

## The Perception and Implications of Bride-Wealth for Marital Relationship: Gender Analysis through Sukuma Oral Arts

Esther Julius Masele

Department of Foreign Languages and Literature

The University of Dodoma, Tanzania

[ejmasele@yahoo.com](mailto:ejmasele@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

This study examines perception and implications of bride-wealth among the Sukuma of Tanzania. The data, which were basically the Sukuma views and the discourse of their songs were collected using interviews and observations. The analysis and interpretation of the study findings was informed by the social construction theory of reality. Two specific questions; guided the study: What knowledge do the Sukuma have about the role and practice of bride-wealth? How do the Sukuma oral arts communicate the social practices of bride-wealth in the community? The integration of songs with people's views facilitates understanding of the context in which bride-wealth is practiced and transmitted from one generation to another. It also highlights the efficacy of oral arts, specifically songs reflecting social reality. The study reveals that the cultural practice of paying the bride-wealth in the Sukuma, on the one hand, makes the married woman a man's product as it ties all the movement of her life; on the other hand, it threatens men's identity, especially those who cannot manage to pay it in full. Generally, the study demonstrates how oral arts provide knowledge on power relations resulting from the inherent social practices of marriage. This knowledge contributes to the understanding of gender status *quo* in African countries which is one the ongoing debates globally.

### Keywords:

Bride-wealth, arranged marriage, marital relationship

<https://dx.doi.org/10.56279/ummaj.v11i1.2>

### Introduction

**B**ride-wealth is a fascinating topic since it is a valuable custom in different societies (Titi, 2019). However, several studies have been carried out on bride-wealth by scholars worldwide (Wojcicki and Padian 2010; Soung, 2015; Lowes and Nunn 2017; Servatius & Widyawati 2018). These studies have principally explored the nature, assumptions and

effects of bride-wealth on men's and women's autonomy. Servatius and Widyawati (2018) explored the perspective of women on the concept of bride-wealth in Manggarai of Eastern Indonesia. Their study found that bride-wealth as a sign of respect for women in traditional society is merely a social imagination ingrained into the women's expectations. However, "When a girl is born, it is common for people to say, 'The family will get a buffalo'. If a family has many daughters, people normally comment, 'The family will get many buffaloes' (Servatius & Widyawati 2018). This view alludes to the expectations that parents have from their daughters' marriage. Servatius and Widyawati (2018) further contend that bride-wealth in this community, sometimes, is a source of conflicts as the daughter's parents may require its remaining part be paid prior to the wedding day. This conflict does not last as it simply reminds the groom's family about the remaining part of the bride-wealth. Other studies have focused on the relationship between bride-wealth, socio-demographics, sexual and reproductive practices among women. Wojcicki's (2010) study conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe found that bride-wealth constituted a negotiation that is an integral part of the marriage process.

Even though many of the studies suggest that bride-wealth has a negative impact on women rather than men, Servatius Lon and Widyawati (2018) provide an exceptional view that in Indonesia, bride-wealth symbolises respect for women. As bride-wealth is sacred, other informants suggested that it is difficult to discuss it in detail as it is against the norms (Servatius Lon & Widyawati 2018). Generally, the gap between the real experience of men and women in marriage and the communal perception about bride-wealth, as revealed in many communities, exposes women's superficial respect in a patriarchal society. This article, therefore, comparatively analyses the Sukuma oral arts, songs in this case, and societal views to interrogate the perception and implications of bride-wealth on marital relationship.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

The social construction theory of reality informed the data analysis, interpretation and presentation of the study findings. Berger and Luckmann in their 1966 book '*The Social Construction of Reality*' developed the theory, arguing that reality in society is created by humans when their interactions constitute recurring actions, which Berger and Luckmann dub habituation. The term 'habituation' describes how frequently

repeated action is cast into a pattern, which can be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economic effort. Since social order is a human product, Berger and Luckmann (1966) explicate how individuals are socialised to construct reality around institutionalised norms for thinking, feeling and behaving. The current study adopted Berger and Luckmann's premise to investigate the reality of the Sukuma perception and implications of bride-wealth on marital relationships. The analysis of the songs and societal views reveal that some members of the Sukuma treat bride-wealth as an ideological tool of exercising power and indicate a desire to end all the forms of discrimination and violence resulting from this cultural practice. Others insist on paying bride-wealth as a good custom that encourages men to be generous to the bride's parents. Generally, the study findings reaffirm the usefulness of the theory in understanding social reality.

