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Cattle for Wives and Extramarital Trysts for Husbands? Lobola, Men, and HIV/STD Risk Behavior in Southern Africa

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Abstract

Lobola is in many Southern African countries a tradition, which is expected to be adhered to by anyone who is part or wants to be part of the community. It is about paying respect to the elders, the family and the community. It is a significant element of marriage among many tribes and there are strict rules to adhere to. In order to determine how much the actual fact of payment of lobola would influence the behavior of husbands and wives, we conducted several focus group discussions with men, women, mixed groups and couples. We analyzed the data collected during these sessions and compared these with the literature. Many participants see lobola as part of their African culture, although they wished that they would not actually have to pay lobola. We could not determine a difference in the husband's behavior, whether they had paid lobola or not and having extramarital affairs.

Keywords

Culture; Tradition; Lobola; HIV; extramarital affairs

Introduction

In some African countries, for example South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, D.R.Congo, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Lesotho, the tradition of paying lobola or a "bride price" is very common. There is an understanding that the custom surrounding the practice of paying lobola is to seal the relationship between the two people who plan to get married and their families or clans. The lobola demonstrates that the man getting married is capable of taking care of a family and also serves as a token of gratitude to the bride's family for raising a wonderful woman.

The lobola ceremony is a formal process of negotiation between two families in order to come to a mutual agreement on the price.

According to tradition it was customary to pay the lobola with cattle. In present times, however, the payment can be made with money or cattle, depending on the families' circumstances. For example, families living in a city might not have the physical capacity to receive cattle. The number of cattle or their actual value has to be determined prior to the ceremony and is dependent upon on the bride's background, her education, and the social position of her family. The tradition has to be adhered to and accepted regardless of the educational background of the new couple and the financial situation of the family. The same custom of lobola applies even if the groom does not belong to the same tribe as the bride. He will have to follow the tradition as required by the culture of the bride so that the marriage will be recognised by [the] her family and community.

The lobola ceremony itself differs slightly from region to region and tribe to tribe, but in general the lobola ceremony is expected to follow strict regulations. Close relatives or representatives of the families such as the maternal uncles and paternal aunts become part of the negotiation procedures, but the father and/or the older men in the extended paternal family usually are the ones who negotiate. At the time of the introduction of the groom to the family of the bride-to-be, the lobola price has to have been determined by the family of the bridegroom, with the understanding that the lobola has to be delivered at the time of the lobola ceremony. The couple themselves are not involved in the actual process although they may have something to do behind the scenes. The bride or the bridegroom might influence the negotiations through their families without having direct contact with the negotiations. It is against the culture of the couple to have any sexual relationship prior to the day of the lobola ceremony, which is considered to be the day of the traditional wedding.

On the day of the ceremony everyone is dressed according to a specific dress code. In some tribes in Southern Africa, the women are expected to wear traditional dresses and have to be covered with a blanket and to wear a scarf around their heads. The men are required to dress formally, wearing jackets.

The two families initially meet separately. The family of the groom meet in the house of the groom's parents. Once all members have gathered, they then move to some specific point where a member of the family of the bride greets them. Once the greetings are over they all enter the grounds of the bride's parents although not the house of the bride. They are expected to wait until they are invited to start the negotiations. If the original agreement is not met, the negotiations will continue until a final agreement is reached. This could take up to two days.

Until that point no food or beverages other than water are served. When the final agreement has been reached and the bride's family have accepted the offer, the official ceremony and feast will start. As part of the lobola ceremony the girl's family slaughter a sheep or a goat. Just before the food is served the bride arrives and is handed over to her new family. As required by tradition she is covered with a blanket and the family of the groom now receives her. One of the elders then takes off her blanket and she formally becomes a member of the new family and greets everyone.

While this is happening the food is being served followed by tea and coffee. Then the groom's family are called to meet the family of the bride and they greet each other and give thanks for the new family member. An official date is then set for a white or traditional wedding ceremony and the festivities end with a prayer. The family of the groom is at this point expected to leave while the groom himself is allowed to sleep over, which implies acceptance, and seals the marriage.

