


# Bride price and Christian marriage in Nigeria

**Author:**Solomon O. Ademiluka<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, School of Humanities, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria

**Corresponding author:**

Solomon Ademiluka, solademiluka@gmail.com

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Payment of bride price is a popular tradition in Nigeria as in most parts of Africa. However, in Nigeria, the practice has virtually lost its traditional purpose of marriage validation and honouring because of the commercialisation by many parents. For this reason, some critics have called for a cancellation of the custom, as it has turned women to commodities to be bought and sold. This article examined the purpose of bride price in the traditional African setting, the changes that have crept into the practice over time, and the desirability or non-desirability of bride price payment for Christians in Nigeria. The article employed the exegetical method for the study of the relevant texts and, using the descriptive approach, it gathered and utilised material relevant for bride price payment, as practised in Nigeria. The author found that payment of bride price is not prohibited in the Bible. In the traditional African society, bride price served mainly as the legal exchange that validated marriage. It was discovered that charging exorbitant bride prices by Nigerian parents obliterated the original purpose of the custom. Commercialisation of bride price in this way is partially responsible for the increasing rate of late marriages and non-marriages amongst Christians. The inability to pay high bride prices had created a situation whereby young Christian men and women cohabit without legally getting married. Exorbitant bride price sometimes leads to domestic violence against women. It is for these reasons that some have considered payment of bride price unchristian, whilst others have called for its abolishment. Nevertheless, this study concluded that as payment of bride price is not prohibited in the Bible, it is not wrong for Christians to pay and receive bride prices. Moreover, if its traditional purpose is adhered to, payment of bride price need not cause women abuse. Its cancellation would amount to doing away with the original purpose of the practice, particularly the legitimisation and honouring of marriage. Therefore, rather than abolishing bride price, one would call for a return to its original purpose. More than recognising the value of bride price, the church in Nigeria has the responsibility to educate Christian parents on the adverse implications of charging exorbitant bride prices.

**Contribution:** This article is a contribution in ethics of Christian marriage. It is relevant for educating Nigerian Christian parents against charging excessive bride prices.

**Keywords:** bride price; dowry; מנה; African traditions; Christian marriage.

## Introduction

Bride price comprises items or money paid by an intending husband to the family of the woman he intends to marry as part of the marriage process (Sambe, Avanger & Agba 2013:5). Expressed in another way, bride price is (Nambozo 2004):

[A] form of exchange between the family of a bride and a groom whereby gifts in cash or in kind are given to the bride's family in return for giving away the bride. (p. 1)

Bride price is sometimes confused and used interchangeably with dowry (Theological Advisory Group [TAG] 1996:128), but although the two are closely related, there is a difference between them, namely (Scheidler 2010):

[A] dowry is normally paid by the family of the woman to the family of the man while [bride price] is paid by the man or potential groom to the family of the woman. (p. 2)

As Anderson (2007:153) puts it, marriage payments 'from the family of the bride to that of the groom [are] broadly termed as dowry [while payments] from the groom's side to the bride's [are] broadly termed as bride price'. Hence, Becker (1991) stated that bride prices and dowries are 'two

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sides of the same coin, distinguishable only by the direction of transfer' (cited in Anderson 2007:167). Both forms have been in practice in most parts of the world. For example, dowry payments are widespread in India, whereas China and Taiwan are amongst the few places where bride price and dowry coexist (Anderson 2007:153). According to research studies, the custom of bride price dates as far back as 3000 BCE amongst the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Hebrews (Anderson 2007:153; Lowes & Nunn 2017:1; Nambozo 2004:1). It is estimated that roughly 75% of the world's contemporary population lives in regions where the practice of bride price is prevalent (Hudson & Matfess 2017:10). The practice is most commonly found in sub-Saharan Africa where more than 90% of the societies traditionally pay the bride price (Murdock 1967, cited in Anderson 2007:153; cf. Lowes & Nunn 2017:1). In fact, in most parts of this region, bride price is practically necessary for marriage (Hudson & Matfess 2017:10; cf. Sambe et al. 2013:65). There are two dominant theories in anthropology concerning the context within which bride price originated (Ashraf et al. 2016:9). The first suggestion is that it began in patrilineal societies where the wife had to join the husband's kinship group at marriage. The bride price was thus meant to compensate the bride's lineage for the 'loss' of their daughter and to appreciate the investments they had made in raising her. In agrarian societies, as in most parts of Africa, the practice has also been linked to the involvement of women in agriculture. In such places, bride price was originally intended to compensate for the loss of a daughter's contribution to manual labour (cf. Ashraf et al. 2016:9; Sambe et al. 2013:65).

