

***ILOBOLO*, THE BRIDE PRICE THAT COMES ‘AT A PRICE’ AND THE
NARRATIVES OF GENDER VIOLENCE IN MAMELODI, A SOUTH AFRICAN
TOWNSHIP**

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ABSTRACT

Ilobolo, an age-old practice among black South Africans, is the bride price paid by the bridegroom and his family for his wife. It serves as exchange between two families to legitimise a relationship skewed towards ‘relocating the woman to a new household’. The *ilobolo* is usually paid in the form of cattle, cash, or both, before the marriage ceremony. While this ‘mark of honour’ is every woman’s dream, it sits at the core of what has often been described as ‘the culture of violence’ in many South African homes. How does this ancient practice instigate or promote violence, and how does the society perceive the gender violence resulting from *ilobolo*? Employing qualitative data in its analysis, this paper examines these questions in the light of this form of violence that has made South Africa one of the countries with the highest rate of femicide in the world.

KEYWORDS: South Africa, domestic violence, *ilobolo*, culture, patriarchy, gender

INTRODUCTION

In this article I focus on how the ancient practice of *ilobolo* instigates or promotes violence in intimate relationships in Mamelodi Township, Pretoria, South Africa. How do some women in this community perceive gender violence resulting from *ilobolo*? I used the cultural context of domestic violence against women to discuss the debates scholars have on masculinity in formulating the identity of an African man, as well as the conceptual framework of socialisation of gender as identity, followed by the findings and conclusions.

***ILOBOLO* AND THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Dlamini (in Posel, Rudwick & Casale, 2011, p. 106) defines *ilobolo* as “bride price” in the context of cattle in African society, with a link between women’s reproductive labour and the bond created between the two families of the bride and groom. Dlamini argues that *ilobolo* was always paid in cattle and the number of cattle varied, depending mainly on the status of the father of the bride (in Posel *et al*, 2011, p. 106). African culture has been influenced over the years by capitalism, since money has also been introduced as “payment” of the *ilobolo*.

Culture is defined as a set of characteristics that includes the beliefs, practices, values, norms, and behaviours that are shared by the members of a group (Kasturirangan, Krishnan & Riger, 2004, p. 319). Culture links the individuals in a group, and its multidimensionality manifests itself in the ways people perceive and interpret their world; furthermore, culture is passed down across generations (Kasturirangan *et al*, 2004, p. 319). According to Andersen and Taylor (2002, pp. 60-61), culture is a complex system of meaning and behaviour that defines the way of life for a given group or society. It is shared and learned indirectly through observation and imitation, and it also encompasses knowledge, art, morals, laws, customs, habits, language and dress.

South African scholars refer to domestic violence as a desire to exert power and control over women, which falls under the rubric of a “culturally” entrenched pattern in traditional communities (Bowman, 2003, p. 858). While the term “domestic violence” is not necessarily gendered, domestic violence is often associated with women as victims and men as perpetrators. South Africa has many such communities where domestic violence is culturally entrenched, and where men exert power and control over women; moreover, domestic violence is on the increase in South Africa. A cultural twist to domestic violence is that in certain cultures, beating a wife and violence to a wife are tolerated as a response to infidelity or other infractions to the family “honour” by her (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra & Weintraub, 2005, p. 75). In some communities, the term *domestic violence* does not even exist; in other communities, religious and social norms hold the view that domestic violence is a private matter between partners rather than a crime for which the perpetrator should be held legally responsible. It is also observed that some women might have trouble recognising domestic violence as a problem for which help should be sought (Liang *et al*, 2005, p. 75).

Ideas and attitudes portrayed in African cultural notions of male patriarchy abound within marital relationships where the subordination of women is underscored by the tradition of *ilobolo*, which reinforces the notion that a husband has purchased and now owns his wife, including her labour and sexuality (Zondi, 2007, p. 22). In fact, the custom of *ilobolo* underscores the power dynamics in African communities. However, patriarchy is a visible characteristic of all societies in Southern Africa. Moreover, the payment of the bride price to the family of the wife prior to the marriage makes it difficult for women to leave abusive husbands, unless their families are willing to return the amount paid (Bowman, 2003, p. 853).

