

'Because it's our culture!' (Re)negotiating the meaning of *lobola* in Southern African secondary schools

Abstract

Payment of bridewealth or lobola¹ is a significant element of marriage among the Basotho of Lesotho and the Shona of Zimbabwe. However, the functions and meanings attached to the practice are constantly changing. In order to gauge the interpretations attached to lobola by young people today, this paper analyses a series of focus group discussions conducted among senior students at two rural secondary schools. It compares the interpretations attached by the students to the practice of lobola with academic interpretations (both historical and contemporary). Among young people the meanings and functions of lobola are hotly contested, but differ markedly from those set out in the academic literature. While many students see lobola as a valued part of 'African culture', most also view it as a financial transaction which necessarily disadvantages women. The paper then seeks to explain the young people's interpretations by reference to discourses of 'equal rights' and 'culture' prevalent in secondary schools. Young people make use of these discourses in (re)negotiating the meaning of lobola, but the limitations of the discourses restrict the interpretations of lobola available to them.

The practice of *lobola* in Lesotho and Zimbabwe

Lobola, the provision of gifts to the parents of a bride, usually in the form of cash or livestock, is an entrenched part of marriage in parts of Southern Africa.² In Lesotho,

¹ The Zulu term *lobola* was that which the young research participants in each country used most commonly, and hence is the term I use in this paper. The students' indigenous languages have their own terms (*roora* in Shona and *bohali* in Sesotho).

² While the focus of this paper is on *lobola*, it should be recognised that this cannot be fully understood independently of other aspects of marriage (including polygyny, child-pledging, bride-service etc.).

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women subject to customary law (most rural women) may marry in either customary or civil marriages. Customary marriage, in compliance with Section 34(1) of the Laws of Lerotoli, requires both fathers' agreement and payment of *lobola*.³ Civil marriage is conducted by a minister of religion or District Administrator and is subject to somewhat different requirements.⁴ In practice, most marriages combine the two, although usually customary marriage comes first and thus takes legal precedence. In Zimbabwe, *lobola* is no longer a legal requirement of customary marriage, although the Customary Marriages Act assumes that in most cases *lobola* will be paid.⁵ While couples over 18 can choose to marry without *lobola*, this is rare:⁶ a survey in Harare in the 1980s revealed only 5% of marriages to have been registered without *lobola* payments.⁷

Meanings and Functions of *Lobola*

Over the past nearly two centuries of European involvement in Southern Africa, *lobola* has been interpreted by Western observers in many ways. These changing interpretations relate in part to the changes which have taken place in the nature and The way in which *lobola* is practised and understood has changed over time and must be interpreted in the light of wider political, economic and social contexts.⁸ Nor do functions remain constant across time and space. Southern African bridewealth systems are very varied, and even where they are structurally similar, their individual functions and meanings cannot be read as identical.⁹

Lobola arguably serves a multiplicity of purposes within Southern African society, both material (in terms of distribution of both productive and consumable resources), symbolic

³ S.M. Seeiso, L.M. Kanono, M.N. Tsotsi and T.E. Monaphathi, 'The legal situation of women in Lesotho', in J. Stewart and A. Armstrong (eds). *The legal situation of women in Southern Africa* (Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications 1990).

⁴ D. Gill, (ed). *The situation of children and women in Lesotho* (Maseru, Sechaba Consultants 1994).

⁵ Zimbabwe, Customary Marriages Act: Revised Edition (Harare, Government Printer 1996).

⁶ UNICEF, *Children and women in Zimbabwe: a situation analysis update* (Harare, UNICEF 1994).

⁷ C. Stoneman and L. Cliffe, *Zimbabwe: politics, economics and society* (London, Pinter 1989).

⁸ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 145.



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(relating to the construction of social identity, particularly sexual and gender identities, but also the transition to adulthood¹⁰) and establishing the nature of relationships between people. These functions are intricately interconnected. In Lesotho, Murray writes:

it is impossible to isolate the material or 'economic' aspect of *bohali* transfers from their ideological or 'cultural' aspect, and to ascribe priority to one or the other. *Bohali* is 'cultural' in that Basotho effect resolutions of personal identity with reference to the transactions ... and they also rationalize such transactions retrospectively ... *Bohali* is also 'economic' in that transfers in livestock and cash are substantial items of income and expenditure in household budgets.¹¹

The task of this section is to briefly outline some of the functions served by *lobola* and the ways these have changed over time in response to changing circumstances in the two societies under consideration. And changing European interpretations?????

Material Functions

Materially, *lobola* serves to redistribute both scarce consumption resources (cattle as meat, cash etc.) and rights over productive resources: land, cattle and labour (the immediate labour of the young people marrying, and later the labour provided by their offspring). Through *lobola*, a household can secure both production and reproduction.¹²

The combination of such material functions implied by a particular transfer depends upon the economic context in which it takes place.

