# **In US, African ‘Bride Price’ Tradition Controversial**

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By David Akana

On a Saturday in early July, 26-year-old Alexis Nketiah wedded her sweetheart, 32-year-old Ngukeng Nchindia Ntonghawah, a registered nurse at Inova hospital in Alexandria, in a purely traditional wedding unique to the people of Ghana.

Situated in the West coast of Africa, Ghana has an old custom whereby a groom must pay money to the parents of the bride in compensation for the loss of her work to her family, the time, energy and resources expended on her education and her upkeep before marriage. This cultural practice is known as bride price.

According to the 2010 US Census, more than 50,000 Ghanaians live in America. Out of this number, about 5,000 live in Virginia with most of them concentrated in Northern Virginia. More than 2,000 Ghanaians living in Virginia are married.

The local Ghanaian community says they relish customary weddings not only because it is part of their cultural identity but also because it offers them a rare opportunity to celebrate their culture.

But the popularity of customary weddings among Ghanaians doesn’t make it less controversial. For some people, the bride price submits women to their husbands. For others, it is an important cultural identity which sets Ghana apart.

The bride price, according to Nana Alhaji, member of a royal family in Ghana, and one of the thousands of Ghanaians living in Northern Virginia includes drinks, clothes, necklaces, earrings and other ladies’ items. If the girl is from the northern part of Ghana, the bride price may also include salt, kola nut, goat, guinea fowl, sheep and cattle. A cash component is invariably part of the bride price.

When Ntonghawah, a native of Cameroon, another West African country, asked the hand of his girlfriend in marriage, he was aware of the customary practices that he would have to fulfill to qualify to marry her.

“When both of our parents sat down, they told us what is required to marry a woman in Ghana. You have to provide a box containing eight unsown clothes, a ring, a bible, bra, jewelries, four bottles of liquor and anything that can make your wife look beautiful,” Ntonghawah said. “As far as money is concerned, they initially asked us to pay $5,000 but after some back and forth discussion, my wife’s family accepted that we pay $2,000.”

Richard Kusi, a 37-year-old social studies student at George Mason University, paid many times more in bride price than Ntonghawah. Kusi wedded Bonsu Stephanie on July 16 in Woodbridge.

“My wife is from the Northern part of Ghana and it is very expensive to wed a woman from there. They asked me $10,000 excluding the clothes and other basic things. But I ended up paying about $7,000.”

Love for Ghanaian culture seems to be the reason why customary weddings have survived amidst many other cultures in the U.S.

“We love our culture and we take pride in identifying ourselves with it. It is an abomination for one person to see off a child to marriage because in Ghana like other parts of Africa, a child does not belong only to the parents, it belongs to the whole community,” said Nana Alhadji, member of a royal family in Ghana.

**Women as Property**

Bride price practice has been criticized for causing women to be looked upon as property. As far back as 1976, Buchi Emecheta, one of Nigeria’s most respected female novelists, used her novel “The Bride Price” to portray how the bride price causes women’s submission to men in African culture.

In 2004, Mifumi, an international development agency in Uganda organized a conference in the Ugandan capital of Kampala to discuss the reform of the bride price. At the end of the conference, Mifumi, (named after a village in Uganda) issued a strong condemnation of bride price.

“The payment of bride price reduces a woman’s status to that of property so that she is not entitled to own anything in the home. If the relationship is violent and she is attempting to leave, culture demands that she returns the bride price paid for her yet she cannot afford the refund since she cannot own any property,” Mifumi wrote in the report.

As for Nketiah, Ntonghawah’s wife, payment of the bride price to her parents does not trouble her.

“As far as I am concerned, things are changing. The bride price is just to show appreciation to the family of the girl. If a woman chooses to be submissive because a bride price was paid for her, fine. Basically, every woman should be submissive to her husband but I don’t think a man ought to dominate the woman because he paid a bride price for her.”

Bonsu Stephanie, who has been in the US since she was 6, doesn’t think that the bride price paid for her would result in her husband’s domination or looking at her as property.

“Although a woman must be submissive to her husband, just because he paid a bride price does not worry my heart,” she said.

**Modifying Customary Marriage**

While the bride price is shared among the family members of the bride, water or alcohol is poured in various corners of the house during the wedding to appease and honor ancestors and family members who recently passed away. This process is known as the Pouring of the Libation or Tambiko. But not every Ghanaian family respects this ritual during bride price marriages.

“It is like praying to the small gods,” said Nketiah.

Bonsu who is a devoted Christian doesn’t also think it is necessary to pour any libation to the ancestors.

“We are Christians. Stuff like that deals with chiefs and kings. We go by the Christian belief and as long as we pray and use the bible, we don’t need to do any of that,” said Bonsu.

Regardless of what is said of bride price, Bonsu seems to be particularly comfortable with customary wedding.

“Regardless of my place of birth and how long I have leaved in America, I am a Ghanaian American, my tradition is my tradition,” said Bonsu.

“Being in America does not discount the fact that we lose track of where we come from. By paying bride price, we recognize all those who have played a part in the girl’s upbringing,” said Ntonghawah.