Dlamini (in Posel *et al*, 2011, p. 109) points out that particularly isiZulu speakers view the paying of *ilobolo* to be their “cultural duty”, with the payment instilling a sense of pride, and they feel that *ilobolo* negotiations should precede marriage. Therefore the explanation of

domestic violence in Africa follows the bias-cultural theory, which emphasises the power of tradition and norms within African societies and how these contribute to the widespread incidence of domestic violence (Ross, 2010). The practice of and discourse on domestic violence provide an opportunity for men to reconstruct contested and unstable masculinities shaped by cultural and structural changes (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004).

A study conducted by Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, Levin, Ratsaka and Schrieber (1999, p. 8) concluded that aspects of culture provided some of the explanations for why one in five women finds it acceptable that a man may act violently against his partner. In the questionnaire, women were asked a series of questions about what they understood to be the general view on gender relations in their culture and whether they themselves held this view (Jewkes *et al*, 1999, p. 8). The responses show that some women perceived that their culture's view was more patriarchal than their personal views. Some women were subservient to their husbands; they viewed punishment from their husbands, male ownership of women, notions of male sexual entitlement, and beatings as signs or expressions of love. Jewkes *et al* (1999, p. 8), ruled out the possibility that so many women indicated that they held views which differed from their perceptions of the "norm" in their culture as a sign that a process of questioning and re-examination was under way among women at community level.

Domestic violence against women should be seen against the background of various harmful or prejudicial traditions, customs, beliefs and practices to which African people still subscribe. Among these, the following were identified by Okereke (in Ross, 2010, p. 58):

- Female genital mutilation;
- Customs that prohibit a woman from inheriting property from her family of origin or from her marital family;

- Customs that perceive widows as part of their husband's inheritance property;
- Customs that still provide for the payment of a bride price or dowry as part of the marriage process;
- Customs that support gender-specific socialisation;
- Differing expectations of boys and girls and of men and women and of husbands and wives within the family;
- Belief in the inherent superiority of males;
- The view that a husband has the right to use some amount of force to "correct" all the members of his family, including his wife;
- The observance of widowhood rites;
- The practice of condoning abduction and rape of young girls when the kidnapper or abuser agrees to marry the young girl (marriage by abduction);
- The practice of betrothing very young girls to men old enough to be their fathers (child marriages);
- Customs that support early marriages of very young boys and girls (arranged marriages);
- Customs that support "shotgun weddings" (forcing a man to marry a girl because of an unplanned pregnancy);
- Customs that give men and husbands guardianship authority over all females within the household;

- Values that give men proprietary rights over women and girls; and
- Customs that blame wives for not bearing children or bearing only female children for their husbands.

SOCIALISATION OF GENDER IDENTITY: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to Feree (2010, p. 424), gender is defined as a social relation characterised by power inequalities that hierarchically produce, organise and evaluate masculinities and femininities through the contested but controlling practices of individuals, organisations and societies. With gender, the socio-political critique emphasises domestic violence as a manifestation of a patriarchal and hierarchical social structure whereby women are excluded from political, business and religious leadership, and these by all accounts are the “naturalising” tendencies, which are rather subtle than violent. Roy (2003) found that women were forced into subordinate positions as discrimination blocks women from influential positions. The ideology of innate inferiority was often enforced by religious values and glorification of feminine virtues. Scholars of domestic violence globally seem to conceptualise domestic violence around the dynamics of gender and power relations (European Commission, 2010). In other words, scholars believe that there is an underlying relationship between domestic violence and gender roles in intimate relationships.

According to Jewkes and Morrell (2010, p. 1), gender power inequity in relationships and domestic violence places women at increased risk of HIV infection in South Africa. Young men who perpetrate domestic violence engage in significantly higher levels of HIV risk behaviour, added to the underlying gender and power dynamics (Dunkle *et al*, 2004). For example, if a woman wants to practise healthy sexual behaviour it involves negotiating condom use with a partner, and this poses challenges for women who have limited power and

are the victims of domestically violent relationships. Their abusive partners are less likely to use condoms, and this has the potential to elevate the risk of disease transmission for both herself and her partner (Swan & O'Connell, 2012, p. 776).

Jewkes and Morrell (2010, p. 1) point out that:

In South Africa, while gender identities show diversity, the dominant ideal of black African manhood emphasises toughness, strength and expression of prodigious sexual success. It is a masculinity women desire, yet it is sexually risky and a barrier to men engaging with HIV treatment. Hegemonically masculine men are expected to be in control of women and violence may be used to establish this control, and instead of resisting this, women's dominant ideal of femininity embraces compliance and tolerance of violent, hurtful behaviour and infidelity.