Although the tradition is widely respected by most men and women in the society, lobola comes with controversy (Wendo C., 2004; Belinga-Eboutou M., 2001; UN report 2003;

Swartz L., 2001). Many outsiders see the custom as a direct reason for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. The lobola tradition is also known as “the Customary Law of Marriage” (South Africa; Act 120 Justice Department 2000) which permits the husband to marry up to four wives. The latest example is the President of South Africa, who is currently married to three women, having paid lobola for all of them. Many see this as equal to multiple concurrent sexual partners (Fray P., 2008). In the case of one of the partners contracting an infection everyone involved in this sexual network is at risk of infection (Duncan ME. Et al 1994; Morrison CS et al 1997; Leclerc-Madlala S 2009; Asamoah-odei E. 1996; Dunkle KL et al 2008). Lobola also does not prevent the husband from having extramarital affairs. The social expectations towards him as a man may put him under pressure to which he might feel he has to respond (Walker L. 2005; Hunter M. 2005; Kongnyuy EJ et al 2007; Ng’weshemi JZ, et al 1996). In an effort to gain a better understanding of the custom and its effect on the potential spread of sexually transmitted infections including HIV, we conducted focus group sessions to examine the feasibility of a health promotion programme for heterosexual men in a South African Township. The results presented here represent the understanding of the tradition of lobola extrapolated from responses given by the participants during the focus group discussion.

Aims

The authors wanted to establish whether or not the tradition of paying lobola has any influence on the behavior and attitude of men and women who adhere to this tradition.

Method

We conducted 11 focus group sessions, with 11 to 14 participants in each group. The sessions included 5 “male only”, 2 “female only”, 2 sessions, where the participants were of mixed gender, but did not know each other and 2 sessions of married couples. Prior to the sessions the participants responded to a brief survey, which provided an overview of their socio-economic background.

The focus group sessions followed a prescribed script, uniform to all groups. The sessions were led by an experienced facilitator and were audio taped with the permission of the participants. All participants gave written consent.

Most of the male focus group sessions were held in private houses. Other focus group sessions were held in the conference room at the office of the research centre maintained in East London, which is part of the University of Fort Hare and the University of Pennsylvania. The participants were approached via the snowball system and present a cross sectional sample of the community. All participants were screened in regard of age, gender, being heterosexual active and wanting to participate in such a focus group session. The participants consisted of single gender groups of men, and single gender groups of women, two groups of mixed gender, at which the participants did not know each other and two couples groups, who were married to each other. About 120 participants attended the eleven focus group sessions. Their age range was between 18 and 55 years, with a mean of 33 years. Their education level was between grade one to post graduate level. About a third of the participants were unemployed, less than half of the participants were married.

A trained bilingual facilitator following a designed script held the focus group sessions. All sessions followed the same script and were audiotaped with the permission of the participants.

The Institutional Research Board of the University of Pennsylvania, USA and the Ethics committee of the collaborating University of Fort Hare, Eastern Cape, South Africa, approved the study.

The specific questions regarding lobola were asked and the a summary of the responses is provided below. (The questions are in “remarks” with the responses).

“Do you think most married men pay or don’t pay lobola?”

The men mentioned that they previously have been forced to pay lobola. Today they try to avoid payment. However, marriage in the rural areas is only possible if lobola is paid first.

The women voiced their concern that if lobola has not been paid the marriage will not last. “A wife is always proud if lobola has been paid for her”. “The wife will be treated with respect as well as the husband”.

“How does failing to pay lobola affect the relationship between husbands and wives?”

Every one agreed that: “The wife does not respect the husband” and “the husband does not respect the wife”, if lobola has not been paid and “The families do not recognise the marriage”. In case of problems within the marriage, the couple will not find any support. Failure to pay lobola assumes that “the woman remains single”, “thus is not married” as a result the children of the young couple will belong to the father of the wife, and not to the husband and as a result the husband will have no influence in the upbringing of the children”.

“Does whether the man has paid lobola affect the man’s sexual behavior either in the marriage or outside the marriage?”