In contemporary Nigeria, because of modern civilisation, several changes have come upon the traditional custom of bride price payment, notably the acceptance of money in place of material goods, particularly in urban areas. Nonetheless, bride price payment is still commonly practised 'and tends to be accepted as a cultural norm' (Sambe et al. 2013:65). However in some quarters, the practice has gone beyond a cultural norm into some form of business by some parents who see this as an opportunity to reap the totality of the money they have expended on their daughters prior to marriage. This has resulted in exorbitant bride prices in many parts of Nigeria, particularly amongst the Igbo of the south-eastern region. Hence, some critics have called for stopping the custom, as it presents women as 'commodities to be bought and sold' (Mordi 2019:online). The subject of bride price is relevant for Christians because it is witnessed in the Bible. It is significant for Nigerian Christians because despite the distortions, most denominations demand it to be paid before intending couples are wedded (Mordi 2019:online). The aim of this study is to examine the purpose of bride price in the traditional African setting, the changes that have crept into the practice over time, and the desirability or non-desirability of bride price for Nigerian Christians. The target population is Nigerian Christians who pay or receive bride prices. The essay employs the exegetical method for the study of the relevant texts, and the descriptive approach for

the issue of bride price as practised in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. It begins with the practice of bride price as found in the Old Testament (OT). From there, it examines the tradition of bride price payment in Africa with particular reference to Nigeria. Finally, it appraises the implications of the current practices for Christian marriage in Nigeria.

## The biblical basis for bride price payment

Bride price is not mentioned at all in the New Testament (NT). In the OT, however, it represents a well-established custom, which is similar to the practice elsewhere in the ancient Near East. In the ancient Near Eastern patriarchal extended family system, it was the father or eldest brother of the groom who arranged marriage with the bride's parents (Hamer 2015:66). Usually, such a pre-nuptial agreement involved some amount of money to 'be paid to the bride's family by the groom's family' (Hamer 2015:67). Such agreements were found in Mesopotamia during the Ur III period in 2100–2000 BCE (Hamer 2015:67). Similarly, the Babylonian and Assyrian laws made it mandatory for the groom to pay to 'the girl's father or sometimes to the girl herself the *tir-atu*, a sum varying from one to fifty shekels of silver' (Kaiser 1980:492). In Assyria, the payment was made to compensate for the girl's loss of virginity or serve as an insurance if her husband died. In the ancient Near East, the pre-nuptial agreement had a binding force 'that required a full "divorce" for its abrogation' (Hamer 2015:67). The practice is found in Israelite culture in the form of betrothal. According to Fitzhenry (2015:1), the Hebrew marriage included two ceremonies carried out at an interval of about 1 year, namely, the betrothal and the wedding. The betrothal (Heb. אֵרֶשׂ) involved negotiations, payment of the bride price and a vow. Etymologically, אֵרֶשׂ means 'to pay the price, and so gain the right of possession' (Fitzhenry 2015:1). Literally, then, payment of the bride price (Heb. מָהָר) for a virgin means that the man 'has legally purchased a wife, but will not take physical possession until the wedding celebration' (Fitzhenry 2015:1). Shectman (2014:168), however, argued that although the payment of the מָהָר transferred a woman's affiliation from her father to that of her husband, it did not signify that 'women are commodities being bought and sold. [It] is notable that the terms מָכַר and קָנָה [to sell] are almost never used of marriage'. Lemos (n.d.) also asserted that 'to think of the betrothal gift as a purchase price ... is inaccurate'. Similarly, Kaiser (1980:492) affirmed that the מָהָר was 'strictly speaking not the purchase price' but the customary bride price.

