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# Changes in the customary marriage traditions and their implication for the girl child: A gender perspective

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**In Ghana, customary marriage traditions have witnessed some level of changes. This study examined these changes and their implications for the girl child development, using the Gurishies of Bongo in the Upper East Region as a case. Purposive and quota sampling techniques were employed to select 41 participants in a case study design. Face to face interview was employed in gathering primary data and were analysed thematically. The study found that the traditional processes of courtship is currently not strictly adhered to, elders and parents have less influence on the choice of partners, marriage by elopement has been reduced to unnoticeable level, and monetization of bride wealth payment in some instances. These changes have weakened the stability of marriages and increased in cases of teenage pregnancies. The changes equally, have liberated the girl child from the inadvertent abuse of forced marriage through elopement, circumcision, and denial of formal education. The study recommends the formation of all-inclusive advocacy groups including traditional authorities, women and men associations, to spearhead the protection and promotion of the rights of the girl child and women in consistent with the current realities without necessarily undermining the traditional heritage of the people.**

**Key words:** Tradition, customary marriage, change, girl child, women.

## INTRODUCTION

Customary marriage, the contraction of marriage traditionally by way of the payment of bride wealth is a practice prevalent in the world over, most especially, in Africa (Murdock, 1967). Nukunya (2003) wrote that, traditionally, customary marriage in Ghana is construed as a union between a man and a woman who have gone

through all the acceptable customary practices. These legitimate practices included the payment of bride wealth (Renya, 1984), family gatherings (Ozoemena, 2015), and libation prayers, exchange of gifts and captivating cultural performances (Lodonu et al., 2015). The marriage institution is thus a revered one with rules governing its

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practices (Murdock, 1967). According to Conteh (2016), bride wealth practices have been prevalent for millennia as a way for people to fulfill the conditions of marriage. Conteh (2016), claims that the transfer or exchange of commodities and services signifies a particular kind of contract between and among groups of people who share a common interest. Anthropological studies by Murdock (1967) and Renya (1984) have found that bride wealth is traded in Ghana as in a number of African marriages. They observed that this practice authenticates the marriage. In Ghana, the sanctity of customary marriage is guaranteed by the 1992 Constitution. Section 39(2) of the Republican Constitution of Ghana (1992) unequivocally indicated, 'The State shall ensure that appropriate customary and cultural values are adapted and developed as an integral part of the growing needs of the society as a whole; and in particular that traditional practices which are injurious to the health and wellbeing of the person are abolished'.

According to Akoto (2014), Africa traditions are a part of generational living experiences that meaningfully depict the present-day historical events. He maintains that in Africa, customs are the means by which the current historical events find meaningful expression. Consequently, Graburn (2001) indicated that traditions are continually being created, not in some past time immemorial, but during 'modernity'. He cited that after the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rural traditions became the source of inspiration and identity in many European countries, particularly those like Finland, Ireland, Hungary, and the German principalities that had no prior independent statehood. Thus, tradition as a reservoir is the strength to draw upon, a source of historically defined identity, and a source of a sense of safety, specialness, or difference. It is in this realm that Gyekye (1997) conceived traditions as practices that are passed down and persist over at least three generations within an ethnic tribe. He compared tradition to cultural practice, pointing out that the two are not interchangeable. A cultural practice is not yet a tradition without the specified time and persistence elements. A cultural practice may arise and die within a generation or be passed down between generations. If it endures over three or more generations, it can then be called a tradition (Gyekye, 1997).

