

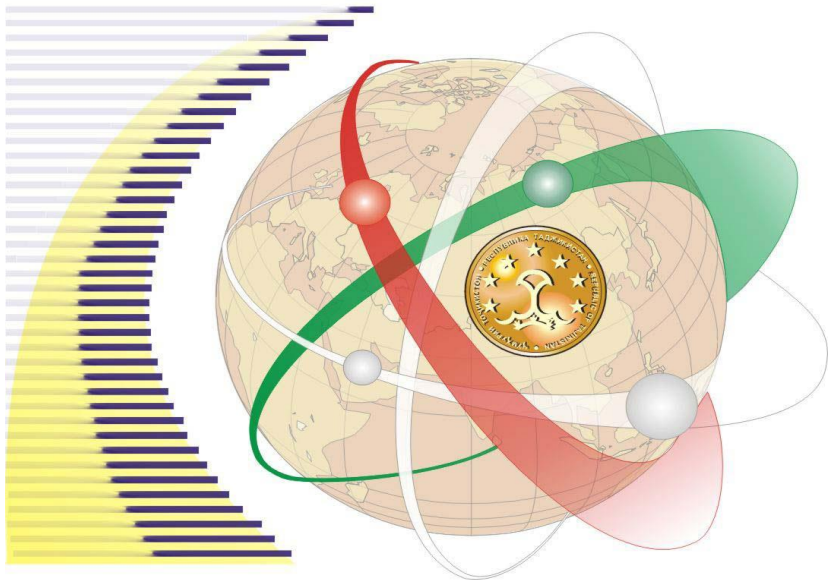


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SOMMAIRE

1. Formation universitaire et marche du travail au Bénin.....1
QUENUM C. Venant Célestin
2. Interrogating parents' involvement in children's marriage in Africa in selected works: a comparative study of fiction and reality 19
Théophile Houndjo
3. Les dynamiques d'intégration sociale et économique des ressortissants ouest-africains au Bénin approche comparée des maliens et nigériens à Cotonou.....53
DEMBA DIALLO Kassimou
4. Pertinence socio-économique de la conservation des espèces ligneuses agroforestières à fort potentiel de fertilisation du sol au centre-Bénin.....73
Léonard Cossi HINNOU, Armelle AHEHEHINNOU, Alida Roch BLEOUE, Raphiou MALIKI
5. Effet de la qualité perçue du service éducatif et de la satisfaction des diplômés sur la notoriété des universités privées.....94
Adamou MODI, Dossa Théodore MEHOBA
6. Mécanismes de réinsertion professionnelle des filles en situation difficile par les centres d'accueil et de protection des enfants (CAPE) maison de soleil et foyer LAURA VICUŋA (FLV) à Cotonou.....123
Bernice COSSAHINTO, Colette TCHAOU, Salomé O. C. TAKIN, Théodore MONHIDE, Blandine YABI, Dodji AMOUZOUVI
7. Genre et vulnérabilité aux IST/VIH-SIDA en milieu conjugal au Bénin: analyses et perspectives.....140
BALLO Ignace, AFFO Alphonse, GNIMADI Clément
8. Déterminants et implications des acteurs face aux récurrences des inondations dans l'arrondissement central de Malanville au nord-Bénin.....150
Maman-Sani ISSA, Romaric OGOUWALÉ



-
9. L'éthique et la politique : étude des nouveaux déterminants du comportement de vote chez les électeurs/consommateurs de la génération z au Bénin.....172
Ismaël AW SAMBA
10. Rôle de la communication interne dans la motivation du personnel de la mairie d'Abomey-Calavi.....192
AFFOIGNON Patrick Jean-Claude
11. Contribution des marches à bétail aux transformations des espaces et au développement des communes de l'Ouémé supérieur.....210
Maman ZAKARI BASSAROU, Boni SOUNON BOUKO, Jacob Afouda YABI
12. Analyse de l'évolution des actes de piraterie maritime au Bénin.....239
Wenceslas Ahognisso GBAGUIDI, Thierry Hervé AZONHE, Placide H. CLEDJO



INTERROGATING PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S MARRIAGE IN AFRICA IN SELECTED WORKS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FICTION AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on redressing the critical imbalance that underestimates parents' involvement in traditional marriage in Africa. Marriage in this context is defined as the union between a man and a woman. Indeed, most of those who criticize parents' involvement in their children's marriage do it based on their ignorance of African realities. Others do it because they just want African ways to look Western. The works under study are Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, inspired by the Ibo culture and custom, and Olagoke Ariwoola's *The African Wife* and Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*. The last two are not novels but civilization books. The former is set in Nigeria and deals with the Yoruba culture and custom, while the latter is set in Kenya and deals with the Kikuyu culture and custom. The two books make it possible not only to compare the message in the novels with the realities through the books but also the Eastern African realities, precisely the Kikuyu, in terms of marriage with the ones of Western Africa mainly those of Yoruba and Ibo. The study reveals that parents' involvement in children's marriage is not synonymous with imposing wives to one's sons or husbands to one's daughters but just a necessary coaching which is advantageous to both the family being founded and the extended families of both sides. It also points out some weaknesses in this practice. For efficient analysis, I have used socio-criticism, womanism, feminism, and postcolonialism as literary theories and the qualitative approach method.*

Keywords: *Girl, Boy, Parents, Family, Dowry*



RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article se focalise sur la correction de l'injustice qui sous-estime l'implication des parents dans le mariage traditionnel en Afrique. Dans ce contexte, le mariage signifie l'union entre un homme et une femme. En vérité, la plupart de ceux qui critiquent l'implication des parents dans le mariage de leurs enfants le font par ignorance des réalités africaines. D'autres le font juste parce qu'ils veulent que les Africains s'alignent sur les Occidentaux en tout. Les œuvres à l'étude sont *Things Fall Apart* et *No Longer at Ease* de Chinua Achebe inspirées des culture et coutume Ibo, et *The African Wife* de Ariwoola Olagoke et *Facing Mount Kenya* de Jomo Kenyatta. Les deux dernières ne sont pas des romans mais des livres de civilisation. Le premier est situé au Nigéria et traite des culture et coutume Yorouba alors que le second est situé au Kenya et traite des culture et coutume Kikuyu. Les deux livres permettent non seulement de comparer le message dans les romans avec les réalités par le biais de livres mais aussi les réalités de l'Afrique de l'Est, précisément celle Kikuyu en termes de mariage avec celles de l'Afrique de l'Ouest principalement celles Yorouba et Ibo. L'étude révèle que l'implication des parents dans le mariage des enfants n'est pas synonyme d'imposition de femmes à ses fils ou de maris à ses filles mais juste un encadrement nécessaire qui est avantageux à la fois à la famille qui est en train d'être fondée et les familles élargies des deux côtés. Elle fait aussi ressortir quelques faiblesses de cette pratique. Pour une bonne analyse, j'ai utilisé 'sociocriticism, womanism et le postcolonialism' comme théories littéraires et la 'qualitative approach method'.*

Mots clés : *Fille, Garçon, Parents, Famille, Dot*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first black Africa, three different types of marriage prevail and cohabit: traditional marriage, legal marriage, and religious marriage. It is a common fact that the same couple is married under all the three different marriage regimes. Traditional marriage is the marriage celebrated under the prescriptions of the customs of a given area. In *Things Fall Apart*, all the marriages are traditional marriages, e.g., Uzowulu and Mgbafo's marriage,



Okonkwo and Ekwefi's marriage, Akueke and Ibe's marriage, and Ezinma and her suitor's impending marriages. Usually, it is the custom of the man or the groom that is applicable. Precisely, in a patriarchal society, it is the laws and the regulations in the field of marriage that are followed and observed for the celebration. When the woman is an adept of a particular divinity or deity, she is considered and treated as the wife of this divinity or god and, therefore, some ceremonies must be performed 'to ask her hand' from this divinity. If this prescription is not observed or observed in a wrong or neglectful way, the marriage cannot prosper until the couple realizes or notices their mistake and come back and 'repair' this prejudice and then ask for forgiveness. As far as traditional marriage is concerned, the focus of this study is on the choice of the girl and the payment of dowry and its implications. Some people still think, but wrongly, that religious marriage is synonymous with only Christian marriage. As a matter of fact, Christian marriage is a religious marriage like several others. For instance, there are Hindu marriage, Muslim marriage, and Vodun marriage which are also religious marriages. In actual fact, religious marriage is the marriage celebrated according to the rites of a given religion. Legal marriage is the marriage celebrated before a sworn authority, for instance, the mayor. In modern Africa or Westernized Africa, it is the most important marriage because it is the legal evidence that links or 'ties' the couple together. For instance, when the husband dies, the woman who has got married under this regime has legal tender and, therefore, can inherit all that the deceased husband possessed during his lifetime. My concern here is neither religious marriage nor legal marriage also called marriage by court but traditional marriage. In choosing this topic, there is one general objective and a specific one too.