Early colonial interpretations of *lobola* in both Lesotho and Zimbabwe equated it straightforwardly with the sale of daughters for cattle.¹³ Protestant missionaries in Lesotho

⁹ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

¹⁰ D. Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power: the construction of moral discourse in Southern Rhodesia, 1894-1930* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1993).

¹¹ C. Murray, *Families divided: the impact of migrant labour in Lesotho* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1981), p. 146.

¹² G. Malahleha, *Contradictions and ironies: women of Lesotho* (London, Change International Reports: Women and Society 1984).

¹³ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*. Ref for Lesotho??

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similarly saw 'marriage with cattle' as commercial transactions, degrading women as mere chattels.¹⁴ This was essentially a misinterpretation which reflected European regard for property: until European colonisation bridewealth was not understood to confer property rights.¹⁵ As Jeater points out, 'rights to capacities vested in people are not the same thing as rights to property.'¹⁶

Rights to labour and land may be transferred through the practice of *lobola*, but so too are material goods. In Zimbabwe's pre-colonial past, *lobola* generally took the form of a hoe (*badza*), which was worth little materially, but was a symbol of the marriage (maybe also a symbol of work).¹⁷ According to Schmidt 'Immediately prior to the European occupation, typical marriage payments included four to five head of cattle supplemented by other gifts such as hoes, blankets, and baskets of grain.'¹⁸ With European occupation payments began to be made in cash. Chigwedere complains: '[s]ince 1890 [the year Zimbabwe was colonised] we have become commercialised, every aspect of *lobola* has become a matter of money.'¹⁹ Even in pre-colonial times, however, bridewealth was not purely symbolic, but could allow petty accumulation of wealth. In the 1870s, trade with the Portuguese resulted in the use of gold and guns in Shona bridewealth payments.²⁰ Market conditions shaped the nature of bridewealth demands:²¹ cash was demanded in the economic depression of 1920s as a result of falling wage incomes and crop prices,²² and later due to shortages of

¹⁴ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 126. In Zimbabwe, most missions, especially protestant ones, were fairly tolerant of bridewealth, although to some settlers it was evidence of perversion. Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

¹⁵ E. Schmidt, 'Patriarchy, capitalism and the colonial state in Zimbabwe', *Signs* 16, 4 (1991) pp. 732.

¹⁶ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

¹⁷ Gelfand, *The genuine Shona*.

¹⁸ E. Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives: Shona women in the history of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939* (Portsmouth, Heineman 1992), p. 17. Similarly, in Lesotho, it was common to give only two or three cattle, or even only a single hoe. S.J. Gill, *A short history of Lesotho* (Morija, Morija Museum and Archives 1993).

¹⁹ Cited in R. Weiss, *The women of Zimbabwe* (Harare, Nehanda n.d.), p. 138.

²⁰ Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*, p. 52.

²¹ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

²² Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.



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cattle.²³ The introduction of the plough and the scotch cart, however, gave cattle an economic as well as a social role, and at times made them the preferred currency.²⁴

As well as becoming commercialised under colonial rule, *lobola* became more formalised. In pre-colonial Lesotho, the number of cattle required was not fixed. It depended on wealth, and the poor paid only 2 or 3 cattle, plus calves sheep and goats, while the rich might pay as many as 40 cattle. It was only at the end of the century that anyone noted the 'conventional' expectation of 20 cattle, ten small stock and a horse.²⁵ Similarly, among the Shona, nineteenth century *lobola* arrangements and payments were much more *ad hoc* and fluid than records suggest.²⁶

Historically, most accounts of *lobola* have associated it with the rural production process. Through marriage and payment of *lobola*, a son could be transformed into a productive asset – upon marriage he would be granted land.²⁷ *Lobola* was, more significantly for the wider community, the means by which lineage elders extracted labour from junior men.²⁸ In pre-colonial times junior men would work for their own lineage in order to 'earn' the cattle they gave in bridewealth. Any deficit in the bridewealth payment would entitle the father-in-law to call upon his son-in-law for labour when needed.²⁹ By the late nineteenth century, men's labour for payment in white-owned farms, factories and mines was of greater value than their labour on the land, and it was this earning capacity which was valued by rural households:

²³ D. Auret, *A decade of development in Zimbabwe 1980-1990* (Gweru, Mambo/Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace 1990).

²⁴ Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*, p. 85-6. For a discussion of the preference for bridewealth payments in cattle in Lesotho, see J. Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine: 'development', depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho* (Cambridge, CUP 1990).

²⁵ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 128.

²⁶ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

²⁷ Malahleha, *Contradictions and ironies*.