Abimbola (2015) noted that the major types of marriages that existed in the pre-colonial era as in Ghana were the cultural/traditional marriage. This type of marriage practice was determined by the prevalent traditions or religions which governed the society where the parties live in or where they originated from. It was and still revered as sacred and thus heavily guarded by various religions, traditions, social norms and laws (Renya, 1984). Ozoemena (2015) emphasized that customary marriages are not entered into secretly but are usually organised and planned with a lot of family gatherings orchestrated to such an extent that the

community must know that a man is now connected to the woman's family by marriage. It is considered as a means of bringing families and even communities together in many African traditions (Owurasah, 2015). Traditional marriage as among the Akan culture of Ghana entails the establishment of a stable relationship between individuals' families (Agyekum, 2012). This indicates that although marriage as an institution occurs between a man and a woman, families and the larger community have a significant impact on how marriage is established and maintained. Toth and Kemmelmeier (2009) studied on divorce phenomenon through a cultural lens, and found higher divorce rate in individualistic cultural societies as compared to socialist cultures. This accentuates the importance of communities in engendering marriage stability. Highlighting the value of marriage and its processes, Gesinde (2010) and Boomie (2010) observe that among the Yorubas of Nigeria, the customary marriage, also known as an engagement or traditional wedding, continues to be a significant part of the wedding ritual. In a similar view, Omobola (2013), claims that because marriage involves the union of two or more families, it is the obligation of the communities, not just the couple, in Yoruba culture. This is true because, historically, that is what society has defined as a man and a woman becoming married. This serves as more evidence that customary marriage is still seen as a significant rite in the majority of nations, even in modern times when most customary traditions have been rendered obsolete by civilization, education, religion, and modernism (Omobola, 2013).

The value of customary marriage is enhanced by the kind of rites that are associated with it. Normally visible with marriages are libation prayers, exchange of gifts and captivating cultural performances (Lodonu et al., 2015). Dowries and bride wealth play instrumental role in customary marriage. These are the well-known forms of traditional wedding gifts. A bride wealth payment is a financial or in-kind transfer made by or on behalf of the groom to the family of the bride upon the marriage. Contrarily, dowry payments entail a transfer from the bride's family to the groom's family following the marriage (Conteh, 2016). He noted that depending on the economic status of the groom, payment is typically done by the groom. However, family members of the groom can sometimes be collectively accommodating in helping the groom meet the cost of payment. The author also noted that there are cases when both the bride and groom families offer such as land and other valuables to the bride and groom to establish their new family. This, however, depends on the wealth status of both families. According to Anderson (2007), sub-Saharan Africa and several regions of Asia are both home to the practice of paying a bride wealth at the time of marriage. The Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Hebrews, Aztecs, and Incas all practiced this method. It has a lengthy history, going back at least to 3000 BCE. The author emphasized that historically and currently, the bride

wealth is frequently substantial; bridal wealth transfers are frequently greater than a year's worth of income and occasionally even seven or eight times as large.

Africa, as in Ghana, however has been mostly affected as a result of some vulnerability in the African cultural environment. As earlier hinted by Moore (1963), institutions have always been changing their forms and functions.

Grosz-Ngaté et al. (2014) however maintain that these changes have affected Africa more than many other places on earth. Notable among these forces of social change include internal realignment of political forces, others in the wake of civil wars, famine, floods and other natural disasters, western education, colonialism, the media, and the advent of missionary activities. These changes have all led people to reevaluate their lives, values, and ideals (Nukunya, 2003; Ushe, 2015). Consequently, the social norms and practices surrounding marriage have undergone both change and continuity with their implication for the development of the girl-child, especially in Ghana. This is in consonance with the social change theory which anchored the study.