The general objective of this research is to point out or to prove that that parents' involvement in children's marriage also has advantages beside its weaknesses and, therefore, need to be thought and reoriented for more efficiency and benefits for both the couple and also the families of each side instead of being categorically rejected. There are other things which refrain couples from prospering than parents' involvement in children's marriage. The specific objective is to enable those who still ignore it to know about the different stages of traditional marriage mainly from the choice of the girl to the meaning of dowry. To enable the readers to know what exactly I have dealt with, the topic has delimitations. The study takes into account



traditional marriage both in the past and in the present days. It is based in East and West Africa and covers two main aspects, namely the choice of the bride and the dowry. Both novels and civilization books are the ‘raw materials’ of the study. What are the novels and the books under study? This study is based on two novels by Chinua Achebe namely *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* and two civilization books namely *The African Wife* by Olagoke Ariwoola and *Facing Mount Kenya* by Jomo Kenyatta. Why were these works chosen?

The two main issues of this study are dealt with by Chinua Achebe in his two novels under study here. Concretely speaking, *Things Fall Apart* set in pre-colonial and colonial Africa deals with the issue of Marriage from the choice of the bride, bride price clinching, bride price payment, betrothal, marriage, divorce and remarriage, and the significance of bride price or dowry. Almost all the above-mentioned issues are also dealt with in *No Longer at Ease* apart from the aspects of divorce and remarriage. Both novels are set in West Africa. All necessary details about all these aspects can be read about in the development of this paper. In traditional marriage, parents are always involved in the two main aspects of it which include the choice of the bride and the payment of dowry. In this light, both *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* are suitable for this study taking into account their contents and the study’s objective. The house of edition of *Facing Mount Kenya* wrote on the back of the book:

Facing Mount Kenya is a central document of the highest distinction in anthropological literature, an invaluable key to the structure of African society and the nature of the African mind. Facing Mount Kenya is not only a formal study of life and death, work and play, sex and family in one of the greatest tribes of contemporary Africa, but a work of considerable literary merit. The very sight and sound of Kikuyu tribal life presented here are at once comprehensive and intimate, and as precise as they are compassionate. (A Vintage Book).

In a word, Jomo Kenyatta’s book under study is a deposit of African cultures in general and the Kikuyu’s in particular. *The African Wife* is an African civilization book that deals with issues such as marriage in Yorubaland, systems of naming in Africa and women’s role in the community, to name just a few. Both *Facing Mount Kenya* and *The African*



Wife bring useful information about marriage in real life in Africa and therefore have made it possible to compare fiction and reality even if the main goal is not to compare them but to point out how far parents' involvement in children's marriage can be profitable for both families starting from the groom and the bride. How relevant is the topic?

This topic has been chosen in response to some easy and sweeping statements according to which parents' involvement on the one hand and dowry payment on the other are obsolete and constitute a violation of children's rights in general and women's rights in particular. Indeed, I have read several results of researches such as theses, dissertations and articles, to name just a few where different authors state without any restrictions that in Africa, young women and men are imposed their husbands and wives respectively. Majority of the papers stated that dowry payment is a practice of primitive or backward people because it is neither good for the couple nor for both families. It is in this framework that I have decided to carry out this study in order to show that even if the way people get married in Africa, mainly traditional marriage, is different from the way it is done in Western countries, nowadays the general rule is not to impose women on men to marry or vice-versa. The common practice is that both families guide their children in relation to what they know about this or that family and advise their children to marry a man or a woman in this or that family. As a matter of fact, some parents choose husbands for their daughters and more rarely women for their sons. Usually, the parents are of good will. I have chosen both novels and civilization to prove that all the fruits of the novelists' imagination take source from somewhere and that researchers should take this into account in order to avoid drawing premature conclusions. Some literary theories and research methods have been used to conduct this study. The literary theories used are feminism, womanism, postcolonialism, socio-criticism, and the qualitative method approach. Briefly speaking, feminism entails considering women as socially, economically, and politically equal to men. In her essay entitled *We Should All be Feminists*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote: "A feminist is a person who believe in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes" (Adichie, 2014, pp. 47-48). Womanism, in a word, means the necessary complementarity between men and woman in the perspective of smooth evolution of the human society. This is clearly expressed in both *The African Wife* and *Facing Mount Kenya* where important roles fall to women's role to play such as economic, social,



and political responsibilities. In both novels under study, we can see women in farming and household tasks. This study does not have much to do with figures, and this is the why the qualitative approach method is chosen for its analysis. Basically, the study is divided into two main parts with each of them being divided into four subparts or subtitles. Each of them is meaningful and presents a clear idea of the contents. The first part is dedicated to the choice of the girl to marry, the future bride and wife. It is entitled “Marriage in Africa: From the choice of the girl and engagement in East and West Africa”. It is divided, in its turn, into four subtitles. The first subpart of the first part is entitled “The choice of the girl by the boy himself in West Africa”. The second subpart is entitled “The choice of the girl by the boy in East Africa: The Gikuyu custom”. The third subpart is “Parents’ involvement in the choice of the girl both in East and West Africa”. The fourth and last subpart of the first part is entitled “Marriage proposal and engagement in both East and West Africa”. The second part is entitled “The issue of bride price or dowry”. Its first subtitle is “Bride price: the diplomatic turning about the bush”. The second subpart is entitled “The bride price clinching proper”. The third part is “Dowry payment”, while the last but one of the very important aspects of the whole study is “The meaning of dowry”.

1-Marriage in Africa: From the Choice of the girl to engagement in East and West Africa

This paper has nothing to do with lesbianism or gay marriage although I don’t have anything against those who have made this choice and/or those who promote or advocate or are involved in such systems of marriages in one way or the other. This study is conducted based on the framework that it is the man who intends to get married that pays dowry for his wife. In other words, we are dealing with the patriarchal African societies. How do people choose their wives in Africa?

1-1-The choice of the girl by the boy himself in West Africa

In traditional Africa, the future wife is chosen in several ways that can be grouped into two. The first way is that the boy or the future husband chooses the girl or his future wife. The second way is that the boy’s people



choose a wife for him. Throughout this paper, girl and bride are sometimes used as synonyms mainly before the dowry payment.

The choice of the girl by the boy starts with him identifying a girl he intends to marry; then he tries by all means to meet with her in order to profess his love for her; finally, he proposes to her for marriage. No matter the place or places where they meet, he must tell or inform the girl of his intention to marry her. After the boy identifies his future or prospective wife, he then leaves his family to take over from where he stopped. Whether or not the groom has direct contact with the girl, contacts during which he informs her of his love for her and his plan to marry her or not, he must inform his parents and/or relatives of his choice of his future wife. After the latter have been informed, they will take over the rest of the process from him, which is mainly the negotiation leading to their marriage. This does not mean that the boy is being totally relegated to the background. There are two other cases where the boys choose by themselves the girls they want to marry. The first illustration was the case of Adizua and Efuru in *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa. As a matter of fact, Adizua although unable to pay dowry has chosen his future wife, Efuru, and even got married to her. The second illustration is the marriage between Mara and Akobi. In effect, Akobi has chosen to marry Mara in *Beyond the Horizon* and with the support of his father succeeds in marrying her. Mara confesses: “But I soon learnt that, yes, Akobi chose me as his wife, ...” (Darko, 1995, p. 4).

