

Accumulating biological capital through the commodification of women: A historical appreciation of the commercialization of *lobola/roora* in Zimbabwe 1920-2010.

Gilbert Tarugarira and Ishmael Mazambani

Department of History, Midlands State University
Gweru, Zimbabwe

Corresponding author: tarugarirag@msu.ac.zw

Abstract

There has been much disputation over the radical transformation of lobola into a commercial pursuit in Zimbabwe. Studies on lobola have largely focused on how this practice is conducted and the cultural significance attached to it. The unexplored dimension in the academic fraternity has been tracing how changing socio-economic and political environments led to the commodification of women and the commercialization of lobola. Rather than becoming a swallowing monster, lobola has grown in the same proportion as the growing body and wealth of African society. This study reveals how lobola has kept pace with the march of time, showing resilience against attacks from the outside and within, and flexibility for adapting itself to changing conditions dictated by the pre-colonial, the colonial and post-colonial socio-economic environments. The contention is that fluctuations in lobola charges should be understood within the context of the dictates of the multifaceted socio-economic and political frameworks. The colonial policies created their own demands while the post-colonial challenges accelerated the commercialization of lobola.

Key words: *Lobola, Commodification, Commercialization, Culture, Civilization.*

Introduction

The payment of *lobola* is part of a complex and formal process of negotiation that results in the building of a sense of community within families that are marrying. Traditionally, the marriage ceremony itself could not happen without a number of members of the extended family being present, *tetes* (aunts), *sekurus* (uncles), *varoora* (daughters-in-law) and *hanzvadzi* (brothers and sisters). In addition, the entire bride price would not be the sole property of the bride's father but part of it

would be shared with other relatives. *Lobola* would give a man the right to reap the fruits of his wife's womb. However, the very fact that the value of *lobola* has been pegged very high gives the impression that *lobola* has become a money-making venture which has lost its traditional or cultural meaning of uniting families. Studies conducted among university students in Zimbabwe (Chireshe and Chireshe 2010) reinforced the stance that *lobola* is a valuable part of African culture that should be allowed to thrive. Bourdillon (1976, 1998); Chigwedere (1982), Mvududu (2002), Kambarami (2006), Mapara, (2007), and many others, established that *lobola* is a noble practice which is meant to promote harmony within the society. On the contrary, Ncube (1987) felt that the practice is antiquated, barbaric and a social anachronism which should be abolished. Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) also posit that *lobola* should be abolished because at times when the in-laws charged exorbitant amounts of money, women tended to be seen as property or objects. It is the aim of this study to show that while *lobola* has become an epitome of the commodification of daughters, different socio-economic and political conditions have shaped this perspective. It is argued in this study that although the payment of *lobola* is becoming more and more a 'purchase price' and not a contractual

incident of marriage, both continuity and change must be critically examined so that people grasp the new reality in all its 'fresh' meanings.

Defining lobola and Framing the contours of debate

Posselt (1935:34), defined *lobola/roora* as 'an implied undertaking, arising from the proposed marriage, by which the future husband (including the adult members of his family) delivers or undertakes to deliver to the father of the woman or his representatives, stock or property, in consideration of which the custody of the children born of the marriage become vested in the husband and his family.' For Chigwedere (1982), *lobola*, which is sometimes referred to as bride wealth, is a form of marriage payment in which the bride's family receives payment of goods, money, or livestock to compensate for the loss of a woman's labour and the children she bears into her husband's family. Mvududu (2002) proffers that *lobola* is the institution through which a man pays some property for the right or privilege to marry a woman. A common feature in the definitions is that none directly refers to the payment of *lobola* as the purchasing of the bride. The fact that it is implied therefore points to the idea that, through the payment of *lobola* women are commodified. When the concept

of *lobola* is translated into English as bride wealth or bride price, it seems to suggest the purchase of wives. The terms bride wealth and bride price as Chabata (2011) has argued, are value-laden and their use would not afford neutrality. Equally so, for the purpose of sustaining the discussion on the commercialization of the practice, the terms bride wealth or bride price will be encountered in this work reflecting the perceptions of cited authorities, not those of the author of this article. In translating concepts from one language into another particularly if the languages have no common source, it is practically impossible to convey in the second language those nuances of meaning inherent in the original. Western anthropologists have encountered in their researches such terms like *lobola/roora* which have no equivalent words in their languages and so had to make do with words like 'wife price', 'wife purchase', 'bride price', 'bride purchase' and 'bride wealth'. While the use of these words is acceptable owing to lack of any better terminologies, it is necessary to make their meaning quite clear in each individual situation. As the words 'price' and 'purchase' are used in everyday life, their context is normally a commercial one. Also the phrase 'commercialization of lobola' is herein used to refer to a system where the payment of lobola has been