Solaja (2020) construes social change as any significant alteration over time in behavior patterns and cultural values and norms. It may be driven by cultural, religious, economic, scientific or technological forces. It is premised that the changes that have taken place in the institution of the customary marriage in the Bongo Traditional area, the study locality are as a result of some of these forces. Apparently, their implications for the girl child development are less researched. While other researchers are more interested of the sacrosanct of the traditional heritage of the people (Akoto, 2014; Gyekye, 1997), others have looked at the dynamic nature of traditions (Nukunya, 2003). Yet, others simply look at how harmful traditional practices have been without necessarily examining their overall effects. This is the niche of the current study. The study has two main objectives. It sought to (1) interrogate the various changes that have taken place in the customary marriage from the past six decades, and (2) analyse the ramifications of these changes on the girl child development.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This article employed the case study design grounded in the phenomenology tradition which holds that any attempt to understand social reality has to be couched in people's experiences. Custom and practices are grounded in people's belief systems and could properly be understood from the perspective of the people themselves. Given the philosophical underpinning and objectives of the study, qualitative case study design was considered as appropriate as it stimulated close interaction between the researchers and the research participants. This also helped the researchers to learn in detail, firsthand information as much as possible from the participants own viewpoints on the customary marriage practices, their dynamics and ramifications on the girl child development in the Bongo community. As argued by Leedy and Ormrod (2010), a case study design is useful for learning more

about a little known or poorly understood situation.

This explains why Robson (2002) espouses that a case study involves a firsthand study of a particular present phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence. This underscores the justification for the choice of the case study design in this current study.

As noted by Vinay (2017), non-probability research methods are best employed in phenomenological study and typically involve conducting interviews (Giorgi, 2009). The researchers thus used purposive and quota sampling methods in selecting the required participants of 41. The youngest was 43 years with the oldest been 88 years. For the purposes of anonymity, pseudonyms were used in the discussions. The experiences of the selected participants were tapped to provide answers to the research questions. The subjects whose experiences were targeted were married women and men (10 each), chiefs and elders (6), one queen mother, a land Priest, three institutions working on girl child development and gender parity in the study district, the older generations of sixty plus years (10). The sample size of the study was determined by the method of saturation which is employed in qualitative data collection. The commonly proposed criterion for determining when sufficient sample size has been reached in qualitative research is saturation (Charmaz, 2003; Merriam, 2009) usually construed as reaching a point of informational redundancy where additional data collection contributes little or nothing new to the study. For the purpose of data collection, face to face interview with the aid of interview guide was utilized to gather the relevant information. Data generated were verified through a follow up interviews and thereby analysed thematically. The recorded information was first transcribed and categorized. Quotes were used in presenting the information.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Changes in the traditional customary practices and their implications**

The study first sought to establish the nature of changes in the traditional customary practices of the people of Bongo. As argued by Grosz-Ngaté et al. (2014), time will never remain the same and that the world is changing with our values. In response to the question, all the forty-one (41) respondents admitted that there have been changes in the practice of customary marriage even though a few of the marriages have tried following the strict traditional procedure as existed in the past.

### **Shifts in courtship and circumcision practices**

According to Adamu (pseudonym) the 88 year-old man who has lived his entire life in the traditional area, one of the numerous changes is the ambiguous procedure in contracting marriages as it is hardly to observe the traditional marriage arrangements in Bongo. He indicated that the traditional processes of courtship are less adhered to by most of the people, especially the educated ones. This is because the present generation think that traditions are out-dated and not worthy of keeping and practicing. In his frustration he lamented thus:

*"The youth think that what we have inherited from our ancestors are outmoded and do not make sense. They have been brainwashed by what they see today in the television and think that we are 'kolo,' that is out of fashion. My son you can see that they are divorcing their wives far more than we did".*

The information indicated that the process of contracting marriage has hugely altered. It also suggests that the stability of marriage has been eroded given rise to perceived frequent divorce. This current study supports Toth and Kemmelmeier (2009) findings which revealed higher divorce rate is common among individualistic cultural societies as compared to that socialist culture. This accentuates the importance of communities in engendering marriage stability. This finding confirms what Grosz-Ngate et al. (2014) have indicated. They reiterated that changes of cultural practices and values cut across all nations in the World. They were however quick to add that, these changes have affected Africa the most. This could suggest that acculturation has been strong among African countries but not Ghana lone.