²⁸ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

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bridewealth is not the 'same' institution in the latter part of the twentieth century as it was in the middle of the nineteenth century ... High levels of *bohali* today reflect the importance of access to able-bodied manpower.³⁰

An alternative, but commonly held, view sees bridewealth payments as transferring rights over women's productive and reproductive capacities.³¹ In different contexts the functions vary. Murray points to the need to recognise distinctions between rights to a woman's childbearing capacity; rights to her sexual and domestic services; and permanent rights over her children.³² Any analysis needs to acknowledge such complexities and multiple meanings to avoid representing those in *lobola* transfers as simple bearers of productive and reproductive capacities.³³

A theme that has run through the changing patterns of bridewealth payment has been the transition from what had been a primarily inter-lineage transfer to a primarily intergenerational transfer of wealth.³⁴ *Lobola* now serves as a means whereby elders are able to make claims on the next generation – specifically the earnings of potential sons-in-law. Insisting on high *lobola* provides for comfortable subsistence, or, in the event of default, affords entitlement to a daughter's children.³⁵ The vested interest of the elder generation in *lobola* partly accounts for the strong opposition of parents, particularly

²⁹ M. Gelfand, *The genuine Shona* (Gweru, Mambo 1973).

³⁰ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 128.

³¹ E. Batezat and M. Mwalo, *Women in Zimbabwe* (Harare, SAPES Trust 1989), p. 47. Murray argues, however, that 'it is often more realistic in contemporary practice to represent marital transactions as the result of bargaining conducted by senior women over the earning capacity of men, than as the result of bargaining conducted by senior men over the productive and reproductive capacities of women.' Murray, *Families divided*, p. 147.

³² Murray, *Families divided*, p. 143.

³³ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

³⁴ Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine*.

³⁵ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 144.

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fathers, to the Legal Age of Majority Act in Zimbabwe, which permits young people to marry without payment of *lobola*.³⁶

Lineage Functions

It is often said that, in Africa, marriage unites families, not just individuals.³⁷ *Lobola* may be seen as a seal on the exchange of a woman from one lineage to another.³⁸ For Thelejane, in Lesotho, 'A woman is an object that creates and seals relationships between families through *bohali* or *lobola*.'³⁹ *Lobola* paid for a daughter might go to her elder brother to enable him to pay *lobola* for a wife.⁴⁰ Under this arrangement, a daughter's function was to produce children for her husband's lineage and bridewealth cattle for her brother so that he could father children for her natal lineage.⁴¹

The bond created between lineages results partly from the persistence of the debt.⁴² In Lesotho, as in Zimbabwe, bridewealth payment does not take place all at once, but following important events such as childbirth, and relating to the need of the father-in-law and resources of the son-in-law. Full payment may take 10 or even 20 years, and in many cases never happens so the marriage contract is not formally fulfilled.⁴³

marriage should be regarded as a process in time and not as a single point of transition between the unmarried and the married state. Indeed the Sesotho maxim *bohali ha bo fele* is perhaps best translated as 'affinity never ends.'⁴⁴

³⁶ Stoneman and Cliffe, *Zimbabwe: politics, economics and society*; H.L. Vukasin, 'We carry a heavy load': rural women in Zimbabwe speak out, part II, 1981-1991 (Harare, Zimbabwe Women's Bureau 1992).

³⁷ Interestingly, people in general seldom attribute this to the practice of *lobola*.

³⁸ Stoneman and Cliffe, *Zimbabwe: politics, economics and society*.

³⁹ T.S. Thelejane, *An African girl and an African woman in a changing world*, UNESCO seminar on the changing family in the African context, (Maseru, Lesotho, 5-9/9/1983 1983), p. 2.

⁴⁰ Gelfand, *The genuine Shona*.

⁴¹ Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*.

⁴² J.S. Gay, 'Women and development in Lesotho' (Maseru, USAID 1982).

⁴³ Murray, *Families divided*, p.124.

⁴⁴ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 119.



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However, since commercialisation in the late 19th century, *lobola* has become more an individual transaction between two men.⁴⁵ A groom's parents are no longer so involved in the transaction.⁴⁶ Furthermore, there is, in Lesotho at least, an increasing trend to transfer the entire payment in one go, in order to avoid repeated meetings with in-laws.⁴⁷

Besides being a transfer of wealth between lineages, *lobola* serves a function within the lineage. While, in pre-colonial times, *lobola* enabled lineage heads to make advantageous alliances with other lineages, as such alliances became less important, *lobola* nonetheless gave power to elders within the individual lineage.⁴⁸ Furthermore, by redistributing the earnings of labour migrants among a household, *lobola* serves to strengthen the 'integrity of the household unit as an effective structure of supports and dependencies,'⁴⁹ bonding the migrant to the rural homestead, and enabling the rural household to make claims upon absent earners.