Thus men and women who adopt such gender identities are following ideals with deep roots in social and cultural processes. The body of scholarly work has a variety of theoretical perspectives emphasising the social structural underpinning of domestic violence in culturally diverse communities. Scholars adopting these approaches have challenged the primacy of gender as an explanatory variable in domestic violence, and have emphasised the need to examine how a constellation of factors leading to inequality and oppression (such as racism, ethnocentrism, class privilege and heterosexism) intersect with gender oppression (Hatashita, Brykczynski & Anderson, 2006; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005, pp. 38-39).

Crenshaw (in Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2012, p. 277) argues that the discourse on the intersecting identities of gender and race that shaped the experiences and oppression of black women has been broadened by acknowledging additional identity categories that intersect with race and gender. Hooks (in Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2012, p. 278), writing about black women's feminism, argues that confronting racial differences is essential in addressing other

categories of difference in the second-wave feminist movement. Hooks analyses power and the evolution of black women's feminism, and concludes that women can share their perspectives and experiences in the open so that power can be collectively negotiated. This emerging area of scholarship focus attempts to address social problems and to represent their interests.

South Africa is a country where race and class continue to coincide with harsh socioeconomic realities bearing heavily on black women. However, domestic violence is often linked to patterns of patriarchy and systems of oppression. Patriarchy is defined as a system of interrelated structures through which women are exploited by men. The distinctiveness of the patriarchal system is marked by social relations which enable men to exploit women (Pollert, 1996, p. 644). It is a system based on a social reproduction framework, explicable as self-perpetuating – either as a totality or as substructures of main structures (Gottfried, 1998, p. 452). It is a system of domination that ensures that women continue certain inequalities and being disadvantaged themselves (Kirton & Green, 2005, p. 141).

NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This article draws on a wider study on the prevalence of violence against women in the low-income black neighbourhood of Mamelodi Township in Pretoria, South Africa. Before requesting ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee, I consulted with professional social workers about the best steps to consider for referral counselling and guidance for those research participants in need of that kind of service. I collected referral information of other local support services specialising in domestic violence issues and distributed it to non-government organisations in Mamelodi Township. Contact details for additional information, debriefing or counselling were provided to all the women participating in the research.

The study made use of qualitative research and utilised in-depth interviews and observation for data collection. In this article, the interview responses of ten female participants were drawn and analysed thematically. The social worker at a non-governmental organisation in Mamelodi Township introduced me to some research participants. I then relied further on referrals. These participants had experienced emotional, verbal, financial, sexual and physical violence in their intimate relationships. For the purpose of this research, “women survivors” are those who have left the violent relationships and “women victims” are those remaining in such violent relationships. The ages of the women ranged from 23 to 63. The majority of women had high school education and university degrees. All were employed, in secured jobs, either as high, primary or pre-primary educators, nurses, social workers, or working in government offices. The majority of the women were married, while a few were widowed or unmarried. All the research participants were given pseudonyms in the analyses of the findings.

Perspectives of Ilobolo – A field finding

Often the abuse of culture is used to perpetrate and justify violence against women in an African environment. The negative aspects of the practice of *ilobolo* result in the institution of marriage ceasing to be a partnership and rather becoming an absolute dictatorship of the husband (Zondi, 2007, p. 22). The research participants highlighted the controlling effects that *ilobolo* has on them as black women. The findings on *ilobolo* have uncovered two subthemes, namely the positive side of *ilobolo* and the negative side of *ilobolo*; however, both these sides testify to the powers *ilobolo* has over black women. The perceptions of *ilobolo* by the research participants are firstly explored.

Zethu is aged 38, married, a mother of three daughters, a high school graduate, working as an assistant in a tertiary institution, and a victim of domestic violence. Her statement below describes the process of *ilobolo* from her own experience, and also as the practice in Mamelodi. She explained:

He sends his family members [aunties and uncles] to my family in order to negotiate *ilobolo*. The whole aim of *ilobolo* is to merge the two families, “yours and his, to be one family”. *Ilobolo* is a negotiated amount that the families agree upon. The men at times suggest the amount for *ilobolo*, maybe the woman’s family would have charged him less, but he has suggested how much he will pay (Zethu, interview March 2014).