### **Methods**

This study was conducted at Bujora Museum Centre in Mwanza, Tanzania around 2020, since it is a place where the Sukuma perform their annual singing competition festivals, which always involve a number of singers and audience from different part of Sukumaland. The qualitative approach of the study facilitated the development of an in-depth understanding of the issue under scrutiny. Semi-structured interviews and observation generated data that were transcribed and translated into English. Twenty-two informants from the Bujora Museum Centre were interviewed and eight songs conveniently sampled. Also, the study controlled for gender bias by ensuring gender parity in the sample where eleven men and eleven women formed an adequate number of informants. The Sukuma songs were subjected to Discourse Analysis (DA) which revealed the themes in accordance with the purpose of the study. According to Paltridge (2006), the major purpose of DA is to examine the language beyond the level of the sentence to determine how language features are distributed within texts and how they are combined in a particular kind and style. Besides DA, the study employed Thematic Coding Analysis (TCA) specifically to analyse societal views on the role, practice and implications of bride-wealth on marital relationship among the Sukuma. The TCA enabled the study to observe procedural matters such as familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, constructing thematic

networks and integration and interpretation (Robson 2011, p. 475). Both DA and TCA provided an informed way of comprehending, not only perception and implications of bride-wealth among the Sukuma but also the role of oral art forms in reflecting social construction views dominating people's life.

### **Social Construction of Bride-wealth, Perception and Practices among the Sukuma**

The social construction perspective posits that the world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives, but also a world that originates in their thoughts and actions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For the Sukuma, the social constructionist perspective helped to identify the nature, perceptions, feelings and implications of bride-wealth in marital relationship and the influence of people's oral arts in circulating them. The study found that the bride-wealth in the Sukuma is strongly aligned with their traditional lives, which were socially-constructed as norms, rules and reality of the community through the descriptions of elders. This is in line with studies such as Louis (1980) who suggests that organisations can influence the reality by setting norms and standards of behaviour for individuals in different hierarchical roles and then reinforcing those standards. During interviews, the informants reported that bride-wealth is inseparable from the Sukuma marriage traditions and customs. The bride-wealth among the Sukuma is usually in the form of cattle, though, sometimes, the value is converted into cash. The number of cattle paid as bride's wealth depends on the nature or form of marriage and ability of the woman's family in convincing the men's family during the bride-wealth negotiation. With regard to a number of cattle to be paid as bride-wealth, one of the informants had this to say:

In the past, the Sukuma paid a big number of cattle as bride-wealth, numbering from thirty to forty heads of cattle. Recently, the number of cattle in marriage has been reduced. It is now between fifteen to twenty-five heads of cattle due to social economic changes surrounding the community.

When asked about the implications of high or low number of cattle to the married woman, most of the informants, both men and women, confirmed that high bride-wealth symbolises respect because a girl who fetches a high bride-wealth brings special respect to her family. When the Sukuma mention a marriage of that girl, they always refer to the number of cattle the family received as bride-wealth. On the contrary, marriage of high number of cattle in the Sukuma as suggested by the informants is not a guarantee that the girl will live a happier life with her husband than other women.

The bride-wealth negotiations vary significantly from one part of the world to another (Cha, 2010; Kyalo, 2011; Makino, 2014). With regard to the marriage institution in the Sukuma, women are socially-constructed to believe that the bride-wealth is a man's affair. For example, if a daughter is getting married, her mother has no say in the bride-wealth. She is also strictly forbidden to attend bride-wealth negotiations. This meeting normally involves only men, particularly the elderly men. The bride-wealth to be paid involves a specific number of cattle, a piece of cloth for the bride's mother and one goat for grandfathers. If there is a need to exchange cattle into cash, then the man's family will pay one hundred and fifty thousand to two hundred thousand for each cattle and thirty thousand for the goat. If both parties reach a consensus, then, the mother receives information from her husband about how much they would pay and the day the representatives of bride's family would go to fetch the cattle from the groom's family. Immediately after the bride-wealth has been received, one cattle offered to the villagers and during the ceremony that cattle is slaughtered and shared communally. The remaining cattle would belong to the husband/father of the bride. In Eastern Indonesia, Servatius Lon and Widyawati (2018) assert: "Women do not even have a say in the decision of their daughters' bride-wealth; they are treated as passive spectators. This is especially because in the Manggaraian society, a woman is considered as an outsider who belongs to her father or her husband". Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend that individuals create and interpret reality as they interact with their environments, which reflects the reality in the Sukuma where the bride-wealth is an inherent phenomenon. During interviews, all the informants expressed familiarity with the nature and practice of it.