1-2-The choice of the girl by the boy himself in East Africa: the Gikuyu custom

In the Gikuyu tradition, the boy who loves a girl, usually accompanied by two or three other boys of the same age group, go to the girl to tell her of his intention to marry her. If the latter agrees to be his wife, she willingly and freely directs them to her parents. But before giving her final answer, she has certainly raised and discussed the matter over with her first, best and most reliable and trustful advisor who happens to be her mother. In the Gikuyu tradition, the process of choosing a girl to marry is summed up in the following way:

If she accepts him as her future husband she tells them to go away and come back some other time. Sometimes two or three visits of this kind are made. When she gives her final answer,



she says to them: "I am willing that the son of so-and-so should be adopted into our homestead, but the ceremonial side of it is a matter for my parents. You had better talk to them about it yourselves." (Kenyatta, 1965, p. 160)

By informing the boy whom she has just accepted as a suitor or lover that "the ceremonial side of it is a matter of my parents", the girl is saying that the boy must send his people to hers – mainly her father. This is how parents happen to get involved in their children's marriage process. In actual fact, this has nothing to do with domination, exploitation, and negation of women's rights. This is the way things are organized in Africa. There is no society on this earth without its own organization and this is the African way of doing things when it comes to marriage. Whether or not people are surprised does not matter. However, going beyond the acceptable limits by saying that Africans are awkward people and they are oppressing women is a mistake. This way of doing falls in the field of social civilization and social civilizations are not comparable.

1-3-Parents' involvement in the choice of the girl both in East and West Africa

As a rule, both families are usually involved in their children's marriage. Parents intervene in their children's marriage at three different levels. First of all, during the choice of the bride and engagement mainly, then for the clinching of the bride price and its payment, and last, the wedding proper. Hence, this paper takes into account only the choice of the girl to marry and the dowry. Another article or other articles will deal with other aspects of women's life such as wedding and marital life.

There is a West African saying which stipulates that a child cannot be older than their own parents. There is another one which stipulates that a child cannot know more than his parents. The two means the same thing but the way the latter is shaped makes it debatable because it is only partly true. A child can happen to know more than their parents. In the light of the assumption, really an assumption, that parents know more than their children, parents are involved in the choice of their son's girl to marry and they play an important role in the marriage process. One of the important and precious contributions the boy's people can bring to their son's marriage is the provision of information about the bride's family. In actual



fact, the two families are usually involved in the choice of the bride or the groom because the girl's people also enquire about their daughter's lover as earlier stated.

As matter of fact, through his people, the boy can have useful and important information about his future wife's family in general and the future wife herself in particular. In life in general and in traditional Africa in particular, one gets married to be happy or happier. To reach this goal, it is important that one marry a girl from a family where the great majority of people are hard-workers, tolerant, courageous, well at ease or at least self-sufficient and honest. It is important to marry a woman in a family where there is evidence that women are usually fertile, obedient and submissive, and also beautiful to some extent. In one word, families want their sons to marry distinguished and resourceful wives. It is a promotion for a man that when his wife passes by, people admire her. For a man to be happy, he should avoid marrying a woman in a family where it can be proved that most people are warlike, thieves, violent, lazy, and are involved in immoralities such as fornication, adultery and having sex with animals to name just a few. Here, I am dealing with Africa in general, including the traditional African context, where some ways of doing things are considered abominations. Taking into account what is prevailing in the world nowadays, Africans can be proud of their continents and its cultures and traditions even though some aspects must be improved and rendered acceptable or bearable or concretely understandable worldwide if necessary. These useful pieces of information that are needed about a girl or a man to marry can be gotten through the elders including the members of the boy's family. It is in this perspective that the involvement of the groom's family, starting from his parents, is useful if not crucial.

Concretely speaking, there are families where some diseases or sicknesses are hereditary. As a matter of fact, in some families mainly in the past, some people are prone to some diseases or sicknesses at a moment or the other in their lives. Among these diseases are deafness, blindness, heart diseases, skin diseases, leprosy, madness and some sicknesses of childhood, to name just a few. Even if nowadays with the progress of science there are great positive changes in the field of human health. Which father or mother or relatives would like to have (a) sick son(s) or daughter(s) or (a) sick grandson(s) or granddaughter(s) with sometimes, some malformations at



their birth? Which parents would be pleased with his son having in-laws with a shameful past? Very few parents would accept such a negative situation. For instance, if a man has more or less than five fingers or toes, this state of things conveys (a) message(s). If a man's or a woman's fingers or toes are not disposed in the ordinary way, this state of things too conveys (a) message(s). As unbelievable as it is, some of these physical malformations are beyond the understanding of science. Only parents and other old people well informed can help young people decode such information. In the same way, only old people in families could know about these diseases that some people used to suffer from in a recurrent way in some families at certain moments in their lives. With the progress of science nowadays, some things can be better understood but not all. In the Ibo ethnic group for example, some men (boys) who are about to marry or desiring to get married solicit or call upon their parents and relatives to look for girls for them to marry. This is what is described through the behaviour of the people of Umuofia in Lagos alluded to in *No Longer at Ease*. The narrator displays the process below:

Those Umuofians (that is the name they call themselves) who leave their home town to find work in towns all over Nigeria regard themselves as sojourners. They return to Umuofia every two years or so to spend their leave. When they have saved up enough money they asked their relations at home to find them a wife, or they build a 'zinc' house on their family land." (Achebe, 1960, p.4)

In the quotation above, young Ibo people willingly and freely ask their people to find them a girl to marry. It is clear that this has nothing to do with imposing somebody on somebody else. Parents' intervention in the process of their children's marriage, especially before and after the engagement time on demand of the same children, is also dealt with in another part of *No Longer at Ease*. Here, it is Obi who is, willingly, telling his father that they should go to visit Clara's people. He speaks to his father about Clara: "that is one reason why I came. I want us to go and meet her people and start negotiations. I have no money now, but at least we can begin to talk." (Achebe, 1960, p.119) He is doing this because he knows its importance and usefulness. This quotation proves very well that almost everybody including those who "know book" like Obi, who do not want to be imposed a wife or be refused to get married to their lovers at least, agree



that parents and relatives must be involved in the marriage process including theirs. This is the meaning of the very last quotation. The direct consequence of the boy's parents or people going to the girl's people is first of all to be sure of the girl's agreement and then the issue of dowry. More evidence can be seen in Obi and Clara's love relationship in connection with the former's parents' reactions. Obi's parents and relatives are involved in Obi and Clara's marriage plan. It is through them that he is informed about Clara's parents, mainly her father, who is a slave or a descendant of a slave, an outcast according to their customs. In actual fact, everybody around Obi who has had the opportunity to say a word about his marriage plan with Clara has not 'missed the target or the occasion'. Otherwise, they all have objected to it. The first to do it is Joseph. The latter is Obi's village fellow who has hosted him before he joins his senior service flat at Ikoyi on his return from England. He has told Obi, in as clear word as possible, that he cannot marry his beloved Clara, "such a good and beautiful girl" (Achebe, 1960, p. 64). He tells him:

'Look at me,' said Joseph, getting up and tying his coverlet as a loincloth. He now spoke in English. 'You know book, but this is no matter for book. Do you know what an osu is? But how can you know?' In that short question he said in effect that Obi's mission—house upbringing and European education had made him a stranger in his country—the most painful thing one could say to Obi. (Achebe, 1960, p.64-65)

At this level, Joseph does not turn about the bush. He clearly expresses his opposition to Obi's intention of marrying Clara. He will go far by overpassing Obi to inform the latter's parents of what he considers as 'a joke of bad taste', something inadmissible, in their tradition. Joseph informs the President of the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) about the issue. The narrator says: "His [Joseph's] crime was that he had told the President in confidence of Obi's engagement to an outcast girl ... he had only told the President in confidence in the hope that he might use his position as the father of Umuofia people in Lagos to reason privately with Obi." (Achebe, 1960, pp. 81-82; square brackets mine) During a UPU's meeting, the President calls upon Obi: "I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry, and even thinking of marrying her ..." (Achebe, 1960, p. 75). What is meant by "doubtful ancestry" here is Clara's being the daughter of an *osu*, a descendent of a slave, an outcast dedicated to a god



according to Igbo customs. According to Obi's people, he should not even go out with Clara after Obi's village fellows in Lagos, his parents too, unexpectedly, object to his marrying Clara. In fact, Obi goes to his home village to see his parents and also speaks to them about his future marriage with Clara. Both parents disclose their clear objection to the plan. However, below are some of the things his father told him. Only Obi's father's statements are quoted below:

'You cannot marry the girl,' he said quite simply.