From this we learn that *ilobolo* is the negotiated amount that both families agree on in order to merge the two families. In a case where there is disagreement regarding the amount, Nombali (aged 58, divorced, and a graduate teacher) (interview February 2014) said that the two families would meet on another day and continue negotiating until they both reached agreement on the amount. According to Nontombi (aged 57, unmarried, a graduate and a mother of three daughters) (interview February 2014), people are no longer living in “the bundus” (rural areas) where there could be an exchange of cows; nowadays people are living in the townships where money is the only option.

The meaning and value of *ilobolo* is explained by Zimbili (aged 36, a high school graduate working in a tertiary institution in Mamelodi):

The payment of *ilobolo* [monetary or cows] does not matter, it is the gesture that counts ... *ilobolo* is our tradition, it is part of being African ... I support it ... it was done to me; I would want it for my own daughter ... he respects me ... he is prepared to go through the journey of marriage with me ... the in-laws have a

certain respect for you once *ilobolo* is paid. You become like a daughter to them and not just a *makoti* (bride). They truly care about you and your wellbeing (Zimbili, interview February 2014).

Zimbili's statement above highlights *ilobolo* as an important practice in African tradition that has been passed on from generation to generation: it symbolises respect from the man and his family through the journey of marriage. If *ilobolo* was not paid for the bride, she would later find out that the ancestors (a powerful spiritual element in African belief systems) do not know the bride, she cannot be regarded as *umakoti* because they did not go through the process of introduction to the ancestors where a goat is slaughtered in order to introduce the bride to the ancestors (Zethu, interview March 2014).

In KwaZulu-Natal, the groom's ancestors would ask where the bride is, if she did not do *umabo* (groom's family gifts from the bride), and his ancestors would feel disgruntled that *umakoti* did not give them anything. The challenge with dealing with one (more popular) "payment", such as *ilobolo*, is that its meaning is abstracted. This does not mean that one denies its major and negative impact. But, the other payments to *umubondo kamakoti* (bride bringing massive groceries to the groom's family) and *umabo* (bride buying gifts of blankets, suits, etc. for the groom's family) add to seal the union.

Once the payment of *ilobolo* is completed, the woman is regarded as *ingoduso* (fiancée) and a man as *umkhwenyana* (husband). If *ilobolo* is not paid or is incomplete, a man does not have the privilege of being called a "husband"; he is "useless" and it is only a so-called "vat en sit" (cohabitation) relationship, in Thapiso's (aged 25, a graduate, working as volunteer in an NGO in Mamelodi, and a victim of domestic violence) words. She was referring to her mother's relationship with her stepfather (interview September 2014). *Ilobolo* is a journey to marriage that a man promises to make in order to keep the woman in his life (Mulalo,

interview August 2014). A view from Themba (aged 32, a graduate, married, working in a government office, and a survivor of domestic violence) is shown below:

My father showed some interest in me when I informed the family that my boyfriend's family was coming for the *ilobolo* negotiations; I saw some happiness; maybe it was because it involved money and being known by everyone in the township that his daughter is having *ilobolo* paid for her. I am not close to my father, but during those days of *ilobolo*, I must admit I enjoyed the attention I received from him (Themba, interview August 2014).

From these statements it can be seen that *ilobolo* brings money to the bride's family and the status of marriage to the couple. African literature views *ilobolo* as a "cultural duty with the payment instilling a sense of pride and admits that *ilobolo* negotiations would have to precede marriage". However, *ilobolo* has now become commercialised, because through it women gain status within the community (Sithole, 2013, p. 15). This may cause marriage rates in South Africa, particularly among young Africans, to be very low and to decline even more (Posel *et al*, 2011, p. 102).

According to Zethu (interview March 2014), there is also abuse of *ilobolo* in her community, where the bride's family are exploiting *ilobolo* by suggesting an unreasonable amount for their daughters. Traditionalists feel that it was not meant to be like that in its original form, but it continues (Sithole, 2013, p. 19). Zethu further explains that the bride's father is not involved in the negotiations. It is usually the bride's mother who suggests a large amount of money, and on many occasions those marriages do not last because the bride was bought and it is the mothers again who suggest that their daughters must return home to their Mamelodi family of origin, when they experience marital problems or domestic violence (Zethu, interview March 2014).