The Sukuma perceive and believe that payment of bride-wealth is obligatory and the amount of the bride-wealth agreed upon must be completed, otherwise it becomes a man's debt forever even when the husband dies. For example, when this man dies, his in-laws would ask for the bride-wealth or its remaining part from his relatives on the day of ending the funeral activity. If his relatives fail to pay it, the woman's family known as *bhakumigongo* would take the children and the wife as well. To rescue them, the man's family known as *bhakubhuta* should pay five heads of cattle for each boy child and six for each girl child. The number of cattle paid for the girl child is high because girls are believed to bring wealth in the future. If man's family fails to do so, when a daughter gets married, they would not be involved in bride-wealth negotiation or fetching the bride-wealth. Given this fact, the parents make sure that before their sons engage in marriage relationship, they must have the cattle to pay the bride-wealth. Apart from societal views on bride-wealth, Sukuma songs also express what have already been constructed in their community and present as the perceptions, which have either positive or negative implications in marriages. The following is an excerpt of one of the songs with this content:

***Sanji***

*Sanji unin'he nkima unene nagupe mandege  
I ng'ombe nadinajo ila ung'wanawako nantogilwe  
Solaga sanji nulu bhudaga isabho nadinajo*

*Hiii! Nduhu u nkima o bhule ihaha bhaduguuu,  
Ng'ombe makumi mpungati naupandike nkima, yiii!  
Aliyo ihaha mleduma ng'ombe i tano du!  
Bhayanda ng'wacha mdatolileee,*

**Translation:**

**My In-law**

My in-law, give me a wife, and I will give you maize.  
I love your daughter even though I don't have the cattle to pay you.  
Take even the cassava flour because I don't have anything else.

There is no marriage if you don't have cattle.  
You are supposed to pay at least six heads of cattle as bride-wealth.  
But nowadays some young men fail to pay even five cows!  
Young man, you are dying without getting married.

The stanza from the song “My in-law” reveals that the members of this community are aware of the obligation of paying the bride-wealth in marriage: “There is no marriage if you don’t have cattle.”. However, the singer tries to convince the community on the possibility of marriage with alternative bride-wealth such as foodstuffs like maize and cassava flour. He presents this idea satirically as he knows that such kind of bride-wealth cannot be accepted as it is not part of their tradition and culture. According to the informants it is only cattle that counts as the wealth. The singer further highlights the intensity and extent of the problem of paying cattle as bride-wealth to the young men. He says that nowadays people fail to pay even five cows. Generally, the singer protests against this tradition by urging the community to change.

### **Implications of Bride-Wealth on Marital Relationship**

The bride-wealth among the Sukuma reflects the reality in the mind of the members of the community. Apart from the perception they have about bride-wealth, the study found that the tradition and custom of paying cattle as bride-wealth has implications in some of the marriages, which is illustrated in the following sub-sections:

#### **Bride-wealth as a Source of Divorce**

The current study found that bride-wealth among the Sukuma is the practice that has been done repeatedly, hence habitualised to some degree. However, this practice has far reached implications for marital relationship. One of them is divorce resulting from barrenness. This problem was observed in both societal views and the discourse of their songs. From a medical point of view, both men and women can experience infertility. Only through medical examination can someone asserts that a woman is barren or a certain man is unable to fertilise a woman. In the Sukumaland, on the other hand, if a couple does not conceive a child, the one to blame is a woman. Then, the husband would take this woman to her home and the parents ought to pay back the bride-wealth for the man to use it to get another woman. If not so, this woman will experience humiliation from her husband who has a thirst of children. The act of treating women this way creates a common theme in Sukuma songs. The following is an excerpt of a

song “Barrenness” by Mama Ushauri, a famous woman singer in Mwanza region:

**Ngosha**

*Uli ngunda ki ubhebhe udabishaga?  
Nibhyalilage nane nitanwe “bhabha”  
Miaka na miaka uliho du ulimala shiliwa  
kwenda, pepea, jaga jaga!*

**Nkima**

*Nilekagi nalile hihiii iiiii!  
Nalile mapenzi unene  
N’sembo nene natabhyalaga*

**Translation:**

**Husband**

What kind of a farm are you that cannot bear crops?  
Bear me children so that I can be called “father”  
Many years have passed and you are just eating.  
Go! Go! Go!