Hamer (2015:81) stated that the מָהָר 'is a sum of money to be paid by the groom to the father or family of his prospective wife'. The noun is mentioned three times in the OT (Gn 34:11–12, Ex 22:16–17, 1 Sm 18:25; cf. Kaiser 1980:492; Scheidler 2010:5). In Genesis 34, Dinah, one of Jacob's daughters, was sexually violated by Shechem. Afterwards, Shechem expressed his wish to marry Dinah and was determined to pay whatever her father would demand as the מָהָר. Most writings on the Dinah narrative usually focus on the nature of her experience with her violator, describing it as consensual

premarital sex (Graybill n.d.) or acquaintance rape (Klopper 2010:658). Nonetheless, Shechem's offer to pay the bride price on Dinah makes the narrative relevant in the context of 'female sexuality as an extension of masculine economies of power and control in the Hebrew Bible' (Graybill n.d. cited in Ademiluka 2018:348). This idea of settling women abuse simply by paying the bride price is mentioned more clearly in the Mosaic law, precisely in Exodus 22:16–17 (cf. Dt 22:28–29). The passage states that if a man violates a virgin, he shall pay the bride price to the father and marry her. Thus, 'raping or seducing a virgin was a putative intent to marry, upon payment of the ... bride price' (Cole 2013:6). This text further depicts female sexuality as an extension of masculine exercise of power, in that the bride price is paid not to the abused girl but to her father to compensate him 'appropriately for the reduced price she would fetch, given the loss of her virginity' (Jacobs 2012:247). However, Cole (2013:6) explained that without her virginity, a Hebrew woman was considered to be unmarriageable, in which case no bride price would be paid to her father. In the corresponding law in Deuteronomy 22:28–29, the money to be paid to the father of an abused virgin is specified as 50 shekels of silver. This, however, may not signify that bride price was a fixed amount in view of the varying forms of payment elsewhere (Hamer 2015:81), as seen, for example, in 1 Samuel 18:25–27. Here Saul wanted David to pay the bride price for his daughter, Michal, in terms of a valiant deed of killing 100 Philistines. In this demand, Saul was not only bent on getting David killed but also wanted to ensure that David annihilate Philistines, and not Israelites, and hence, the specific demand for the foreskins, which would clearly indicate that the dead were uncircumcised philistines (Ellicott's Commentary, in Bible Hub 2004–2021). Apart from Saul's ploy to kill David by that exploit, verse 23 shows that payment in terms of the valiant deed was an option for David as a poor man. This passage is thus reminiscent of Genesis 29:13–20 where Jacob laboured for Laban in order to marry Leah and Rachel. The מָהָר, then, was paid according to the payer's ability. 'Abraham, a wealthy man, gave out of his wealth (Gn 24:50–54) while Jacob, in his material poverty, gave his labour' (TAG 1996:128). As seen in the following section, payment of bride price in the form of labour anticipates the old practice in Africa.

This exegesis has shown that although payment of bride price is not commanded in the Bible, 'unless there is something about the ... practice that would violate a principle found therein, [it] is not specifically prohibited by the Bible' (Scheidler 2010:6). It can, therefore, be safely assumed that it is not wrong for Christians to pay and receive bride prices. In the following section, the article examines the custom of paying bride price, as practised in Africa, with particular reference to Nigeria.

## The tradition of bride price in Nigeria

In patrilineal societies, as in most parts of Africa, generally at marriage, women join the households of their husbands, the movement which traditionally warrants payment of bride price, paid by the husband to his wife's 'parents for

the right to her labor and reproductive capabilities' (Anderson 2007:159). In the African agrarian economy, the woman leaving her family deprived that family of her labour, transferring it to her husband's own (Hamer 2015:82). It may be in view of this perception that in the past, bride price consisted mainly of manual labour rendered by the groom and his family for the bride's parents. For instance, amongst some ethnic groups in Kenya, 'bride-wealth was related to goods and services that a bridegroom and his kinsmen transferred to the family of the bride' (Onyango 2016:2). Writing on the Gbagyi of north-central Nigeria, Ali, Al-Yasa'U and Wushishi (2018:34) stated that upon agreement between a man and a woman to marry, the next stage was to pay the bride price for which the groom was required to work at the bride's parents' farm at least two times every year for about 7 years, usually assisted by his friends. He would 'be engaged in several kinds of farm work [such as] making ... yam heaps and harvesting of farm produce'. Similarly, in the traditional setting of the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, the bride price (Eniola & Aremo 2020):

[C]onsisted of the labour rendered by a man to the parent of the woman he sought to marry.... Such assistance included farm work, building mud huts, splitting firewood, fetching water, or collecting palm fruits. (p. 27)