...

'I said you cannot marry the girl.'

...

'I know Josiah Okeke [Clara's father] very well'

...

'I know him and I know his wife. He is a good man and a great Christian. But he is osu. Naaman, captain of the host of Syria, was a great man and honourable, he was also a mighty man of valour, but he was a leper.' (Achebe, 1960, p. 120-121; square brackets mine)

The above quotation illustrates well Obi's father's opposition to his marriage plan with Clara Okeke, Josiah Okeke's daughter. Obi's father's opinion is not understandable. As a matter of fact, he is a retired catechist and even confesses that Clara's father is "a good man and a great Christian", "a mighty man of valour", "a great man and honourable" but nevertheless objects to his son's marrying the great Christian's daughter. What a paradox! Achebe uses humour to have this character of Isaac Okonkwo laughed at by the reader. Obi's mother's refusal is more harsh, rude, violent, and menacing. She tells him:

In the afternoon your father came in with a letter from Joseph to tell us that you were going to marry an osu. I saw the meaning of my death in the dream. Then I told your father about it.' ... 'I have nothing to tell you in this matter except one thing. If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more. If God hears my prayers, you will not wait long'

...

'But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself.' (Achebe, 1960, p. 123)



Obi's parents and relatives have gone beyond their duty or task. Otherwise, they are playing the bad role even if this answers a logic, the one of their time and area. As Christians, they are expected to do not only better but much better. Their son reminds the father that they are Christians. When his father is insisting that he cannot marry Clara, Obi replies: "I don't think it matters. We are Christians." (Achebe, 1960, p. 120). Obi's parents' task is to inform their son about the girl and mainly her origin. But not only do they offer their 'ugly' refusal but they also frighten him. This aspect of frightening and threatening Obi is not advisable from parents and relatives. Their duty should stop at the level of information. In a flash ahead, the narrator reveals that for Obi, "family ties were all very well as long as they did not interfere with Clara." (Achebe, 1960, p. 4) A Umuofian fellow villager refers to Clara as a "useless girl" just because of her origin and Obi's insistence to marry her (Achebe, Ibid. p. 4). Thus, this behaviour is a mark of irresponsibility as he has gone beyond the limit of the issue. Nobody can choose his or her origin and, as a result, nobody should be blamed or oppressed for that. The treatment Clara has undergone from Obi's parents is to be blamed.

It is good for Obi to know all these information about his prospective wife. This should not be a criterium or a reason or cause of refraining from marrying one's girlfriend that one purports to marry. Fortunately, Obi understands and is not ready to go into the same direction as stated by his parents in the village and relatives in Lagos. Unfortunately for him, this situation was the cause of their separation with several bad consequences just before the separation and after the risky abortion. Here, Obi should be congratulated and praised too for several reasons, among them, of which two are worth mentioning. First of all, he proves that nobody, be it their parents, relatives or friends, should impose a wife on anyone whether educated or not. But rather, it is advisable to guide grooms and brides. Secondly, Obi has proved that he is a man of action too contrary to what a fellow villager in Lagos has said of him comparing him with his father as a man of inaction. He has said of Obi's father's inaction: "His father, although uncompromising in conflicts between church and clan, was not really a man of action but of thought. ...On Isaac's wedding day his wife had cut the cake first." (Achebe, 1960, p. 150)



As already stated, no parents or relatives would want to have grandsons or granddaughters, nephews or nieces, who were born with malformations or social vices. This can justify parents' and families' involvement in their sons' marriages. But I must specify that being a descendant of a slave or slaves, for example, is not a vice. So, this case must be dissociated or separated from some others. Speaking of Obi's parent objection to his marriage with Clara, I personally think that it is a way for Achebe to use humour to expose so-called good Christians to take some of their fellows as second-class citizens. The humour is so visible and vivid that it is Obi's father, Isaac Okonkwo, who has been Nwoye, lazy son of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, before his conversion into Christianity. As a matter of fact, MrKiaga, a teacher of the new faith in Achebe's first novel, has insistently taught the new converts who have rejected in the church the so-called outcasts like the *osu* not to do it. The narrator reports Kiaga's words here: "“Before God,’ he said, ‘there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers.’” (Achebe, 1958, p. 111) After listening to them again, he added: “He needs Christ more than you and I.” (Achebe, 1958, p. 111) Even if Isaac has not attended this section, the one during which Kiaga has uttered these words, he is informed later on as this is taught to people of his generation, the one of the first converts. The humour is emphasized when Obi's father himself confirms that he knows Clara's father, Josiah Okeke, and his wife. He shamelessly adds that “he is a good man and a great Christian” but “he is an *osu*.” (Achebe, 1960, p. 121)

1-4-Marriage proposal and engagement in both East and West Africa

Marriage proposal involves ‘asking the girl's hand’ before her family. In traditional Africa, it is an issue of crucial importance to be left in the hand of teenagers and the youth even though they play the first roles, a way to clean the field for old people, their parents and relatives. Therefore, it is elders and people of a certain age that manage such matter. In most black ethnic groups such as the Igbo, the Akan, the Ewe, the Fon, the Adja and the Gikuyus, once the choice of the girl is made, a delegation of the boy's family is sent to the girl's head of family to ask for her hand in marriage. If this is successful, then it is followed by the engagement. But usually, the delegation which goes to the bride's head of family may go twice or three times before getting a positive answer from the head of the family or from



the girl in the presence of her father or the sworn representative of her family.

When going to ‘their’ son’s future father-in-law’s house, the boy’s people bring with them items such as alcoholic drinks, some local-made wine. It is also the beginning of marriage negotiations. The direct involvement of the boy in the negotiations is almost strictly forbidden or prohibited. But this does not mean that he is prohibited or forbidden to meet his prospective wife if he has the opportunity as said earlier. He can continue meeting the girl as much as he can and discuss with her about the issues that they think relevant. After the stage of marriage proposal, there are three other stages (steps) before the marriage proper. They are first the engagement, then dowry clinching, and last dowry payment. The first stage after marriage proposal is the negotiations of the marriage conditions between the two families. In this framework (perspective), the boy’s head of family sends to the girl’s head of family several delegations. The members of the different delegations may not always be the same. The common point between them is that the delegations are always made of wise people and or people of a certain age and experience. In West Africa, with the Ibo and the Yoruba, the third delegation usually returns back with the agreement of the girl which means she is engaged: the girl and her parents agree with the plan of marriage. After the engagement, the main point they discuss with the girl’s family is the conditions that must be fulfilled to marry the bride, including how the bride must be treated by the groom and his family after the marriage. This includes how she must be fed, how she must be taken care of, how to find a trade or an occupation for her, even a plot of land to till and also her protection against all sorts of evils including bad people among them who are her rivals. Usually, before the end of the negotiations, the two heads of families meet at least once.

The first reason why the boy’s parents must go to the girl’s parents several times is that the girl’s people must try to know about their prospective son-in-law and his family. So, they need to inquire about them before an answer. The second one is that the head of the family, usually the girl’s father, tries to have a conversation with his wife and their daughter separately to be sure the girl has really sent the boy’s family to him. What one must retain is that the girl’s father usually consults her in most ethnic groups. In addition to the father, the mother too, and usually even before the father, discusses the



matter with her daughter warning her against duplicity. For instance, with the Gikuyus/Kikuyus in Kenya, the engagement is reached in a way as described in the following ways.