**Wife**

Let me cry  
I am crying because of love.  
Me, an ill-fated woman, who cannot bear fruits.

The woman persona in the song experiences great pains. She is crying because of her husband’s bold decision of divorcing her. She also curses herself as an ill-fated woman because of the intimidations resulting from her inability to get children. Barrenness is something that is intolerable in marriage because for the Sukuma having a significant number of children is a prestige and sign of respect to a man. The man in the song chase away his wife as he feels that living with a barren woman is an economic loss as the woman eats for many years without producing a child. The male persona compares his wife with ‘a farm that cannot produce crops’. This metaphorical reference stems from stereotypical thinking among the Sukuma that the woman is responsible to produce children. One of the women interviewees complained about this inequality and called it as unfair cultural tendency:



In this society, marriage should produce children. If it does not produce any, the one to blame is the woman (wife). This woman may be divorced and this is considered as normal. If not, it is right for a husband to marry a second wife.

This response hints at women's dissatisfaction with the way husbands mistreat barren women in marriage who sometimes end up getting divorced for that reason. Apart from women's views, some of the men also oppose the cultural tendency of men reclaiming their bride-wealth cattle when they divorce their wives, as the following excerpt from the song 'Marriage' sung by a young man called Doto Jijongo illustrates:

***Bhutoji***

*Amabhutoji i haha bhabha mpaga wibhuje sana  
Nagatola nufugija nagayulila wingw'ene ukunu nalidukila  
Natola kaya ki idina i langi? f  
Nuyomba najimule nashoshe kaya sabho shang'wa bhabha bhatolele bhangi.  
Angu aleyomba u Masanja goshila ugugwijimuja ng'ombe  
Ng'hana yagalukile iwelelo yiiii!*

**Translation:**

**Marriage**

Before getting married you need to think twice.  
I accidentally married and I cried daily regretting my decision.  
What kind of a family did I marry?  
I decided to take the bride-wealth I paid for her so that my brother would use it to get married.  
But Masanja told me that the tendency of taking back the bride-wealth (*kujimula*) is no longer being practiced since, the world has changed.

This song highlights societal views and perceptions about the tendency of taking back the bride-wealth when a man is not comfortable with the bride. It also questions the rules that allows them to do so. In an interview with the singer, it emerged that men have the power to take their wives back to their parents if they are not satisfied with their conduct. Moreover, they can demand for the return of cattle from their in-laws paid as the bride-wealth.

Studies such as Servatius Lon and Widyawati (2018) similarly observed that through marriage, the wife must follow her husband's family system and leave her own. If she fails to observe the new customs, other family members would typically bring up the bride-wealth matters. Otherwise, she must endure humiliating questions due to her bride-wealth posed by her husband's family.

The Sukuma women expressed during interviews a similar view, arguing that the failure of a married woman to fulfil her husband's bidding cannot be a reason for her to go back to her parents unless his husband decides to do so because her parents, fearing to return the bride-wealth, would strongly agitate for her to go back to her husband and tolerate whatever difficulties she encountered in the marriage. Besides, the women participants insisted that it is a great shame for a bride to fail to live up to the married life expectations. The informants reported that such a woman would be condemned to live disrespected life and may disrepute her parents' respect as well. The response from the interview with women also shows that, although a woman may face a kind of mistreatment, she has to tolerate that unless her husband decides to divorce her. In this regard, one of the women said: "A married woman has to endure suffering in order to protect the "respect" or "honour" of her husband, children and her family as a whole." In other words, bride-wealth justifies criticism of a woman's behaviour in the new family.

The song "marriage" reveals the discontent of taking back the bride-wealth when divorce occurs. Although this tendency is now dissipating, the singer attempts to convince the Sukuma to avoid that practice because of the changes the world has experienced. Implicitly, there is an adjustment in behaviour and social attitudes when it comes to bride-wealth and power relations in marriage among the Sukuma. Because of the strong beliefs in tradition and culture among the Sukuma, this inclination persists among some members of the community. Generally, the Sukuma treat divorce not only as illustrative of a sense of inequality but also as a demonstration of how women in marriage get shortchanged as having nothing necessary unless they bear a healthy number of children.