Diala (2014:19) also reported payment of bride price in the 'form of labour' amongst the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria. However, with modernisation and industrialisation with their concomitant effect of rural–urban migration, 'most people no longer live in villages and do not engage in farm work' (Eniola & Aremo 2020:27). The result is that money and items, mainly farm produce and drinks have replaced manual labour as the requirements for bride price. The materials demanded vary from one locality to another, usually reflecting the nature of each specific agrarian economy (Ali et al. 2018:35; Diala 2014:19; Eniola & Aremo 2020:27). For example, amongst the Fulani of northern Nigeria bride price is paid mainly in cattle (Ali et al. 2018:35). In Yorubaland, bride price can be very elaborate, involving numerous items, such as a specific number of tubers (Solanke & Ayodabo 2017):

[O]f yam, bottles of groundnut oil and palm oil, bunches of plantain, suitcase(s) full of female clothing, crates of soft drinks, assorted wines, different types of fruits, and envelopes with different amounts of money. (p. 348)

For Nigerian Christians, these days, bibles and wedding rings are also included. The envelopes contain the real bride price, each with an amount of money and labelled according to its designated owner(s). For instance, an envelope labelled as *owo ori iyawo* [bride price] contains the proper bride price, which goes to the father of the bride. Other recipients of the envelopes are the men, women and youth of the bride's clan (Eniola & Aremo 2020:27; Solanke & Ayodabo 2017:347).

In the traditional African setting, the occasion of the payment of bride price used to be a colourful event, and it is still so in

some places, especially in the rural areas. Nambozo's (2004) description for Uganda is applicable to Nigeria:

When a man wants to marry a woman, a delegation [*from his home*] ... go to the woman's home. On arrival at the woman's home, there is another delegation [*from her home*] awaiting them. The spokesman from the man's side informs the spokesman from the woman's side the purpose of the visit and then the negotiations begin ... The speaker from the woman's side mentions exactly how much their bride is worth in ... cash [*and*] other forms of payment ... The occasion ends with festivity. (p. 3)

The occasion could also be extremely exciting, especially with the theatrics. Scheidler (2010:2) noted that in southern Africa, 'the process of *lobola* [bride price] negotiations can be long and complex even when the parties involved have known each other for many years'. Ubong (2010) described the negotiating phase of bride price payment during the previous time periods amongst the Ibibio of southern Nigeria. At the height of the negotiation, the:

[T]wo friendly but 'warring' ... negotiating teams of the bride's family and the groom's family [*faced each other*] with profuse employment of proverbs, repartees, tropes, fables, jokes, anagrams, and once in a while outright clowning. (p. 337)

After the negotiation came the drama of the 'search' for the bride who had been 'hidden' from view till this moment. As described by Ubong (2010):

The groom's team, about now becoming impatient and getting restive, openly demand the appearance of the subject of their mission – the bride. They are told to organize a search party, during which a woman in the bride's family will be persuaded to lead the search team. She makes demands, makes at least two trips, appearing with females other than the bride (usually an old woman and later a little girl). By the third trip, the bride ... elaborately dressed and decked with trinkets and bracelets from the hair to the ankles ... is escorted by a long dance train comprising females of her age group, friends, and family ... It is a triumphant moment for both parties after a long battle of wits. (p. 337)

Unfortunately, amongst the Ibibio, as in most parts of Africa, most of these practices have been changed or eradicated altogether. The negotiation now takes place privately between the two families before the public ceremony. In place of the negotiation, professional engagers acting as 'masters of ceremony fill the gap with jokes, repartees, and choreography' (Ubong 2010:337). Hence, Scheidler (2010:2) opined that in modern times, 'businesses have even been established for the purpose of helping to assist in [bride price] negotiations'.

Nevertheless, in the traditional African setting, the significance of bride price was beyond the theatrics. Bride price had the most (TAG 1996):

[I]mportant place in the sealing of a marriage relationship. [It] was the legal exchange which validated a marriage and confirmed the consent of both parents of the bride and bridegroom. (p. 128)