transformed from being a mere cultural practice to a business venture, where the bride has a clear monetary value attached to her. It also depicts a situation where, because of the monetary value attached to the bride, payment negotiations are characterized by intense bargaining leading to the payment of a high fee – and is almost equivalent to the selling of a commodity on the open market.

Marriage: Not for profit's sake

During the pre-colonial era, apart from marriage by capture and elopement, parents used to be responsible for finding suitable husbands for their daughters. They chose these husbands according to their characters, and the selection usually took place when the daughter was still very young. According to Janhi (1970:33), the parents were not given any money but a few bags of rapoko or maize. Those who had dogs went to the forests to hunt and bring back game to their in-laws to pay the *roora*. Through *kutema ugariri* the man served at the homestead of the girl's parents while waiting for his wife. Thus, where *lobola* could not be raised, the alternative was to offer one's own services. The fact that the period during which the man was required to serve could be reduced from a number of years to a matter of days seems to indicate that it had

become a mere traditional formality. In some instances, if a young man had come to terms with a young woman, he would proceed to set traps to catch mice. If he was fortunate and caught three or five mice he would quickly go to the mother of the girl, present her with the mice and ask for the daughter. If the father did not object, the young man was allowed to go away with the daughter as his wife (Andifasi 1970). The indication here is that pre-colonial societies were not strongly materialistic and individualistic given that they found themselves in complex situations of taboos, spirit worship, totemic relationships, ceremonies on birth, adolescence, marriage and death which they treated with respect. Farquhar (1965) observed that everything in African society was valued according to its use, be it a tool, weapon, animal or woman. As such the woman's child bearing capacity was the important element in the *lobola* transaction. In the case of barrenness, a sister of the woman may be sent 'to put children in the womb' of the barren woman. *Chimutsamapfihwa* (the practice of replacing a deceased wife with her sister or niece) and *kugarwa nhaka* (replacing a deceased husband with his brother or nephew) practices among the Shona, were linked to the practice of *lobola*. Both sorority and levirate unions assumed that it was

the two family groups which were important, rather than the individual bride and groom. A deduction one can make from the above is that since wealth was understood as securing the survival of the kin group and ensuring biological reproduction, it (wealth) established a very close correlation between livestock (especially cattle) and women. Cattle represented the bride price and were thought in terms of wives who were there to bear children. Of these children the daughters represented a potential or actual value in cattle which provided wives for the sons and in turn circulated as bride price for the sons resulting in the basic pattern of circulation and accumulation of biological capital.

The Universality and Africanity of *lobola*

The institution of *lobola* is not a peculiar Zimbabwean or African phenomenon. Institutions similar to *lobola* can be traced back to the fourth century Europe. Bryant (1949) observed that during the reign of Ethelbert, King of Kent, hopeful grooms paid the father of the bride money or other property as compensation for the loss of the daughters' contribution to the household, while the Hebrew husband paid *mobar* to the father of his prospective wife as a preliminary

step towards the completion of a marriage transaction. In the early 19th century, pigs and feathers were adjudged an equivalent for a lady in Papua Guinea, while among the Congo forest pygmies; three or four spears and ten to fifteen arrows would suffice (Bryant, 1949). In Gabon, a woman's worth was two neptunes, one kettle, two cutlasses, one fine hat, one cape, two silk handkerchiefs, six knives, four plates, four mugs, four dishes, one *jibbo*, one coat and three jars of rum (Rivers, 1924). In Sierra Leone, a bride was paid for in goats, cloth or beads, or otherwise three or five pounds sterling. In Nyasaland, (Malawi), a man paid for his wife about four or five *dotis* (the *doti* being a piece of cotton-cloth four yards long). In Uganda, the customary price among the peasants was fifteen gourds of beer, a basket full of salt, one bark cloth *lubogo*, 1000 shells (*Simbi* cowries) and a goat. Among the Kikuyu, after the usual haggling, the price was 'generally settled at about 30 goats and two cows'. Among the Zulus during Tshaka's time around 1828, some ordinary folk could 'bride price' a girl for three head of cattle, the highest price seldom exceeding ten cows, even amongst the highest classes. In Dingane's reign, around 1835, Captain Gardiner found that the usual sum demanded was four to six cows, according to circumstances of