### **Bride-wealth and Men's Power and Authority**

With regard to bride-wealth, the study found that in the Sukuma, bride-wealth gives men power and authority. Like many other African

communities, a man among the Sukuma is the head of the family and has the right to own everything including his wife if he has paid the bride-wealth for her. As a result, the wife lacks voice on the family property and has no choice of what to do and what not to until she receives the order from her husband. This woman remain in her husband's residence even in his absence as revealed in the interview by one of the women informants who said:

There are some men who sell the harvest and go away from their families. Being there, they make extravagant use of the money: drinking and spending with other women. Their wives remain at home with their children finding alternative ways of living. Some men do not come back, but others do come back after seeing that they have nothing in their pockets and children, especially girls, have grown up enough for marriage. Their wives receive them and life goes on as it was before.

Implicitly, a woman in this situation can neither marry another man nor go back to her parents because a husband paid for her. The idea was also observed in the song *Limnajilya Bhiye* (The one who eats other efforts) sung by Wilson Shagembe:

***Limnajilya Bhiye***

*Nalelile no aho namana u ngoshione*

*wina kaya yingi*

*Aliyo daduma gulima ngunda gwise*

*dugagwishaga mjipande.*

*Jidapungula Mung'hele nalilila ulu nizukila niyahanuma*

*Aho uli oding'wa bhushiya*

*Nukwene jigafuma ng'ombe Ja bhana bhane.*

*Ijo bhakwiwa bhalumbo bhabho*

*Igosha ki ahene limnajilya bhiye?*

**Translation:**

**The one who eats other people's efforts**

I cried when I heard that my husband had formed a new family.  
Despite that, we had failed to cultivate our own farm  
And we survive only as casual labours.  
Jidapungula Mung'hele I always cry when I remember the past events,  
when my husband was caught with a woman,  
and paid the family cattle to end the case.  
The cattle which were obtained from my daughter's bride wealth.  
What kind of a husband who always causes loss to his family?

This song alludes to the presence of unequal power relations among couples, which some of the men use the family wealth extravagantly. Although it is not explicitly presented, the singer in the interview insisted that it is bride-wealth that gives this man such power as he is sure that his wife cannot divorce him. He uses the cattle to end the case only because he knows that they belong to him. The song questions several existing conventionalized social orders that favours this inequality which sometimes encourage intimidations to the women in marriage.

### **Bride-wealth Making Men Lose Power and Authority**

Anthropologists testify that some men suffer humiliation at the hands of women in marriage, including the conservative Sukuma. This piece of evidence materialised in both societal context and in the discourse of their respective songs. The major factor that makes men lose power is their inability to fulfil the requirement of bride-wealth. If this happens women may attain such power of humiliating men. Implicitly, when a man fails to pay the prescribed bride-wealth, he loses power and authority over his wife. This situation among the Sukuma is known as *kuhedekwa* or to be under the control of a woman – under petticoat government.

Lack of power and authority sometimes occur when a man stays with his in-law, which under the Sukuma tradition is shameful. Such a person becomes a subject of ridicule to both his in-law's family and the society. According to Mato and Booth (1995), the African tradition and culture stress the gender dichotomy of husband as the breadwinner and wife as the homemaker. Thus, a situation going against the prescribed rules could lead to a change of behaviour for some of the women who may demand more decision making power than their husbands, which is in line with the

Sukuma where men must exercise power in their families and if not, this man may face the difficulties and sometimes humiliation.

One of the crucial signs that indicate such humiliation is lack of voice in their marriages. The man cannot have anything to say to his wife or his in-laws as he becomes a child of a family. Even the children they conceive in their marriage do not belong to him. When they wed, he cannot negotiate or receive the bride-wealth. This circumstance suggests that the inability of a man to pay the bride-wealth can make him lose power to suggest, warn, decide, own the wealth, control his family and he does not qualify to be a husband until he fulfils this tradition obligation. Also, a woman for whom the bride-wealth is not paid has the freedom to leave this man and get married to another man who can pay for her or she can go to her parents or stay on her own as *nshimbe* – ‘unmarried woman’. If such a woman has begotten children with a man, she lives with her children who can either take care of herself or her family. In this regard, the song *Nyanzala* reads:

***Nyanzala (wife)***

*Nalaje kubhabwiyi bhane  
Konguno utanikwile nulu mbuli  
Niyo napangile kuja na bhana bhane  
Bhebhe shigaga nabhudume bhoko.  
U Holo nu Ng'walu I ng'ombe jileja kukaise*

***Ngosha (Husband)***

*Mayo kanelelagwe unene  
Nagu togilwe no bhebhe dubhejage kaya  
Igwaga dudabhyalagwa na gusiminza  
Dugushiga du nke one  
Uhaya kunipela nashige bhung'wene?  
Ka nnolage u Ng'walu nu Holo ka dulibhihe gupandika bhakwilima.*

**Translation:**

**Nyanzala (Wife)**

I will go home to my parents  
Because you paid nothing for me.  
I have decided to take all of my children  
And you will remain a failure like before.  
The cattle from Holo and Ng'walu will go home to my parents.

### **Husband**

Can you please understand me my wife,  
I really love you, let us, therefore, sustain our family.  
Even a newborn cannot walk within a day of its life.  
One day we will succeed; I will pay the bride-wealth for you.  
Do you want to run away and leave me alone?  
Look at Ng'walu and Holo; they are nearly going to marry.

This song is presented in a dramatic poetry whereby two people—the husband and wife—engage in a dialogue. The song reveals a misunderstanding between Nyanzala and her husband. The wife wants to leave with children because the husband has yet not paid the bride-wealth for her as tradition demands. The husband implores his wife to be tolerant. He believes that one day they may succeed and he can manage to pay it. Also, the man has a great expectation that he will get the cattle from his two daughters, Ng'walu and Holo. However, Nyanzala tells him to forget getting anything out of the marriage as bride-wealth of their daughters as he had not yet paid the bride-wealth for her. Apart from questioning the obligatory of paying cattle as bride-wealth, this song, on the other hand, shows that the singer is among the Sukuma who are impacted by the inherent cultural practices of paying cattle as bride-wealth because some of the verses impel people to follow the rules to avoid the unnecessary conflicts from their wives as evidenced by Nyanzala and her husband. Another song that illustrates this point of view was sung by Ngelela Shilunguja:

### ***Ng'wesi wa Mbale***

*Nolagi u Ng'wesi wa mbaleee  
makima minge utola hamo wali wilemba gagasabhagwa  
Ilelo iwelelo yang'wigelukila  
Wigongēja makabhila ayo gatatonḁaga mang'ombe.  
ubhadosa a Bhasukuma aliyo tommajije I sabho  
Osajije guhengula sagala.*

### **Translation:**

#### ***Ng'wesi of Mbale***

Look at N'gwesi of Mbale,  
he married a number of women.

He rejected the Sukuma women and preferred women from other tribes, because they did not cost him more number of cattle. He did not succeed but ended up roaming here and there without anything.

This song portrays Ng'wesi as a man who married many women from other ethnic groups for the purpose of avoiding paying cattle as bride wealth in his own ethnic group. When Ng'wesi exhausted his wealth and remained with nothing, the other ethnic group women from whom he had married deserted him. The singer warns Ng'wesi to avoid women from other ethnic groups who are always intolerant in marriage and urge people to follow their tradition and rules by marrying the Sukuma as there is no way one can escape the cost of paying cattle as bride-wealth. Generally, the findings towards the perception and implications of bride-wealth as observed in both, songs and societal views indicates dynamic of traditional attitudes among the members of the community. Incidentally, some of the Sukuma favours the payment of cattle as bride-wealth while others treat this tradition as unfair since majority of Tanzanians live in abject poverty.

#### **Bride-wealth as a Source of Arranged Marriage**

One of the causes of arranged marriage among the Sukuma emerged to be bride-wealth. This form of marriage refers to forced marriage and occurs when parents choose a husband or wife for their daughter/son. In this kind of marriage, the choice may be made by both the mother and/or the father, but mostly by the father as patriarchal norms and value demand. In fact, it constitutes one of the marriage practices in the Sukuma and has been observed to affect young women psychologically because some of them are forced to marry people who are far older than they are. However, there were different views between men and women during interviews on this practise. For instance, men argued that arranged marriages are the most preferred means for a girl to get partners from a good family because many of the parents want their daughters to be married in respectable families. In contrast, women argued that this marriage has negative effect on girls with greedy parents because they can exploit that opportunity to find a man who has many heads of cattle to acquire wealth without considering their daughter's preference and needs.