Mr Courage, a 75-year-old man emotionally explains that, nowadays a man and woman meet outside for instance in a market centre and courtship begins and after that marriage can immediately take place without the family involvement. He further expressed that in present times, parents hardly know the boyfriends or suitors of their daughters. They pick their boyfriends and marry them without the prior knowledge of the parents. The girl packs her belongings and joins the man in his house. Sometimes the man does not know the house or parents of the girl and would have to make enquiries either from the girl or from the community, before visiting the parents of the girl, to inform them of their marriage. While laughing he indicated:

*"Parents are only informed after the children have taken a decision that they are married and there is nothing you can do because they are uncontrollable. Your daughter can leave your house and stay with a man for months. It is when their actions lead to pregnancy that they may begin to consider marriage in the traditional form."*

Mr. Courage blamed this misbehaviour to the fact that girls are no longer circumcised, so because of that they are lustful and therefore find it difficult to control themselves. This endorses the reason why there was so much resistance against the campaign to stop female genital mutilation, which was so rampant in the District. The study found that one other change that used to be a condition before marriage was women circumcision. As revealed in the study, it was perceived that no woman could have a happy marriage without going through the circumcision. The supposition was that if any woman bore children without having to go through this, the children were being disrespected, insulted and looked

down upon. These children were being referred to as 'Clitoris children.' They were considered as stubborn because their mother gave birth to them without going through the rite of circumcision. These derogatory remarks and insults were also affecting their mothers. So no woman wanted to go through such an experience, despite the pains and difficulties they experience after. All the participants informed the researchers that such practice does no longer exist in the communities. An elderly woman (73 years) expressed:

*'I have not seen or heard of this done anywhere in the traditional area for a long time now. The Police and Social welfare people will arrest any person who does that. Even the chiefs now do not support it. If it is practiced at all, it may be possible with the communities outside our jurisdiction that is those across the borders of Ghana'.*

The key informants and 23 others however, had a contrary view, indicating that in as much as the traditional practice of circumcision sought to reduce the sexual drive of the girl- child, such practice actually was dehumanised as it came with a lot of complication and bemoaned the practice in the past. To them government policy targeting female circumcision has been a laudable one. One of them indicated:

*'Notwithstanding the wisdom behind this practice, it negatively undermines the sacrosanct of the girl child. Traditional authorities could find other better alternatives to deal with sexual drive of young girls rather than subjecting them to circumcision which has dangerous consequences on their health, emotional and physical development'.*

The emerging theme is that all the participants have identified the dangers of early sex among the girl child. The picture is that the approach to early sexual life among girls however, was detrimental to the development of the girl child. This also means that the change in such a practice has protected the girl child from injurious but unintended practice of abuse. The assertion that parents are less involved in contraction of marriage signalled that the traditional concept of marriage which is not just a union between a man and a woman but families, is defeated and could explain why marriage is perceived as unstable compared to the past. As argued by Omobola (2013), marriage involves the union of two or more families, and it is the communal responsibility of the people to ensure that it succeeds. This assertion was validated by Madam Patience (59 years). She explained:

*'The effects of the non-adherence to the customary marriage procedure means that the interactions that use to take place between families before marriage as agreed upon are virtually absent. There is no extensive background investigation of the partners.'*

*For this reason, traditional marriage is no longer forging any strong relationship between families, clans and communities. It is now a relationship that is limited to two or few individuals. The entire extended family is no longer involved in most instances. This, therefore, does not lead to a united extended family, that has love among its members and cares for the welfare of all members’.*

In corroboration Madam Bawa (45 years) pointed out that:

*‘There is lack of parental control and respect. The children no longer get closer to their parents and elders for advice. Now it is very difficult to monitor the children’s movement, especially the girls. So because of this, they engage in relationships with the opposite sex without the knowledge of the parents. Sometimes these relationships result into unwanted pregnancies and marriages without the consent of the parents. In the olden days both the father and mother had roles they played in providing education about life in general and in the area of gender roles and family issues. Now it is very difficult to carry out these parental responsibilities’.*

The emerging idea is that the social change as experienced is affecting society in general creating a system of instability and insecurity in marriage and social life. As the social change theory espoused, society is likened to a living organism which has interdependent parts. This means that a malfunctioning with one organ (institution/instability of marriage) is likely to affect the whole fabric of society. This calls for a reconsideration of contemporary marriage arrangement which is said to be virtually devoid of family (parents) contribution as identified in the study.