According to Lowes and Nunn (2017:2), generally in Africa, 'marriage is equated with the payment of bride price.... [It] is

the primary indicator of marriage. [W]ithout the transfer of bride price there is no marriage'. It is by virtue of payment of the bride price that a woman leaves her parents' house and family, and becomes 'officially a part of the groom's family ... giving up her maiden name to assume the husband's surname' (Scheidler 2010:4). In other words, it is bride price that really makes the African man the husband of his wife. In Nigeria, it is 'a well-established principle of customary law that the payment of bride price is an essential ingredient of a valid customary marriage' (Falana 2019:135). In the days of old in Yorubaland, without the payment of bride price 'marriage consummation was impossible' (Alowolodu & Olusanya 2019:24). In some parts of Nigeria, for instance, amongst the Igbo, bride price is so important that even where a man dies without paying, his children have to pay it to gain recognition and acceptance by the lineage of the deceased (Diala 2014:21). Diala (2014) also stated that bride price has to be returned in the event of divorce as an indication of the proper dissolution of the marriage. This is very necessary, especially where the widow:

[I]ntends to remarry and the family cannot refund the bride wealth paid for the first marriage, [*in which case*] the suitor for the second marriage may be instructed to refund the bride wealth from what he is to pay. (p. 22)

In Africa, Nigeria in particular, bride price not only makes the marriage legal but also 'establishes the legitimacy of children' (Sambe et al. 2013:66). It is by virtue of payment of bride price that a woman's children belong to her husband. It is what entitles such children to 'the right to bear the husband's family name. Children, whose father defaults in the payment of bride price, are not considered legitimate by the kinsmen of such a father' (Eniola & Aremo 2020:28). As Scheidler (2010:4) puts it, the payment of bride price makes 'the husband and his extended family the rightful "owners" of all of the offspring' that come from a marriage relationship (cf. Lowes & Nunn 2017:2). Diala (2014:23) believed that the Nigerian constitution, under section 42, has nullified this custom in the promulgation that '[n]o citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth'. This law, however, is of little consequence when it comes to matters such as a lineage denying someone recognition. Hence, despite this law, payment of bride price is still considered to be mandatory for even Christian marriage in Nigeria. It is not likely that any church would join any couple without ensuring that the bride price has been paid (Mordi 2019:online). Oduah (2019:online) affirmed that 'for many Nigerians across all religions', what is most important in marriage is 'the payment of the bride price. If the bride price is not paid, the couple do not marry' (cf. Ogoma 2014:99).

Another significance of bride price in the traditional African society was that it served as the confirmation of the potential groom's sincerity concerning the marriage; 'a demonstration that the groom was very serious about his intentions' (Scheidler 2010:4). As the intending couple would not have any physical contact before the bride price was paid, it was 'the only symbol of faithfulness to the marriage, which is

similar to the wedding and engagement rings used today' (Nambozo 2004:3). Falana (2019:135) stated that bride wealth 'is a sign of fulfillment of a customary marriage giving assurance and confidence to the parties involved; [it] contributes to the firmness of the marriage'. In African perception, marriage is a bond, not only between a man and a woman but also involves the extended families of both the bride and the groom (Ojua, Lukpata & Atama 2014:44; Scheidler 2010:3). In this regard, payment of bride price is a symbolic gesture that brings two families together in a social alliance, fostering 'mutual respect between them' (Scheidler 2010:3). The payment of bride price fosters respect, which is applicable not only to the families of the bride and the groom but also to the husband and the wife. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Lowes and Nunn (2017:4) opined that 'for both men and women, bride price payment signals honour and respect'. For the man, he 'will never be respected if he fails to pay bride price' (Nambozo 2004:2). A man who pays the bride price on the woman he intends to marry is accorded respect because he has demonstrated to her parents that he is economically able to cater for wife and children (Scheidler 2010:3). However, it appears that the African woman counts non-payment of bride price on her as more demeaning to her than it is to the defaulter. '[S]ome women believe it is better to live with a friend than to live with a man that does not want to pay the bride price' (Lowes & Nunn 2017:4). A 'married' Yoruba woman on whom her 'family has not received [the bride price] is not accorded due respect' (Eniola & Aremo 2020:27). Similarly, an Igbo woman (Diala 2014):

[W]hose bride wealth is not paid and is living with the supposed husband will not be valued in the society. [In fact,] she is [derided] as cohabiting with the man. (p. 21)

As mentioned earlier, in patrilineal societies, bride price serves the main purpose of compensation for the 'loss' of a family member parting with it permanently to join another. Amongst such groups, bride price 'is considered as a compensation payment for the bride's future children, who will no longer belong to her parents' family' (Lowes & Nunn 2017:2). In the African traditional agrarian culture, it was also a 'compensation for the complete loss of a worker' (Lowes & Nunn 2017:2; cf. Diala 2014:24). However when an African woman is married off, it is not only her labour that her family loses but also her contribution to the family welfare, particularly the care of her parents in their old age (Scheidler 2010:4). Apart from compensation in these ways, bride price is also a gesture of appreciation to a woman's parents for bringing her up and making her marriageable. Upbringing in this respect 'would have included protecting her, educating her and teaching her the practical things of life that would make her a good wife and mother' (Scheidler 2010:3).