the parties, though in the case of chief's daughters twenty to fifty, or one hundred head were not infrequent (Gardiner, 1836). Before the occupation of Mashonaland in 1890, and thereafter between 1896 and 1897, bride wealth transactions in the Goromonzi District of Zimbabwe ranged from four head of cattle plus four hoes, two blankets and ten shillings, to four head of cattle, and six buckets of grain, intended to represent a fifth beast (Schmidt, 2005). As shown in the above examples of *lobola* in other parts of Africa, the indication is that marriage customs had to change with time and as people became more settled and started cultivating crops and rearing cattle, the manner of paying *lobola* also changed.

The changing dimensions of *roora*

After the onset of European occupation and the introduction of a cash economy, in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular, bride wealth became increasingly commoditized. In Zimbabwe for example, cattle gained in productive value as the ox-drawn plough became widely used and the wagon and scotch cart transport assumed increasing importance around the 1930s. Schmidt (2005) also observed that as young men entered wage employment, fathers began to

demand dramatically inflated bride wealth payments composed primarily of cattle and cash. Bride wealth continued to degenerate into a fundamentally commercial transaction in which wealth was transferred between generations of males, and women were the bartered goods. It is beyond doubt that the practice, which European observers described as 'bride buying' was indeed a product of both African custom and European intervention in African society. As the cash economy became increasingly important to the survival of rural households, village elders started to manipulate the bride wealth system. Consequently, the value of cattle rose, and with it, the need to control the means of acquiring cattle, that is, women were transformed into commodities with an ascertainable exchange value. Women were effectively only part of men's wealth.

Missionaries on *lobola*

The missionaries vehemently denounced *lobola*. According to Fr. Richard Sykes (1902), *lobola* was simply the buying and selling of women. He remarked:

The wives by native custom are bought for so many head of cattle, the great source of wealth and importance amongst the wild native

tribes of South Africa, as indeed among all primitive races. The man, therefore, amongst them who can purchase a number of wives, proves his wealth, his social position and power to indulge in luxuries, and secures himself importance in the eyes of the less fortunate neighbours (Sykes 1902).

Fr Peter Prestage (1901) argued that *lobola* was frequently indistinguishable from the purchase of a wife by a man for purpose of begetting children. For him, the delivery of *lobola* was similar to bartering for a wife or trafficking in human beings. While white missionaries were against *lobola* their African counterparts to a large measure were in full support of the custom. The missionaries might not have understood what *lobola* was all about. Rev Joshua Richardson Danisa of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, Rev J.M.Zvobgo of the African Reformed Church, Rev D.P.Mandebvu of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (formerly the Dutch Reformed Church) and Pastor S.L.Masuku of Solusi Mission among others strongly argued in favour of the *lobola* system (Zvobgo 1996). The period between 1924 and 1939 saw several churches laying down regulations covering the *lobola*

practice. The London Missionary Society and the Salvation Army discouraged *lobola* but there was no official prohibition. The Dutch Reformed Church forbade Christian parents from taking *lobola* for their daughters. The Brethren in Christ discouraged excessive *lobola* charges. The Anglican Church would put under church discipline Christians who received *lobola* from a 'heathen'. As Zvobgo (1996) observed, Christians defied these measures until the churches shifted the debate from opposition to *lobola* in principle to opposition to excessive *lobola* charges. The Fort Victoria District Commissioner's Office even made an appeal to peg the maximum amount of *lobola* at £20 but this did not work. Cripps (1947) recommended that *lobola* be fixed at £5 and that no marriage was to be registered until full *lobola* was paid over to the *tezvara* (father-in-law). This again did not work because parents would still make the husbands pay large amounts which were not registered. Ironically, while missionaries were the most vocal detractors of the bride wealth custom, their practices were partly responsible for bride wealth inflation.

