



Le
marché
des
femmes

The legacy of
Simon de Beauvoir
and post feminist condition
in the 21st century

Vilnius, 19 octobre 2019



Chantal Edie

Photographer

38 years

«I and my partner are in a dilemma whether or not to pay for my bride price so we decided to involve other women whose bride price have been fully paid to understand how they felt about this tradition.»



Biba

House wife

33 years

«En buvant le vin blanc que j'ai offert en retour à mon bien-aimé, je scellais mon engagement. Cela me fit couler quelques larmes pas de tristesse mais de joie car pour la première fois je disais « oui » à l'homme que j'aime...»



Eseme

Movie producer

28 years

«Growing up as a Bafaw child I must have asked myself a million times, 'is this what I'm worth'? A goat, pigs, rice, salt. As an adult nothing changed, the question kept nagging me to a point where I told my mum I'm not getting married. I downplayed the importance of traditional marriages in the African tradition.»



Ebot
Teacher
32 years

«On the day of my traditional wedding, lots and lots of items were presented to my family by my husband and Family. Amidst all the things was a very fat pig. It was pregnant as I was too. The story around my pig was what fascinated me most. Upon transporting it to the Ceremony ground, it fell from the carriage.»



Bedie
Blogger
42 years

«That night, my dad made an announcement that he would be returning the white envelope with the money which was requested as part of my bride price to my fiancé's husband because he said it was important to him that everyone see that he was not "selling" his daughter but that he wholeheartedly accepted that the marriage rite had been completed.»

It's been 70 years since Simon de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* but reading through her biography one would think it is a scene from one of those Nigerian Epic movies we watch on our screens today. Those movies have one thing in common: a good marriageable woman must be God fearing, submissive and patient. In these movies a woman who knows exactly what she wants is depicted as overzealous, manner less and undesirable. Once again religion and tradition are vectors against gender equality. Regrettably, we have been programmed like that from the very day we were born. In my culture, it is common thing to hear dad's friends refer to you as "wife" as Simon de Beauvoir puts it "one is not born a woman but becomes it". You go to school, be the best in what you do but if you don't end up as a wife then you are underachieved. The noun "wife" is in contrast with the noun "husband", both maybe common nouns used to describe the different sex in marriage but sexism and misogyny in our society gives the noun wife so many negative connotations. Wife has become symbolic to fragility, protégée, a commodity asset. So eventually a woman who is strong willed, inquisitive and a leader is not easily considered a wife material because they are considered feminist. So much so that women have started debating on which type of feminist they want to or not be.

In Women who brunch –In conversation (a group created in 2018 to discuss gender equality) the word feminism is feared because some women say feminist want to take the place of men. There is this group of young ladies ranging from ages 22 to 35 who recently changed their name from Réseau féminine de lionne to Association leadership des femmes, because a faction of the group assumed the first name sounded too feminist and they did not want to associate themselves to that trend of thinking forgetting that all women are born feminist. Why, because we are always fighting for our rights to one thing or another. Young women have been programmed from birth to aspire for marriage and because they believe that feminist are single women; they don't want to associate to that. My cousin has added me to a group on WhatsApp known as the "WONOCs (Women of noble character) mind you I wasn't bothered until I discovered that Noble was a synonym for submissive. These women elevated their husbands and taught women how to serve their husbands whom they referred to as my king. If Simon de Beauvoir were to live today, she will be called a failure because she refused marriage, the same way society thought of her back then. I am sure you are eager to know where I am taking you to but you will be surprised, pleasantly or not but I have been thinking for a long time now about a practice which is not done only in Africa. A practice which has survived through centuries, countries and now has its bedrock in Africa.

The Bride price!

As a photographer, I have had the opportunity to witness the bride price of so many tribes, a practice where a list is given to the groom for the provisions and money he has to give the bride's family in exchange for her hand in marriage. "According to a research by the Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW) (p.7) groups justify the practice by claiming that the wealth received compensates them for time and trouble taken to raise a daughter who will be sent off to live with another family. For others, it is viewed as compensation for loss of a daughter's economic services or for the children she adds to her new family" The negotiations during this ceremony for me are tense and dehumanizing as the woman is brought down to the level of an object which has to be exchanged with goods. Women are not allowed to speak during the decision making, only men are allowed to share the proceeds and they would allocate what is given to the women in the family as per the Bakossi tribe in Cameroon. I and my partner are in a dilemma whether or not to pay for my bride price so we decided to involve other women whose bride price have been fully paid to understand how they felt about this tradition. In my essay I want to highlight the role traditional and religious beliefs play in gender equality in marriages. In this project (mix of photography, videography and text) we are seeking the perception of women whose bride price have been fully performed in a bid to understand how they felt on the day their Bride price was paid.