Jesse (aged 28, a married graduate, working as a deputy director in a government office, and a victim of domestic violence) says, “He constantly reminds me that he paid *ilobolo* for me, therefore I must show him respect or else” (Jesse, interview September 2014). The two statements from Zethu and Jesse suggest that through *ilobolo* women become “bought items”; Jesse’s husband demands respect or she must face the consequences (Jesse is a victim of domestic violence), and in Zethu’s statement mothers demand huge amounts of money for their daughters, which indirectly puts their daughters at risk of domestic violence. There is an exchange of money for women and their respect.

Some of the norms and beliefs that support violence against women are: a) a woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together; and b) sexual intercourse is a man’s right in a marriage (WHO, 2012, p. 5). Jesse explained her “pretence sexual intercourse” as she put it:

After all the hurt, anger and the beatings ... the next minute he wanted sex. It was painful that he would want it, at that moment what else could I do ... I had to do it, with bruises on my face I had to pretend as if I am enjoying it. I am his wife, he paid *ilobolo* for me, so he is my husband ... things I must do for the sake of our marriage (Jesse, interview September 2014).

Jesse’s statement above highlights the extent of the power and control women in domestic violence relationships allow their partners to have over them. The power and control experienced in the above narrative is over women’s body and their sexuality. There was a common view among other married research participants that, as married women, they do not have power or control over their own bodies. Their bodies belong to their husbands, since their husbands have paid *ilobolo* for them. If they were to show signs of refusing to have sexual intercourse with their husbands, their husbands would have the power to just have

“sex” with them – regardless of their disapproval. For Busisiwe (aged 53, an MBA graduate, mother of two daughters, in her second marriage), “this is real abuse at its best”. She explains:

As his wife, I needed to perform my wifely duties (sexual intercourse) since he can just force himself on me ... he asked for sex just when I found out about his infidelity. I had to forgive him, so to show him I had forgiven him, we had to seal all the hurt I felt with sex ... it was better to just ‘give it’ in pretence for the ‘sake of my marriage’ (Busisiwe, interview July 2014).

Busisiwe’s husband was caught having an extramarital affair. After he had requested forgiveness from his wife, he made another request for sexual intercourse, and Busisiwe thought it was better to “just give it” (Busisiwe, interview July 2014). The highlight in Busisiwe’s statement is that women in domestic violence relationships allow their partners to have their bodies, also out of fear of what could happen if they do not, which is that the man can force himself on her. Another research participant stated that she had sexual intercourse with her partner in order to ease his guilty conscience after he had beaten her (Themba, interview September 2014).

The age group 23-53 years old is made up of 27 research participants, who were referring to past experiences since 16 of them have left their domestic violence relationships, while 8 of them are still in their domestic violence relationships, and 3 research participants’ partners were deceased at the time when I interviewed the women participants. These widows were reflecting on past experiences of domestic violence. The common view from all this is that after the physical violence, or emotional violence (the women being heartbroken after finding out about their husbands’ infidelity), the immediate behaviour is sexual intercourse – and

married women would feel obliged to have sex with their husbands, since their husbands had paid *ilobolo* for them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There is clearly an element of power and demands of authority which come from the abuse of *ilobolo*. *Ilobolo* can thus be viewed as a positive or a negative practice, depending on the circumstances and the meanings attached to it. As was previously mentioned, *ilobolo* reinforces the notion that a husband has purchased his wife, including her labour and her sexuality, and the payment of the bride price to the family of the wife prior to the marriage makes it difficult for women to leave their abusive husbands, unless their families are willing to return the amount paid. The abuse of *ilobolo* by the mother of the bride in requesting an “unreasonable amount” as suggested by Zethu, does cause a risk of domestic violence when the man’s expectations are not met, in the view of Jesse’s narrative that “she must show him respect or else” – and Jesse has remained in her intimate relationship with her abusive husband.

I think we have to acknowledge the fact that domestic violence happens even in communities without *ilobolo*. It is important to stress that between socialisation, social ideology and specific practices (such as *ilobolo*), different communities experience different aggravating circumstances to domestic violence. We may need to explain, through further research, whether certain groups are worse off than others. Also, the role of capitalism and money in practices such as *ilobolo* must be monitored, because as part of aggravating circumstances it may emasculate men, who may then operate in a backlash mode. This paper has tried to demonstrate that African culture has loads of dynamism in the current day and age, in part characterised by a primordialist quest (such as seeking for a genuine African way), but in part

also largely patriarchal within its diversity and mix of traditions, showing a myriad ways of 'doing patriarchy'.

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