The cattle which the Sukuma families acquire from bride-wealth are significant as the sons are expected to use them in their marriage. Through

this kind of wealth, families attach special importance to their girls. When a girl prefers marrying a poor man or a person who has no cattle, her family finds it challenging and would not be ready to accept such a decision. One of the songs that illustrate this view is “Mere” sung by Bhudagala Ng’wana Malonja:

**Mere**

*Yali limi Mere nakwizukaga nakigwa hodi iligongwa.  
“Shemeji u Mere nalinchola alitanwa nu bhabha u gukaya”  
Nalindana yiii natumonaga unsheke yuuuuuu!  
Gashinaga u Mere wina bhutolwa bhungiiii.  
Ngwanike maaama alilila untola atuntogwagwa yuuuuuu!*

**Translation:**

**Mary**

It was during the afternoon when I heard someone knocking at my door.  
“My brother in-law, I am looking for Mary, she is needed at home by our father”  
I waited for a long time but I didn’t see her coming back.  
I was surprised to find that Mary was getting married to another person.  
The girl was weeping because she didn’t love the man.

This song is about Mary, a young girl whose father took her away from the young man she loved. The singer says that Mary was just called one afternoon by her brother so that she could meet her husband whom her father had arranged and she never returned. The weeping of this girl provides a real picture of how she experiences difficulties following lack of freedom of choice in marriage. This song shows that Mary was forced to marry a person whom she did not know. This song exposes not only the challenges girls experience, but also how society despises men who do not have cattle. He uses strong imagery that allows the audience to sense his bitterness:

This situation forces those who do not have the cattle marry the girls without informing their parents (*kupula*) as the singer does for Mere. But, by doing so, they sometimes face difficulties. For instance, the girl whose young man loves her dearly may be discouraged by her parents or the young man may be required to pay an instant fine known as *mchenya*. Generally, the arranged marriages annoy some members of the community,



not only for frustrating the girls, but also on the negative effect of it. This experience is also evident in a song *Bhanamhala* sung by *Shinje Mayunga*:

***Bhanamhala***

*Katogije king'we bhanamhala mliduyanjana.*

*masata gakwilile ihaha.*

*Lazima untolwa aping'we*

*Nu ntoji aping'we*

*Mdatogagwi mang'ombe ng'wibha ubhupanga*

**Translation:**

**Elderly Men**

The way you elders give daughters in marriage confuse us.  
Considering that diseases have increased nowadays,  
The daughter who is to be married should be medically examined.  
The man who is to marry, should also be medically examined.  
Don't just be fond of acquiring cattle and forget the value of life

The singer complains about some of the decisions men make. She cautions those who arrange marriage without considering other factors such as diseases. She also expresses her disagreement with the *bhanamhala bha nzenzo* (elderly men) who also happen to be the bride wealth negotiators, who decide on issues of marriage. Arranged marriages constitute one of the issues many researchers consider as a typical problem to societies (Davies 1986; Verba 1997; Nnaemeka 2005; Lowes & Nunn 2017; Kabaji 2005). In a study of bride-wealth and the wellbeing of women in the Congolese, Lowes and Nunn (2017) observed that high bride-wealth induces parents to arrange for their daughters to be married at a younger age so that they can obtain the payment. From the Sukuma cultural life, it was also evident that arranged marriages constitute one of the factors that contribute to girls eloping with the people whom they love in order to avoid being dragged into this marriage. However, it was reported that such kind of arranged or forced marriages are rarely executed nowadays due to the respect of freedom of choice introduced by religions, education, and awareness of humans' rights.