In summary, the tradition of bride price was meant for compensation and 'to give formal recognition to marriage' (Sambe et al. 2013:65), or, as expressed by Anderson (2007:171), for the 'recognition and valuing of women's productivity and contribution to marriage'. In the following

section, this article examines the changes that have come upon this tradition in Nigeria and their implications for Christian marriage.

## The current practices and their implications for Christian marriage in Nigeria

Today, in Nigeria as in many parts of Africa, the practice of bride price 'has little resemblance to its original purpose.... [but] has evolved into something other than that which was intended' (Scheidler 2010:3). 'The practice appears to have become commercialized [so much that] bride price can now [amount] to buying of a wife as a commodity' (Sambe et al. 2013:65). As Mordi (2019:online) puts it, it now indicates that 'women are commodities to be bought and sold'. This criticism is raised against the backdrop of the hike in bride price made by some parents. According to Onyango (2016):

Commercialization of bride-wealth [*began with*] the introduction of the cash economy [*in which*] bride-wealth is paid to individuals in cash ... Cash is a symbol of sale, so women are seen as articles of sale. This leads women to be seen as property and chattel. Parents [*now*] put a price on their daughters ... The payment becomes even higher if the bride is educated. (p. 2)

That education of women is the major factor for the hiking of bride prices is considerably applicable to Nigeria. Some parents now charge their sons-in-law with a view of getting back the expenses that 'had been incurred on [their] education' (Diala 2018:48). In another place, writing on the Igbo, Diala (2014:27) explained that, initially, female children were not sent to schools because of the help they rendered to their parents on the farm. Moreover, some Nigerian parents thought that upon marriage, girls would join their husbands' families 'and take with them the benefits of education' (Edewor 2013:57), and hence, they did not believe it wise to give them formal education. Rather than sending their female children to school, such parents would 'force young girls into early marriage' (Ademiluka 2018:351; cf. Ede & Kalu 2018:47). Nowadays, when parents have realised the need for girls to be educated, 'the huge sums they spent [on their] education' is a major factor that determines the amount they charge as bride price (Diala 2014:27). In other words, education now raises the cost of bride price. 'If a girl is highly educated, she costs more' (TAG 1996:128). Wegh (2003, cited in Sambe et al. 2013) captured it succinctly when he states with reference to the Tiv of north-central Nigeria that:

[B]ride price escalation has been borne out of monetary economic praxis. In this praxis, money determines [*the*] consumer power of the family. Parents spend a lot of money on the education of their children. More education means more years of parental care and heavier expenditure. In stringent economic circumstances, there is an inclination ... to conceive bride price [*not*] in its legitimate function in marriage but ... as a kind of repayment of money spent on the training of daughters. (p. 68)

Thus, under 'stringent economic circumstances' (Sambe et al. 2013:68), some parents might decide to marry off their

daughters even if they are not ripe for marriage, and this may account for the prevalence of marrying off under-age girls in some parts of Nigeria, as mentioned earlier.

Nonetheless, Sambe et al. (2013:65) observed that in Nigeria, apart from education, the 'socio- economic ... status of the bride and ... her family has become [a] deciding factor in determining bride price'. If the bride or her family is of a high social status, 'the groom or his family is expected to pay heavily' (Sambe et al. 2013:65). Hence, the TAG (1996:129) rightly identified greed as a factor for the commercialisation of bride price (cf. Nambozo 2004:3). 'Greed leads to exorbitant dowry today.... Dowry has also become a form of business, helping the parents build a house or buy a car' (TAG 1996:129). It must be mentioned, however, that in Nigeria sometimes parents do waive certain aspects of the bride price. For instance, there is the practice whereby the bride's father takes a little sum of the proper bride price and gives back the remaining to the groom. 'This shows that he is not selling the daughter but giving her out for marriage and wishes that she be taken care of' (Diala 2014:21).