In Gikuyu customs, once the boy informs his parents that the girl has accepted to become his wife, they take over from him as almost everywhere in black Africa. They go to the girl's parents to ask for her hand in marriage. When going, they bring with them some presents and each item of the whole has its importance and meaning. It is completely unnecessary to give details about the items. Before they raise the matter, they are served food. It is with proverbs and sayings that the matter related to their future daughter or son-in-law, depending on which side one is, is dealt with. It is also the same thing during the two or three visits that the boy and his age mates pay to the girl before they are directed to the girl's parents (Kenyatta, 1965, p. 160). With other ethnic groups than the Gikuyu like the Igbo/Ibo and the Yoruba, the debate between the people of the two families as far as marriage proposal is concerned are led with proverbs too. As it is said in *Things Fall Apart*, "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten." (Achebe, 1958, p. 5) Many aspects of the cultures of different ethnic groups in black Africa are alike. Once the boy's people are at the girl's parent's house, she is called and through a ceremony she proves that she agrees and also states it through words. This situation is described by Jomo Kenyatta in the following words:

*The girl is called and, after being introduced, she is asked if she has agreed to become engaged. As she cannot answer directly yes or no, a little ceremony is necessary. Therefore, she is asked gently to fetch a particular horn used for beer-drinking; then to fill it with beer and hand it to her father who after sipping a little and spitting it out, sprinkles some on his chest. He then hands it over to his wife who does the same. The horn is filled a second time and is handed to the boy's parents who repeat the same procedure. **In each case the girl takes a sip first as a sign to consent.** (Kenyatta, 1965, pp. 160-161; emphases mine)*

The above quotation conveys three pieces of information under the umbrella of the main one which is marriage engagement. The first piece of information is the disclosure (revelation) of the warmth with which Africans



welcome their guests irrespective of the issue which gathers them and the outcome. The second is the revelation that in the process of marriage, parents usually consult their daughters, no matter what the slanders of Africa and its people have been saying of them for more than a century now. The third piece of information under the main one is the fact that girls are not always imposed their husbands. In other words, it even happens that girls object to marrying some suitors who ask for their hand or apply to marry them. Such situation of girls refusing to marry their suitors whose parents have come for marriage proposal was also dealt with by the first President of independent Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta. He wrote: “If the lover has been refused he reports to his parents who, if they would like their son to marry the girl, may visit the girl’s parents. The same ceremony takes place, but if the girl disapproves of it she will not pour out the beer or take the first sip. The visiting parents then go away” (Kenyatta, 1965, pp. 160-161) *Facing Mount Kenya* describes real life and not fiction. Africans and non-Africans who write wrong things about Africa and its people should find a way to say clearly their goals. Even talking of the precolonial and colonial periods, it is wrong to state that imposing husbands on African women was the general rule in the process of marriage.

Girls in traditional Africa are not always imposed their husbands. Sometimes, some girls refuse the offer to marry their lover but when the latter’s parents insist by coming to see her parents, they change their first position by accepting to marry the same boy they have refused formerly. One or some of the following four reasons motivate(s) this change of position. The first one is that some girls fear their father’s temper or even their curse when the latter gets angry because of his daughter’s refusal to marry the man that they wish for her. This should not be so. The second justification of some girls’ change of position is that between the moment of her refusal and the visit to her father by the boy’s people, she may freely change her mind. Another way of seeing this change of position or the third reason is the fact that the girl may also realize that the insistence shown through the boy’s parents’ visit to her father can be a chance or an opportunity for her to seize instead of playing the smartest or the most intelligent and honest girl in her area. Africans too are believers in God, the true one. The fourth and last reason that can bring a girl who has refused a boy when he has proposed to her is either shyness or hypocrisy. Hypocrisy prevails everywhere in the world and within the two genders, but taking into



account what we know about African women, mainly in traditional Africa, the rate of prevalence seems high, apparently higher than elsewhere even though we cannot provide figures. The illustration of such a situation is the first three sentences of the previous indented quotation. They go as follows: “The girl is called and, after being introduced, she is asked if she has agreed to become engaged. As she cannot answer directly yes or no, a little ceremony is necessary. Therefore, she is asked gently to fetch a particular horn used for beer-drinking.” (Kenyatta, *Ibid*, pp. 160-161) In one case or the other, when the girl approves to be her suitor’s wife, this means that she is willing to be engaged. Her father invites some of his relations and close friends and they share drinks and ends the gathering with prayers for the future couple on the one hand and “for the future unity and progress of the two families.” This way of ‘launching’ engagement (and/or betrothal) is common to several ethnic groups in black Africa. Jomo Kenyatta wrote about it in *Facing Mount Kenya* (1965):

When the parents’ initial ceremony is concluded and the girl is willing to be engaged, close friends are invited and the beer is shared among them. At the conclusion of this friendly gathering they all join in a prayer, korathimithia, uttering blessings for the future unity and progress of the two families. (Kenyatta, 1965, p. 161)

Through this ceremony, the engagement is sealed. The next stage after engagement is dowry payment but before it is paid, it must be clinched in one way or the other. The second part of this study is bride price.

2-The issue of bride price or dowry

2-1-Bride price clinching: the diplomatic turning about the bush

The word “bride price” is used here as synonym of dowry because it is used as such in Achebe’s two novels under study here. Briefly speaking, dowry can be defined as all that the groom and his family give to the bride’s family in order to take her as their wife. The different components of dowry vary from an area to another from an ethnic group to another even within the same country. It can comprise cattle, agricultural produce, imported and local alcohol drinks, brewed drinks, cloths, shoes, some cooking oils, tobacco, cigarettes, matches, shoes, necklaces, ear rings, some cash money,



kitchen utensils, beads, pans and/or basins to name just a few. But almost everywhere in black Africa, two elements are usually, if not always, required and provided. They are alcohol drinks and domestic mammals such as sheep, goats, cows, to name just a few.

Dealing with dowry in the first chapter entitled “Patrilineal and Matrilineal Societies” in his book *The African Wife*, Olagoke Ariwoolawrote: “Dowry is paid either in money or in material. It may be paid in both.” (Ariwoola, 1965, p. 8) From the late twentieth century up to date, some wealthy people include as items of the dowry a nice and expensive car, a beautiful house or a mansion comparable to a palace in any important and/or beautiful city of their country and are usually well-furnished. Some other grooms also offer as an item of the dowry ‘well-filled’ or well full banking account, a trade register. To impress their in-laws the more, the groom’s family can add to all that has just been mentioned other things such as a (prepaid) vouching at VIP hairdressers, at dressmakers, to name just these two. All this is done to show or display financial power and social rank. How is dowry clinched? Akueke’s bride price clinching is taken here as an illustration. As far as the issue of bride price is concerned, eventually the matter is raised diplomatically as it is said earlier. The narrator specifies it clearly: “as the men drank, they talked about everything except the thing for which they had gathered. It was only after the pot had been emptied that the suitor’s father cleared his voice and announced the object of their visit ...” (Achebe, 1958, p. 50) The meeting is another illustration of patriarchy. Indeed, in the very beginning of the quotation, it was clearly mentioned that it was only the men that were present. This implies that it is only men who matter in some occasions in the conception of these Africans. They behave the way the European colonizer of Africa used to behave towards Africans by doing without them for matters or issues that concerned them on their own land or soil. Men are treating women in post-independence the way white colonizers used to treat the colonized people during colonization.

What I refer to as the diplomatic way is the fact that the participants don’t jump on the issue directly. They talk of miscellaneous things – meaning things that do not have actual or real or direct link with the issue of the bride price clinching that gathers them and that everybody is aware of. Some Western and Westernized people may consider this as a waste of time but in actual fact it is not so. This way of gossiping before tackling the agenda



enables the well-informed or mature participants to have an overview of one another. By behaving so, they know almost what to say, how to say it in order to avoid worrying/hurting one another or some of them. It is almost a kind of psychological preparation and/or warming up before the exchange or discussion. This way is not typically African or specific to Africa. Europeans of even the twentieth century and the twenty-first century too (also) behave this way but not in the field of dowry settling but in other issues like business negotiations. It is said of Europeans:

One study found that the style of French negotiators was the most aggressive of thirteen diverse cultures studied. In a way, the French still embrace the art of diplomatic negotiating [sic] invented in France in the fourteenth century. French managers will have carefully prepared for the negotiations, but they generally will begin with some light, logical sparing ... Through the preliminary and middle stages of negotiating [sic], the French manager will judge the partners carefully on their intellectual skills and their ability to reply quickly and with authority.” Reference: John L. Graham “Visa-A-Vis International Business Negotiations. Chapter Seven, in International Business Negotiations (1996) Dryen Press London U.K.