Text from women who have completed the bride price ceremony.

Bedie 42 years old, married for 12 years .

I still remember the day I called my dad to notify him that my fiancé's family would be coming to see him to ask for my hand in marriage. It was a big deal, but from that point on, it was out of my hands. A traditional African marriage is typically a union between two families. A bride price is requested by the bride's family and a concise list of items is gathered, usually comprising bags and gallons of food such as rice, palm oil, salt, wax print cloth for the mother and grandmother of the bride, a walking stick and hat for the father of the bride and most importantly, meat. The pig is considered one of the most important symbols of marriage, given ceremoniously to the bride's family by the groom's family. In a lot of cases, 2 pigs are necessarily. Mine was no exception in this regard. In our tradition, on the day of the marriage ceremony, once the negotiations have been finalised and the items requested have been ticked off to everyone's satisfaction, one of the pigs (usually a smaller one) is taken away, slaughtered cooked and shared to all the guests. The other pig which is expected to be much larger, is divided up along with the bags and gallons of food, and shared to all extended family members the day after the ceremony. I was not present at my ceremony and neither was my then fiancé but we both got to watch the ceremony on video. In my tradition, it is ideal, but not necessary for the actual couple to be present during the ceremony. My father and my fiancé's sister notified the guests that we had each given consent for them to represent us. My uncle and my fiance's cousin took the customary Bafaw marriage oath for our families. My uncle rubbed the fat from a piece of cooked pork on his in-law's bare abdomen and asked him to vow to be kind, gentle and generous to his niece, then he asked his to eat the meat. My fiancé's cousin in turn rubbed the fat from another piece of cooked pork on my uncle's bare abdomen and promises to be kind, gentle and generous to me and went further to ask that I may bear many children and commit to their family, then my uncle also ate that piece of meat to complete the vow. That night, my dad made an announcement that he would be returning the white envelope with the money which was requested as part of my bride price to my fiancé's husband because he said it was important to him that everyone see that he was not "selling" his daughter but that he wholeheartedly accepted that the marriage rite had been completed.

Eseme 27 years old is a movie producer, Married for 3 years.

Growing up as a Bafaw child I must have asked myself a million times, 'is this what I'm worth'? A goat, pigs, rice, salt. As an adult nothing changed, the question kept nagging me to a point where I told my mum I'm not getting married. I downplayed the importance of traditional marriages in the African tradition.

My day came, the first traditional marriage I ever attended and witnessed. No one had to tell me what a beauty it was to behold, the ceremony, the joy people felt even for the smallest of things as a bottle of drink given to them. I realized it's about me but not just about me, two families brought together from different regions, relationships created, we did that.

The oath performed by both male family heads, rubbing palm oil on each other's one pack belly while they swear to protect us as we merge families was the highlight of my traditional marriage. All I could think of was "I am worth the love they share?".

Biba 25 years old, married for 6 years

Mariage traditionnel, un évènement festif et solennel, bien connu chez nous en AFRIQUE regroupant deux familles et amis pour unir deux personnes qui ont choisi de vivre ensemble. Un moment que j'ai eu le plaisir de vivre. Voici dont en quelque ligne l'histoire de ma dot.

« Hummm!!! Je peux dire, que j'ai eu beaucoup de chance car unir traditionnellement deux personnes venant de régions diamétralement opposées n'est pas chose aisée dans notre contrée : mon époux de l'Est et moi de l'Ouest, deux peuples aux cultures distinctes mais tout de même alignés concernant la liste de la dot. Celle-ci est toujours conçue par la famille de l'épouse et remise au conjoint, elle contient plusieurs présents symboliques que l'époux devra rapporter le jour du dît événement.

Ma dot pourrait se résumer en trois faits qui m'ont particulièrement marquée. »

1. le partage de la kola et de la dégustation du vin blanc.