While good looks had their value, a reasonable amount of corpulence admired and the ability to work hard recommended, *lobola* amounts came to vary with educational qualifications. In the late 1960s, the Karanga were charging £300 for a girl who had done

Standard 6 which implied that the more educated the girl, then the 'more expensive' (*The African Times* 1969:10). Graduates of mission schools, who had learned to read and write and had acquired such skills as carpentry, shoe-making and building tended to earn higher wages than other men. As a result, the business-minded fathers deliberately inflated bride wealth demands the moment they knew that the groom exhibited the capacity to pay (Schmidt 2005). Christian families had also generated new material and financial needs to match their 'civilized' life style-clothing, school fees, different standards of accommodations, European made agricultural equipment and a variety of consumer goods. Thus, rather than helping to stamp out the bride wealth custom, mission stations had indirectly encouraged its perpetuation (Schmidt 2005). In 1951, a theology student Abel Muzorewa married the daughter of a devout Christian widow, paying £25 in cash and two head of cattle as bride wealth which was rather low for a woman with some education (Muzorewa 1978). In 1955, Maurice Nyagumbo, then a shopkeeper, considered himself 'one of the luckiest people to have paid so little bride wealth' when he forked out £30 cash, two head of cattle and seven goats to his intended father-in-law (Maurice Nyagumbo 1980). *Lobola* demands varied.

***Lobola*, cattle and the accumulation of wealth**

As early as 1927, the colonial government was already convinced that African reserves were overstocked and so the need to force Africans to sell their cattle to Europeans was great. The probability was high that a conspiracy to exploit African cattle wealth had been hatched through the settler regime's destocking policy whose first circular was issued in 1932, to be followed by the Cattle Levy Act of 1935. The accumulative tendencies of both the settlers and missionaries which went along with the love for cattle should not be considered an African 'weakness'. What seems to have worried the settlers and missionaries may not be the practice as such but that although *lobola* could be changed into monetary transactions, the marriage system could not do entirely without cattle – the very wealth which they also sought. The motivations and objectives for attacking *lobola* could have been mainly external to the subject. When livestock became more plentiful, men willingly paid more cattle for a new wife. Thus the strength of the missionary attack on *lobola* should have had more to do with the relationship between owning a lot of cattle and one's capability to leading a polygamous life which was anathema to Christian principles.

Interestingly, the missionary petitions flowed in at a time when Liebigs (Rhodesia) Ltd had undertaken to erect a canning factory in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). It should not go without saying that missionaries did cast envious eyes on African cattle. The Rev H.H. Orlandini of the Dutch Reformed Church, who was stationed at Alheit mission in Gutu, was known to be herding over 900 head of cattle in the reserve apart from those he distributed throughout the reserve among his teachers at their schools. While on patrol in the Gutu reserve, a messenger Mapfumo found that Orlandini had 130 cattle in the Soti area tended by herd boys Mandabu, Madabi and Varandi; in the Ndadza area, 152 cattle were under Chadana; the Chaminuka area had 59 cattle under Masara while in Raurwe, Dagwa and Polisa looked after some 70 cattle (S235/378-379: Dutch Reformed Church Activities). Both missionaries and settlers were subtle in their approach towards *lobola*. They did not make the object of their claims as obvious and yet the underlying motive in most claims was material gain. Prior to 1900, there was no delay in the payment of *lobola*. As the years went on, the amount of *lobola* claimed rose, less and less was paid and more and more remained outstanding. The table below illustrates this:

Lobola

Years	Amount Claimed	Amount Paid	Amount Outstanding
1910-14	£11 10s	£11 10s	£1
1915-19	£11 70s	£8	£3
1920-24	£15	£7	£8 10s
1925-29	£17	£7	£10 30s
1930-34	£15	£6	£9
1935-40	£17	£3	£13 10s
1941-45	£21	£7	£14

Source: NADA: The Southern Rhodesia Native Affairs Department Annual, 1947.