**Conclusion**

As Schneider and Ingram (1993) in the social construction theory have illustrated, reality is originated in the people's thoughts and has been taken for granted by members of the societies as the norm. Therefore, the importance of bride-wealth in Sukuma marriage is the constructed reality which is maintained as a meaningful conduct of their lives. This reality touches the life experience of the couples positively or negatively depending on their perception. Because having paid bride-wealth is perceived by some community members as an absolute right of a man over a woman. This was also observed in the literature where Titi (2019) identifies undesirable issues happening in marriage resulting from the practice of paying bride-wealth, including women's lack of decision making in reproductive rights and family economy. Where bride-wealth reduces the power and prestige of a woman, the perception that the woman was paid for, belongs to the man's mind. This belief in the Sukuma society although suggested by some of the informants to be inappropriate, other informants specifically women in the interviews insisted that it is happening in some the families where men exercise power in all aspects, including using the family wealth without the consent of their wives. Thus, the payment of bride-wealth in the Sukuma cherished in their tradition and it relates to many other cultural contexts, especially on the perpetuation of inequality in the family economy where women are perceived as the ones who were brought, *ng'winda*; hence, they have no right in controlling all financial and family resources. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons to believe that members of the Sukuma community not only understand the essence of bride-wealth in marriage, but they also know its negative effects, although they have no means to amend it. However, some studies in the literature do not provide overwhelming evidence in support of the concern that bride-wealth has effects on the wellbeing of married men or women. Lowes and Nunn (2017), for example, concluded that the evidence of their findings does not support the notion that the practice of bride-wealth has detrimental effects on the wellbeing of married women. They further add that high bride-wealth in the Congolese tends to be associated with good outcomes. This view provides an understanding of the variation of practice, perception and implications of bride-wealth across cultures. Generally, the content of the songs examined in this study proves Furniss (1995) and Seitel (1999) ideas that oral arts as discourse have been and are used by many communities to transmit and bolster social reality. This is because the reality observed in Sukuma songs about perception and implications of bride-wealth is not far from what was argued by the members of the community

in the interviews. Therefore, the study recommends the issue of bride-wealth to be included in formal education to improve understanding of it for the wellbeing of the people and for human development in general.

### References

Berger, P and T. Luckmann. 1966, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday, Garden City.

Cha, Y. P. 2010, *An introduction to Hmong culture*, McFarland & Co., Publishers, Jefferson, NC.

Davies, C. B. 1986, Motherhood in the works of male and female Igbo writers: Achebe, Emecheta, Nwapa, and Nzekwu in Davies, C. B and Graves, A. A. (eds) Ngambike, *Studies of Women in African Literature* (pp. 241-256), Africa World Press Inc, Trenton, New Jersey.

Furniss, G. 1995, The Power of words and relation between Hausa genres, in Furniss, G and Gunner, L., (eds), *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature* (pp 1-22), Cambridge University Press, New York.

Kabaji, S. E. 2005, *The construction of gender through the narrative process of the African Folktales: A case study of the Maragoli*, PhD Thesis, University of South Africa.

Kyalo, P.M. 2011, The future of African family and community analysis on traditional Akamba marriage: Implications for Christian marriage, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 1 (21), pp. 156-166.

Louis, M. R. 1980, Surprise and sense making: What newcomers experience in Entering unfamiliar organizational settings, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 25, pp. 226-251.

Lowes, S & N. Nunn. 2017, Bride rice and the wellbeing of women, Wider working aper, United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research ([Publicatins@wider.unu.edu](mailto:Publicatins@wider.unu.edu)).

Makino, M. 2014, Dowry and women's status in rural Pakistan: Interim report for institutional roles of marriage in the developing world: Empirical studies from the perspectives of Gender Empowerment, IDE-JETRO.

Nnaemeka, O. 2005, Bringing African women into the classroom: Rethinking, pedagogy and epistemology in Oyewumi, O. (ed), *African*

- Gender Studies: A Reader* (pp 51-66), Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, New York.
- Paltridge, B. 2006, *Discourse analysis: Continuum discourse series*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York.
- Seital, P. 1999, *The powers of genre: Interpreting Haya oral literature*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Servatius Lon, Y & S. Widyawati. 2018, Bride-wealth: Is there respect for women in Manggarai, Eastern Indonesia?, *Humaniora*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 271-278.
- Schneider, A., & Ingram, H. 1993, The social construction of target populations: Implications for politics and policy, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 87, pp. 334-347.
- Titi, F. 2019, Bride price syndrome and dominance in marriage: An expository analysis, *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*, vol 6, no. 8, pp. 132-139.
- Verba, S. 1997, Feminist and womanist criticism of African Literature: A Bibliography, <http://always-ingreen.blogspot.com/2010/12/feminist-and-womanist-criticism-of.html> Site visited on 2 May 2020.
- Wojcicki, S. & Padian. 2010, Bride-wealth, sexual and reproductive practices among women in Harare, Zimbabwe, *AIDS Care*, vol. 22, no. 6, pp. 705-710.