Commercialisation of bride price has far-reaching implications for young Nigerian Christians from the perspective of marriage. In recent times, some writers have observed an increase in late marriage or non-marriage in Nigeria, which have been attributed partially to the increase in bride price. Oderinde (2013:168) stated that 'pushing the age of marriage into the late thirties and higher is now an increasing trend in the [Nigerian] society'. Isiugo-Abanihe (2000) also attested to the 'increase in female age at first marriage among certain socio-cultural groups in Nigeria' (cited in Ntoimo 2012:2). Ademiluka (2021a:2) opined that a major reason for late marriage in Nigeria is 'the downward turn of the economy over the years, which has rendered most male youths unemployed'. Without stable jobs, and with increase in bride price, most 'young men do not have the necessary resources to pay' bride price and to cater for family (Zwang 2004:30; cf. Oderinde 2013:168). Hudson and Matfess (2017:16) affirmed that usually the result of 'bride price inflation is that marriage is either delayed or even put out of reach for many young men, particularly in situations of economic stagnation'. This situation creates a number of possible scenarios for young Nigerian Christians. For young ladies 'who are patient and [want to] wait in an honorable way for *lobola* to be paid, many end up waiting until they are fairly old' (Scheidler 2010:10). Many women under these conditions have ended up getting married to 'older men who have established themselves financially' as second wives (Scheidler 2010:10). For those who are not patient enough, the inability to pay high bride prices 'creates a situation where the young man and the young woman simply move in together without marriage' (Scheidler 2010:10). This is a practice that some have referred to as 'come-we-stay marriages', young men and women cohabiting without being properly married because the men cannot afford bride prices (Onyango 2016:2; cf. Oduah 2019:online). For Christians, this amounts to immorality.

Moreover, some Christians do resort to borrowing to pay exorbitant bride prices, which sometimes leads to poor economy for their new families, and which, in turn, results in marital disharmony. In this regard, Onyango (2016) opined that:

[M]any marriages begin on a shaky financial foundation because the couple might be forced to take a loan to pay bride wealth [and have to] begin their married lives ... servicing the loan. (p. 2)

As expressed by Nambozo (2004), sometimes:

[T]he man is made to borrow a lot of money to pay bride price and as a result he is financially incapacitated during the first year or so of marriage. (p. 4)

That is why, in some instances, commercialisation of bride price has served as 'a major factor contributing to domestic violence ... threatening the stability' of marriages (Alupo 2004, cited in Sambe et al. 2013:68). Hudson and Matfess (2017:10) also stated that 'bride price and its trajectory are an important cause of ... [marital] grievances among young males that have been linked to violence and ... instability'. Mordi (2019:online) buttressed this fact that in places like Nigeria where high bride prices are paid, 'it is common for the husband to believe that by paying the bride price, he now owns his wife ... [as his] property [which] licenses ... domestic abuse'. Domestic violence arises from the fact that oftentimes, women on whom high bride prices have been paid are forced to remain in abusive relationships because of the 'fear of returning to their natal home without being able to repay the bride price' (Anderson 2007:171). Amongst many ethnic groups in Nigeria, for instance, amongst the Igbo, 'as a general principle [bride price] must be returned in the event of divorce' (Diala 2014:22). This means that if a woman intends to quit an abusive marriage, she has to refund the money paid on her. Therefore, the inability to pay back bride prices 'forces many women to remain in the marriage and endure violence and abuse' (Falana 2019:137; cf. Lowes & Nunn 2017:2; Nambozo 2004:4). Ademiluka (2021b) has noted that marital disharmony is high in Nigeria, even amongst Christians:

There are, in fact, reports of wife beating amongst Christians, even church elders and pastors, to the extent that several women have been beaten to death by these categories of Christians. (p. 4)

As payment of bride price gives some men the patriarchal perception that a wife is one's property (Ademiluka 2021b:7), it is plausible to suggest that high bride prices might as well be one of the factors responsible for marital disharmony amongst Nigerian Christian couples. Early female marriage and its consequences could be prevalent in societies where high bride prices are charged because in an attempt to get rich quick, some men 'marry off their daughters, [some] as young as nine years old' (Nambozo 2004:3). In such situations, it is the girls who suffer the consequences. According to Nambozo (2004):