Ce rituel, très important et purement symbolique représente le moment précis où j'ai accepté de m'unir à mon partenaire pour la vie devant DIEU et les hommes. En buvant le vin blanc que j'ai offert en retour à mon bien-aimé, Je scellais mon engagement. Cela me fit couler quelques larmes pas de tristesse mais de joie car pour la première fois je disais « oui » à l'homme que j'aime, pour la première fois je ressentais l'ampleur de ce « oui », la responsabilité de cet engagement qui est le mariage, l'envie de m'évader dans cette nouvelle vie avec mon homme, et ne plus penser à demain en solitaire... J'ai prié et imploré le seigneur tout-puissant de bénir mon union et de nous protéger.

2. les pleurs de ma maman

Durant toute ma vie, du moins jusque-là, jamais je n'avais vu ma mère pleurer. Je ne saurais décrire mon ressenti car aucune expression n'est assez forte pour l'exprimer, ce moment où je la surpris dans sa chambre, assise sur le bord du lit et coulant de grosses gouttes de larmes. Elle ne chercha pas à se cacher au contraire elle me tendit ses bras et sans réfléchir je m'y jetai la rejoignant aussitôt dans son bref moment de tristesse et c'est alors qu'elle me dit:

- « Mon bébé tu es la dernière sortie de mes entrailles, la dernière avec qui je partageais ma demeure, celle sur qui je me reposais. Avec qui vais-je papoter maintenant? Qui me dira encore, maman repose-toi je prends le relais ? à présent, tu es une femme, une mère, une épouse. Ne te fit pas à mes larmes car ton bonheur est tout aussi le mien va et que seigneur de comble de bénédiction ».

3. La mort des cabris

En pays bamiléké plus précisément à l'Ouest aucune dot ne s'effectue sans des chèvres bien grasses offertes par le mari au chef de famille de son épouse. Cette tradition peut paraître banale mais ces animaux sont d'une grande valeur symbolique. De ce fait, mon père demanda à avoir des cabris car il tenait à les élever jusqu'à leur maturité mais malheureusement la nature décida autrement les pauvres bêtes moururent ayant passé toute une journée, abandonnées sous la pluie.

Ces moments résumeront en moi un nouveau départ, l'abandon de ma vie de jeune fille pour une vie nouvelle, une belle aventure en commun qui commençait par un rituel festif, une célébration, une bénédiction traditionnelle.

Ebot 32 years is an educator, married for 9 years.

"I am Vera Ebot ATANGA. I hail from Manyu Division in the South West Region of Cameroon but am married to a man from North West.

On the day of my traditional wedding, lots and lots of items were presented to my family by my husband and Family.

Amidst all the things was a very fat pig. It was pregnant as I was too. The story around my pig was what fascinated me most. Upon transporting it to the Ceremony ground, it fell from the carriage.

People around beckoned our driver to give him signal of a fallen pig. Hahahahaha..... Thank God it didn't die but reached its destination safe and sound.

It was then time to pay my dowry. The pig was given to my Mother's family. Behold, when it was taken to my Mother's family compound, it was well taken care of in its pregnant state.

She grew Large and I too. Finally she gave birth some months before I later did. Till today, its breed keeps multiplying."

It may be of interest to know that, the verbal conversations we had with these ladies is quite different from their written narrative. In our discussions they were more critical about the ritual and their feelings of anxiety on that day. In their written narrative they preferred to give a resume of what was given in exchange for their hand in marriage. In our verbal discussions, these ladies narrated the things that made them anxious: The eternal wait for the deliberations that took place before the performance of the traditional rites. It generally takes between 4 to 8 hours. I have named that the merchandising phase where the woman's relatives go through the list to make sure that all what they asked for has been provided. On the 11/08/2018, I shoot a traditional rite of the Douala tribe from the littoral province that went from 9am to 7pm. It started off with the list of "les fiancials" at 9am, after

a meticulous survey to make sure everything given was authentic, they proceeded to the second list which was the list of the Bride price itself. The woman in this case, quite unusual probably because she was already in her early fifties was present during the reading of the list and acceptance/rejecting of the goods offered procedure. In many case as was this one, if the bride's family was happy about the quality or quantity of an item provided, the groom's family had to fill it up with money. In this case the members of the groom's family ran out of money. It was long and tiring but like the father of the bride said " the bride price had to be met , I too have eaten that of my brothers". Bringing us to the fact that the bride price has become systemic, a woman has to go through this traditional rites to be considered a married woman by her community. It's a traditional rite that has no legal bidding but which importance ca not be underestimated. Some unfounded beliefs tell that a woman whose bride price hasn't been completed may witness unsolvable problems in her house hold.