This quotation is not drawn from a work of fiction but from a business magazine. It is quoted just to show that other peoples too turn about the bush before tackling the issue of the day or the order of the day or the agenda or the main agenda. I have written about the diplomatic attitude of Akueke’s suitor’s delegation while they have come to settle the dowry issue. In this quotation too, the word “diplomatic” is used talking of the way the French people also behave. It is said: “In a way, the French still embrace the art of diplomatic negotiating [sic] invented in the fourteenth century.” (Op. cit.)

2-2-The bride price clinching proper

“The amount to be paid as dowry depends firstly on the customs of the tribe to which the family belongs in general and on that of the family itself in particular. Secondly, it depends on the relative social position of the fiancé in the locality.” (Ariwooba, 1965, p. 08)



Dowry is usually composed mainly of agricultural produce, money, cloths, clothes, drinks of several sorts, cigarettes, Kola nuts, pairs of shoes, alligator peppers, bitter kola and animals. Since this study is based on patriarchal societies, it is the groom who pays dowry for the bride. In Ibo and Yoruba societies, the amount is compulsorily paid at once, especially if the groom's family is a wealthy one with necessary resources. The contrary is true with the Gikuyus who think that **“even if a man is rich it is considered ill-luck to bring all the *roracio* at once.”** (Kenyatta, 1965, p.161) The two main items composing the Gikuyuroracio are drinks, mainly a local beer, and animals, domestic mammals especially sheep, goats, cows, and oxen. The number of sheep and goats for a dowry is thirty to forty (Kenyatta, 1965, p. 161). In the Yoruba and Ibo and other ethnic groups in West Africa, no amount is fixed and known to everybody in advance. As illustrated, Mara's dowry is composed of “... two white cows, four healthy goats, four lengths of cloths, beads, gold jewelry and two bottles of London Dry Gin” (Darko, 1995, p. 3). In addition to all these is the heavy debt her father owes to Akobi's father.

In the Gikuyu custom and in terms of dowry, cows and oxen are the main components of the dowry. It is clearly specified that “when a cow is included in the *roracio*, it is valued at ten sheep and goats, while an ox is valued at five sheep and goats” (Kenyatta, 1965, p. 162). A cow is valued at ten sheep and goats because a cow can give birth to other cows and oxen several times whereas an ox, as a male animal, cannot. That is the reason why the latter is valued at five sheep and goats. The same source gives more information about the amount of *roracio*, dowry, mainly how it can vary:

The amount required by the Gikuyu law is thirty sheep and goats. Sometimes however, it runs to between thirty and eighty sheep and goats, apart from numerous presents exchanged on both sides. (Kenyatta, 1965, p. 162)

As far as Akueke's bride price clinching is concerned, the object of the visit is announced first and then the negotiations which must lead to the settling of the dowry must start properly. Obierika, the bride's father opens the debate by presenting to the father of his prospective son-in-law “a small bundle of short broomsticks”. (Achebe, 1958, p. 50) I must specify that there are several ways of bargaining the dowry among which is the use of a



bundle of broomsticks as it is the case here. How do the people behave in the course of the negotiations when a bundle of broomsticks is used?

First of all, the bride's father counts the broomsticks and hand them over to the head of the delegation of the suitor's family in the form of a bundle. He takes it and counts the sticks and then reveals the total number publicly. Each participant knows what each broomstick represents (stands for) in terms of worth and therefore what the total number represents. Whether they agree or not, the members of the delegation of the suitor's family must go out to discuss among themselves on what they are going to suggest to the bride's family. This can be done several times as much as necessary before an agreement is reached between the two parties. At the end, an agreement is usually reached. The narrator describes here how Akueke's bride price is settled.

Obierika then presented to him a small bundle of short broomsticks. Ukegbu counted them.

'They are thirty?' he asked

Obierika nodded in agreement.

'We are at last getting somewhere', Ukegbu said, and then turning to his brother and his son said: 'Let us go out and whisper together.' The three rose and went outside. When they returned Ukegbu handed the bundle of sticks back to Obierika. He counted them; instead of thirty there were now only fifteen. He passed them over to his eldest brother, Machi, who also counted them and said:

'We had not thought to go below thirty. But as the dog said, "If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play." Marriage should be a play and not a fight; so we are falling down again.' He then added ten sticks to the fifteen and gave the bundle to Ukegbu.

In this way Akueke's bride price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries. It was already dusk when the two parties came to this agreement. (p.51)

From the scrutiny of the quotation above, the most important remark one can make is the fact that for the clinching of Akueke's bride price, the process looks like the one that is followed when one wants to buy or is buying either a sheep or a goat or a cow or a plot of land in the African



context, to name just a few. Cowry represents the currency or the money used at the time of Obierika and the others. The twenty bags can be paid in terms of cowries (money) or materials or both exactly as Ariwoola wrote about and quoted in this book. He wrote: “Dowry is paid either in money or in material. It may be paid in both.” (Ariwoola, 1965, p. 8). Taking all these into consideration, I can say without any doubt or reluctance that women in general and Akueke in particular is treated as a goods, a merchandise, an article or a commodity to sell. But once again, we have to take into account the period and the place. Even nowadays, in developed countries, grooms offer either flats, houses, cars, to name just a few, to their parents-in-law without calling it/them “dowry”.

2-3-Dowry payment

Dowry is usually paid before the wedding. But in some cases, it is paid after the wedding. This happens only when the groom and his family are wealthy and therefore materially and financially solvent. The bride’s family seizes the opportunity to show that they trust their groom and his family. It is also an opportunity for the bride’s family to show in a boastful way that they are not hungry even if they are poor. This is an advantage for the bride’s people to be paid a higher amount of dowry than the one agreed upon before or the one usually expected. It also has the disadvantage not to be paid anything in case the bride dies very shortly after the wedding as it sometimes happens. Contrary to West Africa, in East Africa mainly in the Gikuyu ethnic group, dowry is paid by instalments according to tradition. Once the boy’s parents return back home after the girl’s acceptance to be engaged, they start to collect the necessary number of sheep or goats and even cows, as much as possible, for the first instalment of the dowry. It is called *roracio*. Once they are able to collect a reasonable number, they are brought to the girl’s family by the lover and they are put in the prospective mother-in-law’s hut. This visit is followed by others. On the second visit as on the first, the girl is consulted. The objective of this consultation is to check whether she has changed her position to marry the boy or not. **According to the Gikuyu tradition and customs, no matter how rich a man is, it is “considered ill-luck to bring all the *roracio* at once”** (Kenyatta, 1965, p. 161).

When the total amount of the items of the dowry required for sealing the engagement ceremony is received by the girl’s family, “a day is fixed for



the actual engagement ceremony called *ngurario*, i.e., pouring out the blood of unity.” (Kenyatta, 1965, pp. 161-162) The unity in question here is the unity of the two families. It has an important significance as pointed out below:

The significance of this ceremony is in the first place to announce publicly that the girl is engaged; secondly to provide the relatives on both sides with an opportunity of meeting and getting to know one another; and, thirdly, to decide on how much theroracioshould be. The amount varies from one clan to another and from district to district, although the amount required by the kikuyu law is thirty sheep and goats. (Kenyatta, 1965, p.162)

Elsewhere in Africa and in some ethnic groups in Ghana and Nigeria, Togo and Benin, to name just a few, bringing all the dowry at once is rather a sign of wealth, power, assurance from the boy and his family’s side, and respect to the family-in-law. Paying dowry by instalments in ethnic groups such as the Ibo and the Yoruba is synonymous with the disclosure of the groom’s personal or his family’s or both his and his family’s material and financial weakness or poverty. It can also mean a mockery to the family-in-law for they are poor or so poor or seen as such and therefore cannot fulfill the requirement they are given/offered at any time. Whether known in advance or not, whether it varies or not, almost everybody agrees upon the necessity to pay dowry in traditional Africa. Joseph, Obi’s village fellow in Lagos who is against Obi marrying Clara because of her origin, has already paid the dowry for the woman he is preparing to marry. Below is a dialogue between Obi and Joseph on how bride price is synonymous with dowry. According to Obi:

‘What about women? I have been two days here now and I haven’t seen one yet.’