### **Monetization of bride wealth**

One other change, as identified in the study in contemporary time is monetization of bride wealth with its ramification on marriage security of women as pointed out by 18 participants. Madam Abiba (38 years) explained as follows:

*‘Monetization of bride wealth - the payment of the bride wealth in cash, is not dignified. What happens here is that the suitor and the in-laws make a market survey of prizes of cows that are suitable for the traditional bride wealth payment and then the animals are converted into cash as payment for the bride wealth instead of the traditional use of hoes, axes and cattle. Payments of bride wealth with cash principally have been conducted by people who have migrated outside the community, especially to the southern sector of the country. Women are now*

*bought like slave with cash. This affects their reputation and that of the community they come from’.*

In support of the assertion, Madam Agrawe (87 years) recounted,

*‘The problem with this payment is that, there is usually no witness involved in this deal, as a result, this can generate into a problem in the future because there are no records kept in this transaction. Regarding the bride wealth payment using animals, what happens is that the cows usually would be driven out from the man’s house to the full glare of the community and taken to the in-laws by a witness who is known as the pogkigra. The larger community members indirectly witness the unification between the married couples and the entire families.*

A participant, a teacher (49 years old) was of the view that giving out a daughter for money is like she is being sold out. He remarked:

*‘Now people even bargain with their in-laws as if they are selling a commodity. In one marriage that I witnessed, they had to bargain for long before they finally settled on an amount. The family of the lady wanted them to pay GHS1, 600.00 (about 160 US dollars) per cow and that they needed two cows and they too felt that it was too much and offered to pay GHS 1,400.00 per cow (about 140 US dollars). Their reason for demanding a reduction was that, the man was in school and also needed money to pay his school fees. This went to and fro until they settled at GHS1, 500.00 per cow (about 150 US dollars). So instead of cows they paid GHS 3,000. 00 (about 300 US dollars) to represent two cows. To me this monetization of bride wealth is “like selling the woman’.*

A section of the participants (24) however were of the view that the change of bride wealth to cash is necessitated by a factor of convenience and see nothing wrong with it. They expressed that as a result of the difficulty of shepherding the cattle, due to limited grazing land and labour scarcity as the children now have to go to school, the payment of the bride wealth in cash could be acceptable. This revelation suggests that due to the changing social and economic conditions of society, it is increasingly becoming not feasible to pay cow or other materials either than the payment of cash in this cash economy. The study also suggests that the traditional bride wealth payment in the form of cattle denied children, both boys and girls from attending school as they have to take care of those cattle involved. Chiweshe (2016) in his study found that many individuals did not see the monetization of bride wealth to be a concern

because bridal money is viewed as a significant component of African cultural identity, so women as well as men defend the practice. Also, Chabata (2012) in his studies found that, married women claimed the bride wealth confers status on them, because the payment of a sizable sum of money as bride wealth conveys the value of the recipient.

### Abandonment of elopement

A noticeable change as in traditional marriage system which has a major implication for the girl child as gathered from 36 participants was marriage by elopement, a situation where girls are captured and taken as wives virtually without their knowledge or consent. This practice was however, an acceptable traditional marriage arrangement. While few participants (8) were of the view that this practice guaranteed the safety of the girl child's marriage (future), overwhelming majority (29) expressed that it was not dignified and undermined the right of choice of the girl. The participants indicated that marriage is a lifelong union and people should be given the opportunity to decide whom they want to marry. Some participants expressed as follows:

*'This forced marriage was only limited to the girl child. The boy-child was allowed to grow and make his choice of the lady he desires to marry. Sometimes the family identifies a girl they think is suitable for him to marry and he has the right to decline or accept. "ba ka perigre budibla ti a zona tampugre," (you do not force a man against his will to marry)'*

*'Marriage by elopement is hardly practiced again in our communities which is very good. This way of marriage was less dignifying and disrespectful to womanhood. A girl is forcefully given to marriage to a man by her parents. They did not even consider the maturity of the girl. They only used physical appearance as a benchmark as a sign of maturity to force the girl into marriage'*

*"This practice was forced to stop because of enforcement of laws by the state agencies especially the police. Elopement is now considered as an act of kidnapping and anyone found doing that is considered a criminal, and for that matter, can be punished by the law. What happens now is that lovers who want to enter into marriage relationship reach a mutual consensus to marry."*

The emerging theme was that the practice of elopement was discriminatory against the girl child and denied her opportunity to access education. It also implies that the advent of civil law and other forms of activism have contributed to the change in traditional marriage arrangements. This way of marriage as the study found

was abusive and undermined the rights of women, for that matter the girl child. The girl had no right to make choices as to whom they should marry. The system also promotes early marriage regardless as to its social, economic and psychological consequences on the girl's development. This could explain why the Ghana's Children's Act (1998) (Act 560) prohibits the idea of forced marriage. It also defines a child as any person below the age of 18, and as such, should be given the needed care and protection. Section 14 of the Act clearly indicates that 'No person shall force a child to be married, to be betrothed and to be subjected to a dowry transaction'. It also indicated that the minimum age of marriage of whatever kind shall be eighteen years. This means that the changes that have taken place in terms of elopement have positively improved the quality of the girl child. This finding supports Ushe's (2015) claim that, some changes in traditional practices improve the quality of life while others create conflict and stress.

### Summary

From the foregoing findings and discussions, the general picture is that the changes in customary marriage practices as in the Bongo community have both positive and negative consequences on the development of the girl child. As rightly argued by Akurugu et al. (2021), Horne et al. (2013) and Posel and Rudwick (2013), bride wealth performs important and conflicting roles in securing yet confounding various kinds of rights and entitlements such as dignity, recognition and respect for the conjugal couples in most (patrilineal) societies. Nonetheless, the practice equally tends to deepen existing gender disparities between men and women (Akurugu et al., 2021). While there is the need to strengthen the best customary marriage practices, those found to be inimical to the growth and development of the girl child and women in general, have to be abandoned and reinforced by law.

### Conclusion

The study interrogated the changes in the customary marriage of Bongo Traditional Area over the past 60 years. The study found that the advent of formal education, civil laws and human rights and gender activism, have resulted in the changes in traditional marriage arrangements of courtship and circumcision, monetization of bride wealth and elopement. From gender perspective, the various changes have both positive and negative implications. Instability of marriage due to less parental involvement in marriage arrangement, and perceived frequency of unwanted and teenage pregnancy are blamed on disregard to some traditional marriage processes which hitherto guaranteed

marriage stability and family life. The study also found that due to certain changes, girls are now free to access education, determine as and when they want to marry and the person they prefer to be the life partner. The changes have also liberated the girl child from early marriage and circumcision who hitherto affected the physical, emotional and psychological development of the girl due to pain and stress. These changes are in consonance with the change theory which anchored the study.

The study concluded that cultural traditions are dynamic and changes are bound to take place. Society therefore needs to uphold the good practices and at the same time, abandon those that are injurious to the development of the girl in particular.

## Recommendations

On the basis of the study findings, it is recommended that advocacy groups should be formed at the local levels, consisting of women and men associations in conjunction with traditional authorities, opinion leaders and civil society organizations (CSOs) who actually understand the plight of the girl child and women and would want to protect and promote their rights without necessarily undermining the cultural heritage of the people. As espoused by the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, appropriate customary and cultural values are required to meet the needs of the people, however, those found to be detrimental to the health and safety of the people should be eradicated.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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