While amounts outstanding show an increase from the early 1920s, the trend could not be considered as mono-causal given that no assessment was done to establish the impact of colonial policies like the taxes and destocking on people's capacity to meet their lobola obligations. The circulation of biological capital would mean that cattle would end up in the hands of many who would obviously sell part of their stock and get ready cash to meet tax dues to the state. Delay in payment of *lobola* could be attributable to two factors: the introduction of a money payment; and the introduction of restrictions on cattle movements. When Cripps

(1947) called for the reduction of *lobola* by legislation, the Africans had no problems because the high levels pegged obviously went along with average herds at the disposal of households. The claim that *lobola* had assumed alarming proportions, though it holds some truth, was deliberately misconstrued to confirm the fallacy among Europeans that the majority of Africans were poor. During the years of legalized compulsory destocking Africans refused to dispose of their destocked herds. To avoid being caught they either stopped using dip tanks, distributed cattle to their kith and kin creating *danga resango* (kraal of the forest), slaughter part of the destocked

herds or settle *lobola* obligations. Those who had lost their herds to destocking and wanted to restock were forced to inflate *lobola* charges. The more cattle they lost, the greedier did the fathers make their arbitrary and exorbitant demands. Diminishing cattle herds, and in the case of many young men the complete lack of cattle, resulted in money being used instead of cattle to establish a marriage contract.

The Coloniality of *lobola*

The linkage of bride wealth and industry, or for that matter Christianity and civilization, was not just rhetorical; it was grounded in material reality. As already alluded to, in the colonial political economy, bride wealth was a means of transferring wealth from young male workers in the cities and other centres of employment to elders, especially older men, whether in the reserves or elsewhere. In 1948 the Southern Rhodesian Native Association, a political bastion of the male elite argued against destocking, claiming that it was creating women of loose morals. The Association's greatest fear was that the fewer cattle Africans possessed, the more the *lobola* custom would diminish, and the more prostitution would increase (West, 2002).

West (2002) further argues that because the transmutation from

custom to commodity had been driven by social processes (notably the erosion of traditional norms) that resulted in the rise of an African middle class, the rise of bride wealth had to run in tandem with the accompanying creation of new wants and the consumer goods that complemented elite African styles. This explains why the commodification of the bridal consideration was more pronounced in the urban centres and on mission stations, where the educated and the Christian community could be found in relatively large numbers. An urban resident visiting the Zvimba Reserve in 1957 noted that parents in the reserve were driving towards the formation of a 'Daughters Marketing Board' because there were rumours of meetings being held to fix the price of the bride wealth. Although there was no generalized conspiracy to inflate bride wealth, the increasing monetary demands on suitors stood as an eloquent testimony to its metamorphosis under the impact of colonialism and capitalism, the values and lifestyles of which had been adopted most widely by the emerging African middle class. To most members of the black elite, the commodification of bride wealth was the Christian and civilized way. Mothers-in-law began to grow tired of getting bundles of fire-wood while the sons-in-law willingly obliged with a silk shawl, a blanket, a dress or a comb and mirror. *Lobola* thus became

the receptacle into which were poured the bright new inventions that spilled from the pores of the much touted and admirable European civilization.

The violent exposure of the institution of *lobola* to the radiation of European business ideas and the conspicuous consumption of European goods meant that as a source of income it could not survive commercial abuse. As a result, many Europeans looked upon it as a shameful 'buying of wives' and a 'commercial racket' since the charging and bargaining of *lobola* were based on commercial considerations. When the principal lieutenants of the Native Department failed to curb the system their next strategy was to 'raise the status of Native Marriage' by making it conform to 'civilized standards'. The so-called 'civilized standards' were meant to suppress and ultimately erode the traditional basis of African marriage in favour of an alien and exploitative formality from the Native Commissioners' office.

When the new Native Marriages Act came into operation on the first day of January 1951, no penetrating study had been made to acquire the knowledge, the thoughts and aspirations of the indigenous people on the intangible power of *lobola* as an age-old institution. The colonial government's regulations stipulated that *lobola* should not exceed four head of cattle or £20.00. The transaction had to receive the white marriage officer's

approval (Bhebe 1973). This, however, proved to be an exercise in futility because some parents demanded ten head of cattle or their equivalent of £50.00. As Holleman (1952) puts it, they had administered the strange body of African society from without, with only a vague notion of how its obscure organs functioned. The long and short of it is that marriage contracts involving money altered the nature of the contract from a group alliance to a contract between individuals. Cattle had group value while money accrued to an individual.