‘Didn’t I tell you I was getting married?’

‘So what?’

‘When you have paid a hundred- and thirty-pounds bride price and you are only a second-class clerk, you find you haven’t got any more to spare on other women.’

‘You mean you paid a hundred and thirty? What about the bride price law?’

‘It pushed up the price, that’s all.’



'It's a pity my three elder sisters got married too early for us to make money on them. We'll try and make up on the others.'
'It's no laughing matter,' said Joseph. 'Wait until you want to marry. They will probably ask you to pay five hundred, seeing that you are in the senior service.' (Achebe, 1960, p. 37-38)

The previous quotation proves that even educated people agree to pay dowry referred to in the quotation as bride price. It also confirms the idea that in some areas and ethnic groups such as the Igbo, Yoruba and even the Gikuyu sometimes, the amount of dowry can vary depending on some factors like the boy or the groom's social status. This quotation also points out that there is a law which is passed about dowry so that it can govern Nigeria as at early 1960s.

2-4-The meaning of dowry

Dowry is universal because it is documented in holy books such as *The Holy Bible* and *The Holy Quran*. Being universal here means it has existed or has been paid all over the world at a certain moment of the history of peoples. For clarification's sake, I must specify that I am aware that not everyone on earth believes in the two holy books mentioned above. Details about how dowry is documented in *The Holy Bible* and *The Holy Quran* are dealt with in the subtitle as I progress. Paying dowry should not be seen as buying the girl, the bride, the way people buy cloths, animals or plot of land. It is just a token of the groom's family to the bride's family. It is a kind of appreciation for the upbringing, education, and the health care of their wife from her childhood or even from the moment she was conceived to the age of marriage. It is a way to prove that they are able to take care of the bride. By paying bride price, the groom and his family are aware that they are just taking a commitment to fully take care of the bride, their wife. It is a way to 'swear' to be fully responsible for her security and well-being in life in general and for all the time she will be their wife in particular. If anything happens to her, they must account for it. As far as the bride is concerned, she is invited or instructed to be faithful, respectful, and obedient to her in-laws. By marrying the groom with dowry accepted by her parents, the bride is taught that she is becoming or she has become the wife of every member of the groom's family without some implications like having sex with other members of the family than her own and known



husband while the latter is alive. This commitment induces some discipline. For instance, the woman (the wife) knows that she has been married to this/that man, her husband, until death separates them one day. At this level, I must specify that divorce has always been tolerated or accepted in Africa including traditional Africa under some conditions. Dowry plays an important role in the stability and longevity of couples and families in traditional Africa. In real life as well as in fiction, divorces have occurred in Africa in general and traditional Africa in particular. Based on illustrations, there is the case of Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, Ezinma's mother, who has divorced her first husband to marry Okonkwo, the man she has loved before her marriage. Such situation is described in *Things Fall Apart*:

... there was one woman who had no doubt whatever in her mind. She was Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, whom he nearly shot. There was no festival in all the seasons of the year which gave her as much pleasure as the wrestling match. Many years ago when she was the village beauty Okonkwo had won her heart by throwing the Cat in the greatest contest within living memory. She did not marry him then because he was too poor to pay her bride price. But a few years later she ran away from her husband and came to live with Okonkwo. All this happened many years ago. Now Ekwefi was a woman of forty-five who had suffered a great deal in her time. But her love of wrestling contests was still as strong as it was thirty years ago. (Achebe, 1958, p. 28)

The discipline that the payment of dowry and its acceptance impose or require is that no husband or no wife should divorce the other on the basis of weak reasons. When a woman chooses to divorce, the bride price must be reimbursed by her new husband no matter how long they have been married before the divorce and, worse still, no matter whether they have had children or not. Okonkwo has refunded Ekwefi's dowry to her first husband as already quoted in this paper. Dowry is really a source or basis of discipline and this discipline is also applicable to men. For instance, a married man must behave in a certain way towards his wife. In Akan culture (civilization), a married man must inform his family-in-law of the/his other marriages if he happens to marry another wife or other wives. This demand/requirement is not synonymous with asking permission before another marriage or other marriages. This does not mean an expression of



worries or regrets for misdeed or misbehaviour in order to ask for their mercies or forgiveness. It is a mark of consideration or respect for one's in-laws so that everybody can be at the same level of information for due treatment on each side. In *Beyond the Horizon*, Mara reproaches her husband, Akobi, with the fact that he has informed neither her family nor herself of his marriage to Gitte, his ugly German but kind, comprehensive, cooperative and tolerant woman. Below shows how Mara has reacted to Akobi announcement of Gitte as his second wife:

'Your second wife?' I asked weakly. 'You have taken on a second wife and you didn't tell my family back home?' Our tradition demanded this. It was a sign of respect to the first wife and her family. When a man took on a second wife without informing the first wife or her family, it showed an indifference towards his in-laws, which in itself was considered disrespectful and humiliating. (Darko, 1995, p. 79)

The quotation above explicitly pointed out how a married man must behave towards his in-laws in case he wants to marry another wife or other wives or at least after he has done it. Once again, it has been proved that in most traditional African societies and ethnic groups, dowry is a contract that unites the two families which appeals to discipline and patience from the couple and their extended families. Dowry is important for many other reasons. It helps to fill in, to some extent, a part of the economic gap that the bride's leaving her household creates or can create for her family in general and her parents in particular in the traditional African context. As a cement, a bridge or a contract or a consecration of durable and solid relationship between the two families, dowry establishes cooperation and mutual assistance between the two families. *Facing Mount Kenya* gives an illustration of how the two families can help each other when need be:

With regard to economics, both sides give each other a great deal of mutual help. In agriculture, relatives by marriage generally help one another. Cultivation right are, moreover, given to a relative by marriage who has not sufficient land of his own to maintain himself and his family. There are numerous gifts exchanged among them, especially in times of ceremonies connected with initiation, marriage, or religion. (Kenyatta, 1965, p.20)



From the above quotation, the reader can notice the fact that a woman who is married with the dowry dully paid ties the two families together for the better and the worse. Those who advocate the suppression or prohibition of dowry either do not know or seem to have chosen not to know or acknowledge its advantages. Willingly or unwillingly, they want to promote individualism in African societies. Dowry is documented in holy books such as *The Holy Bible* and *The Holy Quran*. The former says about the dowry: “If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her, **he shall give the marriage present for her**, and make her his wife.” (*The Holy Bible*; Exodus 22: 16) Dowry can be paid in several ways. One of these ways is through marriage presents which can be made up of several items as dealt with earlier. Another way to pay dowry is through labour. *The Holy Bible* has also dealt with this way of paying dowry: It says:

Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be? Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful and lovely. Jacob loved Rachel; and he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

*Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” So Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) (*The Holy Bible*; Genesis 29: 15-25)*

Another holy book that deals with dowry payment is *The Holy Quran*. In this book, Allah recommends that dowry should be paid when a man is about to marry a woman:

*And give the women (on marriage) their dower as an obligation, but if they of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it with right good cheer. (*The transliteration of The Holy Quran*; Sûrat 4: 4)*



Dowry is so important that almost everybody agrees upon its payment even those who can't afford it. As a matter of fact, one of the protagonists of *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa, Adizua, although aware that he can't pay the dowry for his beloved Efuru before marrying her, has nevertheless promised to pay it after she becomes his wife by joining him:

'You will come to me on Nkwo day. Every place will be quiet that day being market day. Take a few clothes with you and come to me. We shall talk about the dowry after.' Efuru agreed and went home feeling very happy and light. (Nwapa, 1966, p. 7; emphasis mine)