Everyone agreed that that: the husband’s behavior “ will not be different if he paid or not. “All men go outside {the marriage} whether or not they have paid lobola.” (meaning having a sexual relationship, an affair). “If the man does not respect his wife, he will do what he wants to do”. If lobola has not been paid, the husband in times of crisis will say to his wife “ you are not my real wife, I did not pay lobola”

RESULTS

1. Across the single gender groups, there was no correlation between payment and non-payment of lobola and the sexual behaviour of the husband. Everyone believed that husbands would have sexual relationships outside the marriage regardless of the social custom of lobola.
2. Couples linked lobola to:
 - a. Relationships between families of the parents;
 - b. Legitimation of each partner by both families of parents;
 - c. Support of both partners by families during crisis in the marriage.
3. Men-only groups’ linked lobola to:
 - a. Respect of husband by wife;
 - b. Value of wife in marriage.
4. Women only group linked lobola to:
 - a. Value of wife by families of parents;

b. Legitimation of husband by her parents

The analyses of the survey focusing on the beliefs about Lobola seem to support a low potential mediator variable that emerged during our preliminary research. A “cultural beliefs about lobola” scale was created. This 3-item scale ($\alpha = .74$) included questions on whether a man who has paid lobola is

- a. entitled to have sex with his wife anytime he wants to
- b. could insist on sex with using a condom and
- c. whether a woman for whom lobola has been paid loses all her independence with respect to her husband.

Men who scored higher on this scale, correctly answered

- a. fewer HIV culture myth ($p = .04$)
- b. condom-use knowledge questions ($p = .02$),
- c. expressed weaker intentions to use condoms ($p = .001$),
- d. were more likely to report having multiple partners in the past 3 months ($p = .20$)
- e. were more likely to report ever forcing a woman to have sex ($p = .01$), ever being told they had an STD, and ever being told they had HIV than were other men.

We also assessed beliefs about gender roles and relations between men and women. The men expressed gender beliefs supporting the acceptability of coercive sexual activity and men's power over women in relationships. For instance, large percentages agreed that if:

- a. a woman engages in kissing and touching, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her (36.0%),
- b. women who are raped while at shebeens get what they deserve (33.0%),
- c. a woman will respect a man only if he lays down the law to her (37.5%) (Messersmith LJ. 1996).

Only 26.1% agreed that a man is never justified in hitting his wife. Married and unmarried men held them equally strongly. In addition, the beliefs did not vary as a function of education level, language preference (English vs. Xhosa), age, or reported substance use (Mbizvo-Madlala S, et al 2009). The beliefs were pervasive irrespective of these variables.

One of the ultimate examples of men's power over women is sexual coercion. About 12.0% of the men reported that they had used force to make their steady partner have sex in the past year (Molla M et al 2008). Such reports were unrelated to marital status, education, language preference, age, or gender-role expectations. The men who reported forcing their partner to have sex reported consuming more drinks the last time they had sex ($r = .31$, $p = .03$), were more likely to report binge drinking ($r = .33$, $p = .02$), reported smoking dagga (marijuana) on more days ($r = .42$, $p = .003$), and expressed more negative hedonistic beliefs about condoms ($r = -.41$, $p = .004$).

Discussion

In this study men and women made it clear that they see tradition and culture such as paying lobola as an important part of their lives. Paying lobola is paying respect towards a tradition and towards the future of the new family. This is accepted as an important part of the marriage, which will contribute to the stabilization of the marriage.

In spite of wide spread beliefs that traditions and customs are no longer strong, the results of the focus groups showed that lobola is an important part of culture in South Africa. Most women and men believe that the payment of lobola creates a greater value and strength in their marriage and hence they insist that husbands should pay lobola. It is when lobola is not paid, that many participants strongly believed that the marriage does not last, the husband or the wife will not respect each other and the families will not accept the marriage.

Husbands are having extra-marital sexual partners, whether or not they paid lobola, and expose themselves to the risk of STD/HIV transmission (Asamoah-odei E 1996). This conclusion supports the view that interventions targeting men's sexual behavior and attitudes are more immediately crucial in reducing the risk of HIV transmission within marriage (Buregyeye E. 2008; Molla M. 2008; Hunter M. 2005; Walker L. 2005). Intervention programs need to be developed with the overall goal of convincing men, including married men, to reduce their number of sexual partners to one partner, to provide basic information about the risks posed by multiple concurrent partnerships, provoke thought and dialogue, and increase self-risk perception (Mbizvo MT, et al 1996; Fray P. 2008; Messersmith LJ et al 2000; Kongnyuy EJ,et al 2006).

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