the African continent. He has good plans for Africa and for its people’s culture. I believe that he is saying to Africans that even bride wealth is part of his good plan for the African continent. He has given the African mind a revelation in the Old Testament as to what should be done about bride wealth. God spoke to the

Hebrews through the culture that they understood best. This was part of his plan for the Jews, and what he did with them in the past is now part for his plan for Africa.⁶⁰

Any ritual adopted by a particular people has a meaning for them. The practice of the bride price can be regarded as an African ritual. In the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, rituals were not only structures but determined how things would be done by that particular society. The bride price ritual could then determine how relationships should be formed in local communities.⁶¹ If the bride gift is a sign of friendship, the neighbours and the new families (after exchange of bride wealth) should display what the bride wealth means by the way they behave towards those who have given and received it.

Having said that, it should be acknowledged that bride wealth in Africa has both good and bad points. African theologians have spoken about its dangers. In some African communities, the woman becomes the husband's slave.⁶² Edna Maluma highlights the fact that a woman works under the command of her husband, because to his mind, she has been bought with bride wealth. In this way, African men abuse the practice of bride wealth to inflict suffering on women throughout the continent. The woman can become a slave to her husband's family to such an extent that even if the husband dies, she cannot remarry without the consent of her dead husband's family. Bride wealth also gives the husband a right to bodily pleasure with his wife whether she wants it or not.⁶³ A woman in Africa cannot say no to intra-marital sexual activities with her husband, even if he is promiscuous and therefore exposed to sexual disease. This situation arises because the payment of bride wealth gives official approval to control by her husband. On the other hand, some parents of the bride have commercialized the practice of bride wealth, thus losing the original meaning of friendship and bonding. The parents demand expensive bride wealth gifts, which must be given in order for the marriage to be consummated. It turns out to be more of a profit-making act than a gesture of friendship. Some families take it as an opportunity to get rich. As a result, the family of the bridegroom that manages to meet all these demands may find that it is left with nothing to take care of the wife to be once she is married.

Culture and a person's religious beliefs cannot be separated. They are interdependent, as Stephen Neill asserts:

Throughout human history religion and culture have been indissociably connected. There has never yet been a great religion which did not find its expression in a great culture. There has never been a great culture which did not have deep roots in a religion. When religion is separated from culture it becomes anemic. Religion cannot feed on religion; it has to feed on life. Whenever a culture is set loose from a religion it becomes demonic.⁶⁴

African cultural life plays back into the Christian worship and rituals. The Gospel of Jesus Christ can be understood in other forms of culture like bride wealth.⁶⁵ Bride wealth, like any other cultural practice, can be used as a means of incorporating something good into the worship of God if it is understood and applied in the right spirit.⁶⁶ The missionaries came to Africa with a new religion. The coming of new religious ideas has both positive and negative effects that can strengthen or destroy any culture.⁶⁷ In Africa, the practice of bride wealth has to some extent been revised or questioned as African culture has met Christianity. As we have already stated, from the African perspective it can be identified with the bride wealth practice that is mentioned in the Old Testament and justified on that basis.

Conclusion

There are some good things in African culture, but it should not go against the biblical teachings which hold the key to theology in Africa as elsewhere. African theologians should seek to address issues that are close to the African heart and explain their connection with Christian teaching as simply as they can. Africans need a theology that they can understand and identify with. Bride wealth is the linking of two families in African society which makes it very important, and serious study ought to be done on this subject.⁶⁸ There is a need to examine bride wealth within both traditional and Biblical contexts in order to arrive at a fully balanced perception of it.⁶⁹ This is possible, provided that both traditional and modern ways of life are examined in the light of Scripture and reconfigured according to its teaching, and not in the light of perceptions and prejudices imported from elsewhere.

Rev. Dr. MARTIN OLANDO is the Academic Dean at Bishop Hannington Institute of Theology in Kenya and Visiting Lecturer at Kenya Methodist University.

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