After the acceptance of the bride price, the lady is given a glass palm wine symbolic of fecundity by her father to kneel and give to her husband to be who drinks it, puts money inside the cup to be handed back to the father. My mother says the bride price known in my tradition (Kupe Muanenguba division in the southwest region) as the "Ngabb" meaning something they put on your head in exchange for your transfer into another family. So literally meant the woman now became the property of the groom and his family. In the case where the bride wants to break the union, the bride price had to be returned fully to the groom's family. So if a woman came from a poor family who couldn't afford to pay back the bride price, she may have to stay in whatever condition her marriage was putting her through. This rite gave the powers to the man to claim ownership of a woman after its performance and generally put the woman in a vulnerable position of submission. It is very common for women to proclaim "thanks for honoring me" to their spouse after this ritual. In Bedie's case, her father refunded the money that was given to him in exchange for her hand because he didn't want to sell his daughters freedom of choice. The money was symbolic, but its symbolism had some hidden connotations that were not in favour of his daughter. Ebot in her verbal narrative recounted her upset her husband's family where to find out that their tradition did not allow her corpse in the advent of her death to be buried at her husband's village. The Bayangi people of the southwest region didn't allow for their children to be buried anywhere else but on their native land. The tradition of the bride price gave the power of choosing where the woman should be buried and it wasn't something they were willing to part with after paying the bride price. "Several sources state that, according to traditional practices, a woman becomes the "property" of her husband once the dowry is paid (Cameroon 17 Nov. 2014; US 11 Mar. 2008, sect. 5; WIRA et al. [2009], 13, 45). Some sources add that a woman also becomes the property of her in-laws (VSO 2 July 2013; Cameroon 11 May 2009, para. 54). In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a representative of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (ministère de la Promotion de la femme et de la Famille) of Cameroon, stated that a young woman is treated like a commodity in her family: they can force her into a marriage or arrange one for her with two or more suitors, and thus increase the amount of the bride price (Cameroon 17 Nov. 2014). " In my tradition that is that of the Kupe Muanenguba Division, Bangem precisely, the woman even if separated from the husband, in the advert that their bride price wasn't returned has to be buried at her estranged husband's village. Encyclopedia Britannica states that in cultures that practice this form of bride wealth, a marriage is not considered to have ended if the bride wealth has not been returned (3 May 2014). The Ministry representative also gave the following example:" if a woman were to remarry without refunding her bride price, her first husband would have property rights over the woman's corpse (upon her death), rather than her current husband." In the same way that if the woman's bride price hasn't been fully paid, the man cannot claim ownership of her or her offspring's. If divorced legally without the bride price refunded, the offspring's from the new marriage is considered that of the former husband until the bride price is returned according to my culture. Even though the civil wedding is the only form that is legally recognized by the judiciary, the customary law courts take care managing disputes that arise from the restitution of the bride price. "to marry validly under customary law, the man must pay some token (bride price) to the family of the bride" (Cameroon 11 May 2009, para. 60). According to Encyclopedia Britannica, in some cultures, particularly in Africa, bridewealth is a payment made in cash or goods by a groom to the kin of the bride [1] (3 May 2014). Religion has always played a strong role in backing up while women ought to be submissive.

Genesis 3:16 To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." In the Bible the stories of Esther, Ruth, and even Mary mother of Jesus are used as examples. The African traditional religion is no different. Women have been raised up to believe that a man who has paid your bride price ought to be revered because of the process that they go through the traditional payment of the bride price. Psychologically a woman will think of herself unequal to the man because he had to pay for her while she had to go wait without a say in the merchandising process. It is tradition, that has been passed on from centuries ago but the world is evolving and while we are trying all to fight for the emancipation of the female child and gender equality, we shouldn't forget that questioning certain cultures and traditions is a sure way to find answers to gender equality.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/30/books/excerpt-introduction-second-sex.html> Introduction to Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex'

By JUDITH THURMAN MAY 27, 2010

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<https://www.refworld.org/docid/5524e1ea4.html> Cameroon: Dowries in forced and arranged marriages, including whether they may be refunded; the role of the state in the payment of dowries, in particular, that of the Ministry of Finance; whether a document exists that takes into account the details of the dowry (2011-November 2014)

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/genesis/3-16.html>

Thank you!

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