In the same vein, Efuru's father insists on the necessity for his son-in-law to pay the dowry for his daughter in the following terms:

If the man wants to marry her, there is nothing wrong about that. The man should come and fulfil the customs of our people and marry her. But as it seems now I don't think the man in question wants to marry her. And that is dangerous. What if she gets pregnant? Who will look after her now that her mother is dead? (Nwapa, 1966, p.8)

Efuru's father says: "The man should come and fulfil the customs of our people and marry her." He is saying that the man, Adizua, should come and pay dowry for her. Thus, there is nothing debasing or uncivilized in it. To marry a woman, you must pay dowry according to what prevails in her culture. This is clear! This idea is confirmed by another one: "I don't think the man in question wants to marry her." The father is worrying about his daughter's future. A man who does not pay dowry is simply insolvent and therefore proves that he can't take care of a family. This is an aspect of how things are organized in Africa and it has nothing shameful. Paying dowry in most African families is a 'must' and paying is synonymous with being a good citizen who is observing the regulation or an article of the constitution of their own country or the country in which they live. In actual fact, dowry is not so 'harmful' as some people present it. The actual payment of dowry is evidence that the boy is solvent or his parents are solvent or both the boy and his family are solvent. Being solvent is a forerunner that the boy and his family can feed the future wife and can also take care of her or provide for her other needs. The man sent to Adizua's homestead to inquire about Efuru



tells her or reminds her what follows: “But your husband must fulfil the customs of our people. It is very important. Our enemies will laugh at us. Tell your husband, he must see your father. Let him not be afraid.” (Nwapa, 1966, p .09) Seeing Efuru’s father’s here means that Adizua and his parents should come to see him in order to say when they are going to pay the dowry. Efuru herself agrees with the words of the spokesman of the people who have come to enquire about her. She replies: “**My husband is not rich. In fact he is poor. But the dowry must be paid. I must see that this is done.**” (Nwapa, 1966, p. 10: emphasis mine) When dowry is not paid for a girl, it is a shame for her parents, a failure in life. This is a part of African realities. Nowadays, there are parts of the black continent where it is becoming optional and symbolic although those who have the means continue to make of it something big and pompous. In real life, it is noticeable that all the white men who marry African women, after the independences, systematically pay dowry as a mark of respect for African customs in general and the women’s ethnic group in particular. In addition to actually paying dowry for their African women, these white husbands pay more in terms of value or amount. African cultural values should not be ‘kicked’ just to please other peoples, the Western World. Social civilizations have never been the same and can never be the same until further notice. Therefore, they cannot be compared still less awkwardly to please other people, other cultures. When need be, adjustments can occur but, once again, in a right way without any external pressures so that these adjustments can be accepted and implemented progressively and cleverly.

When a groom succeeds in paying the dowry for his wife, it is evidence that he has already built a hut or owned a house of his own or can do it before the wedding. Traditional African people were so disciplined that one of the proofs that a young man is ready to get married is building his own hut somewhere, given to him by his father, close to his father’s own homestead or far from it. A paraphrase of a common saying in black Africa is that, to prove that you are a man, you must change a forest into a dwelling place. Mimesis like imposing on parents not to have anything to say in the marriage of their children is a mistake because parents’ involvement in children’s marriage has more advantages than drawbacks/disadvantages. Mimesis like suppressing dowry in traditional marriage as it is in modern Western countries should be avoided because dowry payment has more advantages or benefits than disadvantages. Besides, in some parts of Africa



and elsewhere, marriage is almost impossible without dowry because it is so in their mentality because of their religion and cultures.

Western families face more difficulties than African ones because of instabilities, whereas in these countries parents are not involved in their children's marriage. For instance, hundreds of Western celebrities or celebrities living in the West such as football players, actors and actresses, singers, journalists, writers, to name just a few, have experienced instabilities in their marriages. These instabilities have led most of them to divorce even several times with so many problems as far as the bringing up of the children is concerned. These people, these celebrities, do not pay dowry. Their parents or people are not involved in their courtships or engagements. A(n) imperial crown prince of the most powerful Kingdom in the world divorced his wife and the latter became the mistress of an ordinary but wealthy person from an African country before they died in an accident in the second half of the 1990s. I don't think the Queen and the King were involved in their son's, the prince's, marriage. Even if they were, I don't think it was that involvement which was the cause of the instability that led to their divorce with all its consequences on the two teenager princes. In the name of academic standards, names cannot be mentioned here. So, Africans should not be ashamed of their culture. What they must necessarily do is to seek regularly improvements. Two consecutive European presidents of the same country, of course, in the decade 2010 divorced their wives while on duty (office) and remarried very quickly, both of them having been accused of repetitive or continual conjugal unfaithfulness. This might explain the quick remarriage of both of them. Each of them has been living now with their third publicly known wife. The latter was legally married in the first week of June 2022. Is it dowry or parents' involvement in their marriages that led to these divorces or instabilities? I don't think so.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the two aspects (steps) in traditional marriage process in Africa, namely the choice of girl by the boy himself and parents' involvement in courtship and engagement on the one hand and the clinching and payment of dowry, as described in the two novels under study on the other hand are almost the same as described in the two civilization books



under study. In addition to that, the parents' involvement in their children's marriage is the initiative of the children themselves even if it is a cultural behaviour. Illustrations of such a state of things are the case of the members of UPU in Lagos who request their people in the village to help them find women to marry as described in *No Longer at Ease*. Even Obi Okonkwo, a graduate from London, has asked his parents to be involved in his marriage plan to Clara. Although he has not gotten enough money, he has told his father they can start the process. Ibe's father and uncle visited Akueke's people for bride price clinching in *Things Fall Apart*. The way girls are involved in their own engagement is described in *The African Wife* and *Facing Mount Kenya*. Hence, these are proofs that nobody compels anyone to marry anyone. One can therefore draw from this remark that the idea according to which narrative writers take their inspiration from reality is quite true. In other words, novelists, short-story writers, playwrights, to name just a few, almost always take inspiration from real life. In the same way, parents' involvement in their children's marriage including the issue of dowry is almost the same both in East and West Africa whether through novels or real life. Dowry is the first evidence that the groom is ready to host his wife which is very important. This is Africa. It also plays other important roles such as the discipline it imposes in the couple and among the different members of the families concerned by this marriage. Dowry unites the families and also establishes mutual help relations among them in almost all fields which are crucial in Africa. Oppression and violence based on gender should be fought at all costs no matter where it takes place and who is involved. Men like Uzoulu, Mgbafo's husband, must be punished but in taking into account the whole family's interests. No parents should impose a partner on their children no matter the sex. One must have in mind that both in the West and Africa, some women exert violence on their husbands and the rate is high, about 30% in some European countries, compared to figures in Africa which is less than 10%. In this perspective, the best way to solve progressively the problem is to start giving priority to human rights in general and not insisting on women's rights, female children's rights to specify just a few.

There can never be absolute agreement on any issue all over the world mainly in terms of cultural civilization. For example, in Western countries, there are legal gay marriage and lesbianism whereas in almost all African countries, it still is unacceptable and those who are involved in it must hide



themselves or live clandestinely. In Western countries, aged parents live in asylums whereas in African countries one is civilized when they host their aged parents at home even if it must cost them resignation from one's work to stay at home to take care of them. Aspects of civilizations can vary from a continent to another. For instance, infanticide did exist in Africa but nowadays, it hardly exists. Cultures and civilizations are dynamic and therefore evolutive. Those who are saying and those who used to say that Africans are uncivilized cannot know nor say exactly all that their forefathers used to be and do thousands and millions of years ago. What is improvable is being improved in Africa everyday including dowry in all its details with its main "headings" that is marriage. *The Holy Bible* says: "Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in question of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath." (*The Holy Bible*; Colossians 2:16). Africans should be proud of their civilization because it is full of positive and advantageous things for everybody and, at the same time, should also be vigilant and open-minded so as to make necessary changes at the right time. In this light, both men and women must be continuously/permanently educated and sensitized. After courtship, engagement, dowry payment and the meaning of dowry, further research papers will be devoted to wedding and marital life.

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