[Early marriage] does not leave a creative space for a child to discover [herself]. [It] does not leave room for a child to blossom

and experience a few thorns in her life ... If fathers saw beyond the [bride price], they would leave their young girl children to grow and discover life from the strength of their hearts and not from the strength of money. (pp. 3–4)

In view of these implications, 'rights campaigners advocate the abolishment' of bride price everywhere (Anderson 2007:171). Some have condemned the practice 'as dehumanizing because it seems to commodify women' (Oduah 2019:online). Onyango (2016) is of the view that:

[P]ayment of bride-wealth ... leads to the inferiority and mistreatment of women, [hence it] is not in line with biblical teaching on equality between men and women ... [H]ence Christians in the modern world should rethink the practice of bride-wealth. (p. 4)

However, the clamour for the cancellation of bride price fails to take due cognisance of the original purpose of the practice, particularly the legitimisation and honouring of marriage. If the traditional purpose is adhered to, payment of bride price need not lead to women abuse, and it is not contrary to any biblical teaching. In this regard, Scheidler (2010) asserted, as seen earlier, that the payment of bride price is not:

[P]rohibited by the Bible ... [But] if [it] is to be practiced today it should be practiced in a way that supports its original meaning and that avoids the potential abuses. (pp. 6, 13)

In Nigeria, the churches have realised the value of bride price for Christian marriage and hence their insistence on its payment before joining Christians as couples. However, they have to do more than recognise the value of bride price, in which case the recommendation of TAG (1996) is apposite, namely, that:

The church [has the responsibility] to educate the Christians in general and the parents in particular not to require excessive dowry ... [Parents] should ask according to the young man's ability to pay ... Falling into debt before marriage is a very poor practice. The church has an important role to play in teaching Christians ... to have biblical priorities. (pp. 132–134)

Therefore, rather than stopping payment of bride price for Nigerian Christians, one would call for a return to its traditional purpose (as delineated in the preceding section), which is a complete negation of the current commercialisation. The cancellation would lead not only to a gradual decline in the honour attached to marriage but, in fact, to a social disorder, in which women are at the receiving end and which perhaps would be worse for them than domestic violence. It would create a society, in which every disgruntled man who desires a woman simply acquires one, sometimes using whatever means, including abduction and kidnapping. Moreover, no value is attached to a woman thus acquired as nothing is paid on her, and she can simply be dispensed of at any time to create room for another. It would also create a situation where every man can have as many wives as he wishes irrespective of whether he has the means to cater for them and their children. Such relationships would produce

vagabonds and thugs for children, and the society, at large, would suffer for it.

## Conclusion

Although payment of bride price is not mentioned at all in the NT, it was a well-established custom in the OT. As the practice is not prohibited in the Bible, it is assumed that it is not wrong for Christians to pay and receive bride prices. In the traditional African society, bride price was the payment a husband owed to his wife's parents as a compensation for giving him their daughter. Apart from compensation, bride price served as the legal exchange that validated marriage. It also served as the confirmation of the groom's sincerity of intention. However today, in Nigeria as in many parts of Africa, the practice has lost its original purpose, in that it has become commercialised by many parents by charging exorbitant prices on their daughters. Commercialisation of bride price has considerable implications for Nigerian Christians. It is one of the factors responsible for the increasing rate of late marriage and non-marriage amongst Christians. The inability to pay high bride prices has created a situation where young Christian men and women cohabit without legally getting married, a habit that is untoward for Christians. Some Christians resort to borrowing to pay bride prices, which sometimes leads to poor family economy and domestic violence against women. In view of these implications, many have called for the abolishment of bride price, whilst others condemn it as contrary to biblical teaching. However, if its traditional purpose is adhered to, payment of bride price need not lead to women abuse, and it is not contrary to any biblical teaching. Cancellation of bride price would amount to throwing away the baby with the bathwater, that is, doing away with the original purpose of the practice, particularly the legitimisation and honouring of marriage. The abolishment of bride price might also lead to a social disorder worse for women than domestic violence. Therefore, rather than stopping payment of bride price for Nigerian Christians, one would call for a return to its original purpose, which negates the current commercialisation. The churches in Nigeria realise the value of bride price for Christian marriage, and hence their insistence on its payment before joining Christians as couples. However more than this, the church has the responsibility to educate Christian parents not to charge excessive bride prices on their daughters. In this respect as in others, the church has to teach Christians to adhere to biblical priorities.

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S.O.A. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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