Tradition and Modernity at crossroads

Until the passing of the Legal Age of Majority Act in 1982, an agreement as to *lobola* was an essential requirement for a valid customary marriage. Under the African Marriage Act, Chapter 238, the African Marriage Officer was obliged to satisfy him or herself about the existence of a *lobola* agreement between the woman's guardian and his son-in-law before solemnizing the marriage. Africans who wished to marry under the Marriage Act, Chapter 37, had to secure an enabling certificate from the District Administrator stating that there was no bar to the marriage by reason of lack of consent of the guardian of the woman. In this way, the colonial state entrenched the institution of *lobola* by

making it a condition precedent for a valid marriage (May, 1983). Thus, even an unwilling father was legally obliged to charge some *lobola* in order to satisfy the requirements of the law before his daughter could be validly married. In many cases, guardians used their power of withholding consent to delay the registration of their daughter's marriage until the *lobola* was paid. Thus, the consent clause conferred unlimited power on the woman's guardians to defeat the requirements of the law regarding registration of customary marriages. Under traditional customary law a father possessed clear proprietary interests in his daughter. As long as he could prevent her from marrying by withholding his consent, he could realize his proprietary interest in the form of *lobola*. He received the *lobola* in exchange for surrendering his guardianship of his daughter into the hands of her prospective husband. The Legal Age of Majority Act enables a woman over the age of 18 to contract a marriage without her (former) guardian's consent (LAMA). She may also contract a marriage without a *lobola* agreement. The father no longer has guardianship over his daughter and therefore nothing to pass in exchange of *lobola*. Since he is no longer entitled to *lobola*, whether he receives it will depend on his daughter's discretion. On the basis of the LAMA it is the bride, and not the father who now has that right. He no

longer has automatic rights of guardianship and custody over his children whether or not *lobola* has been paid. However in practice, Zimbabwean Africans of all classes have continued to charge and pay it. When LAMA was passed, Zimbabwe was cruising through a decade of development where gender equality was quite topical. Between 1980 and 1990 the quality of life of the Zimbabwean majority improved considerably. Those who were employed held steady jobs, lived lavish lifestyles, held ostentatious engagement parties and wedding ceremonies. The environment had all the necessary ingredients to nurture serious emotional involvement and commitment to heavy investments in *lobola*. Even daughters willingly permitted their fathers to charge and receive *lobola*. The men too, were willing to pay, only complaining of the often exorbitant amounts involved. The degree to which LAMA weakened the institution was negligible or insignificant. The institution had built its own socio-economic support structures. In the music circles, the gigantic process of wealth accumulation by fathers of women through the extraction of *lobola* became a popular theme.

Jonah Moyo and the Devera Ngwena Jazz Band (1985) released a song entitled *Too Cheap*, which brought to the open the greedy intents of the

father: *Mwana wangu haungamuroori uri too cheap mufana! Mwana wangu haungamugoni ari too dear mufana.* (You cannot marry my daughter because you are cheap! You cannot marry my daughter because she is too dear/ expensive).

Oliver Mtukudzi's *Nyanga yenzou* castigates the commercialization and commodification of women:

Shuwa! shuwa! tezvava manyanya rushusho. Mukati mangwana-mangwana mukwasha ndipe nyanga yenzou...ndipe nyanga yechipembere...Ukasadaro mwana wangu ndотора! Inga wani ndakabvisa mapondo...Inga wani ndakabvisa maKwacha? (Mtukudzi, 1989).

The greedy father-in-law makes ridiculous requests like the elephant tusk (ivory) or rhinoceros horn. He (the father-in-law) continues to harass and threaten that he will take back his daughter despite the fact that the son-in-law paid British pounds (*maPondo*) and the Zambian Kwacha (*maKwacha*) for *lobola*. Daily, the father-in-law has brayed the son-in-law who is now limp even to his bones.'

John Chibadura (1987) in a song *Rozi* says:

Sara zvako Rozi mwana wandaida, ndakange ndakuda kuti tozoorana asi zvakaramba... asi haisi mhosva yako. Imhosva yababa

vako vakatirambanisa, imhosva yababa vako vakakwidza mari vakanditi ndirimurombo (I am leaving you behind Rozi, the woman I loved to marry...it is not your fault...but that of your father who charged an exorbitant amount...)

The song's theme centred on the commercialization of *lobola*. Such songs which became very popular in the 1980s and early 1990s clearly confirm how fathers-in-law grabbed the opportunity for heightened accumulation by ruthlessly charging high amounts for *lobola*. Such was the abuse or use of *lobola* as a vehicle for accumulating and amassing of wealth on matrimonial grounds.

The optimism which characterized the decade of development started fading away upon the Zimbabwe government's implementation of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1991. The 1991-1995 reform programme was greeted by the most economically devastating drought ever experienced in the history of the country. The ruling elite's earlier rhetoric championing socialist egalitarianism had also, by then been replaced by a capitalist ethos that now emphasized growth rather than development and talked about cost-recovery rather than equity (Mlambo, 2000). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank

-induced cost recovery measures hurt the majority of the population as the combination of government cuts in expenditure on education, the removal of government education subsidies and the introduction of school fees led not only to a deterioration in educational standards, but also to a situation where poor peasants could no longer afford to send their children to school. ESAP aggravated unemployment through its massive retrenchment in the public and private sectors, privatization, subsidy withdrawal, drastic expenditure cuts, destruction of small and indigenous capital, and import dumping. Real wages fell and stagnated through wage freeze, inflation unleashed by devaluation, and the scarcity of essential commodities arising from a shift from local resource production to export promotion. The cost recovery measures re-inforced gender inequalities in education which the Zimbabwean government had been trying hard to end since 1980. According to Mlambo (2000), by the end of 1992, a greater proportion of girls than boys were dropping out of secondary school because families, rural and urban were not able to afford school fees. The stress placed on the girl child also contributed to early marriages and low literacy levels which translated to little gains in terms of *lobola*. Drought meant that cattle were already a liability. The best insurance against losing out was

attaching monetary value to beasts. The beasts did not fetch much and people had little disposable income. The prices fell to their lowest ebb. Although the harsh environment theoretically provided an opportunity for an increase in *lobola*, reality dictated otherwise because of resource inadequacies. However, it sounded normal for in-laws to call for exorbitant amounts as a way of cushioning themselves from the economic hardships. This explains why part of the *lobola* could also be paid in form of groceries.

Between 2006 and 2008, Zimbabwe slid into the deeper end of the bottom billion trap, experiencing the highest inflation ever in the world with a peak rate of more than a billion percent. The official exchange rate, when the crisis started in late 1997, was US\$1 = Z\$17. By 2009 it had risen to US\$1 = Z\$42,750,000 000 000. The parallel market rate ended at a staggering US\$1 = Z\$43 000 000 000 000 000 (Sadomba 2011). While the effects of the economic meltdown were felt throughout the country, Zimbabwe also experienced a diamond boom which increased differentials in people's income earning capacities. The increased levels of wealth and spending in the cities (especially Mutare) impacted upon marriage issues.

A diamond dealer would go on a marrying spree. At the height of Chiadzwa diamond dealing, it was normal for one to have several wives with fully furnished houses in different suburbs. The highest *rutsambo* recorded in Mutare at the height of Chiadzwa diamonds was USD \$20 000 for ten herd of cattle (*The Manica Post* 2008). Cell phones, cars, groceries, suits of unique designs, became part of the *lobola* paraphernalia. Organized economic crime and corruption of local finance houses through speculative and illegal deals, money laundering and (illegal) trading in gold, diamonds, foreign currency and fuel explain the untold generosity in a worsening economic environment. Parents were cashing in.

Those in the diaspora were also responsible for pushing up *lobola* because at a single meeting with in-laws, the suitor could pay everything and make wedding arrangements before flying back within a space of two-weeks. When the government embarked on a military-style operation codenamed *Chikorokoza Chapera* (end of illegal mining) which hit the small-scale miners *lobola/roora* changes in the Manicaland region plummeted. The military style operation code -named Operation *Hakudzokwi* (No return) in the

Chiadzwa area led to the folding up of the formerly rewarding diamond sector. The *lobola* demands also started fluctuating in tandem with the socio-economic forces at play.

Conclusion

Whether *lobola* dehumanizes women and relegates them to the status of commodities, the fact that the institution has persisted is because people are aware of the underlying meaning, as well as gains associated with it. The practice, as has been discussed, was not a Zimbabwean invention, but more of a common inheritance from primordial times amongst humankind. It is plainly nothing more than a natural outcome of the universal human instinct for gain where charges are constantly being adjusted to the current rate of inflation and subject to cross-generational attitudinal shifts. Zimbabwean African women have always been commodities in the hands of their parents with a definite exchange value tagged on their heads as dictated or determined by the prevailing socio-economic circumstances. The amputation of this custom or institution is like stabbing towards the heart of organized indigenous life which is not a minor operation.

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