Lobola may be seen as payment for children for a lineage⁵⁰ as it 'brings about the absolute transfer of rights in a woman's procreative capacity from the woman's family to her husband's family.'⁵¹ In Lesotho it is said that 'the child belongs to the cattle' (*'ngoana ke oa likhomo'*),⁵² and in Zimbabwe 'cattle beget children.'⁵³

⁴⁵ Stoneman and Cliffe, *Zimbabwe: politics, economics and society*.

⁴⁶ S.-R.K. Asaba, *A comparative case study of the changing pattern of Bohali among the Basotho of Mafeking and the indigenous residential NUL staff (Ha Maama) with regard to their income and educational level*, BA (National University of Lesotho 1987).

⁴⁷ Asaba, *The changing pattern of Bohali*. Interestingly, Asaba found that parents, too, preferred to receive *lobola* in one payment, in order to avoid enmity between the two families.

⁴⁸ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

⁴⁹ C. Murray, 'The symbolism and politics of Bohali: household recruitment and marriage by instalment in Lesotho', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comaroff (eds). *Essays on African marriage in southern Africa* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, Jutta & Co. Ltd. 1981), p. 118.

⁵⁰ Gelfand, *The genuine Shona*.

⁵¹ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 142.

⁵² Cited in Murray, *Families divided*, p. 129.

⁵³ Cited in Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.



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This transfer in rights over children is not, however, straightforward, particularly in the context of Lesotho, owing to the protracted hand over of *bohali* payments.⁵⁴ In Lesotho six cattle are demanded for 'spoiling' (i.e. causing pregnancy) or for elopement, but do not accord paternity rights. While eight cattle 'lay the foundation' of a marriage, ten are necessary to secure paternity over children.⁵⁵ Often this payment of ten cattle is only completed upon the birth of the first child.⁵⁶ However, while *bohali* appeared to early observers⁵⁷ to be a coherent set of formal rules, Murray points to the inappropriateness of such a positivist interpretation. Instead he sees in *bohali* 'the idiom for resolution of conflict' over paternity,⁵⁸ wherein 'the existence of a particular "marriage" only comes into question in circumstances of dispute.'⁵⁹

It is also necessary to distinguish between the social (legal) father and physical father. It is a child's social father that is defined through sufficient payment of *lobola*.⁶⁰ This secures paternity of any children to which the woman subsequently gives birth, irrespective of who physically fathers them. Even when dead, a man who has paid *bohali* may continue to father children for his lineage.

Social Control Functions

Lobola enables the exercise of social control at a number of levels by different actors. Its significance within the lineage has already been mentioned. *Lobola* accords considerable control to the elder generation over the younger. In pre-colonial Zimbabwe, *lobola* gave the elders, not only a degree of control over their new daughter-in-law, but also their son –

⁵⁴ Murray, 'The symbolism and politics of Bohali'.

⁵⁵ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 122.

⁵⁶ This is a significant point which the wife's parents mark with a feast. 'Men familiar with the formalities of mine recruitment use the word *konteraka* (contract) to explain the significance of the *tlhabiso* feast which marks the fulfilment of the union.' Murray, *Families divided*, p. 122.

⁵⁷ E.g. H. Ashton, *The Basuto: a social study of traditional and modern Lesotho* (London, Oxford University Press 1967).

⁵⁸ C. Murray, *Keeping house in Lesotho*, PhD (University of Cambridge 1976).

⁵⁹ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 144.

⁶⁰ Murray, *Families divided*, p. 142.



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they 'controlled land, ... livestock, marriage and behaviour.'⁶¹ The control that charging *lobola* gave elders over young women was one route through which they were able to control young men.⁶²

Through bridewealth exchange, control is exercised over both men and women. However, men are able to exercise a certain amount of control in and through the transaction. Women have far fewer options. In Lesotho at least, women have no say in the *lobola* transaction.⁶³ It takes place in men's space (the cattle kraal), using men's property (cattle). While men can exercise some control over their lives through payment of bridewealth, women have fewer options in the construction of their sexual and gender identities.⁶⁴ The exchange links the gift-givers, not the gifts – 'women are conduits of a relationship, rather than partners to it.'⁶⁵ The transaction therefore accords them no social power.⁶⁶

Through *lobola*, control over young women is vested in their elders and also their husbands. *Lobola* is thus related to women's lack of control over their own bodies, either sexually or in terms of their labour.⁶⁷ Even if pre-colonial thought did not conceive of *lobola* in terms of property rights, nineteenth century Shona women did not have full rights to themselves: others could dispose of them through a *lobola* exchange.⁶⁸ Women's bodies were never their own.⁶⁹ With the colonial introduction of the idea of property rights, a woman was seen to pass from the 'ownership' of father to that of husband. It is thus

⁶¹ Stoneman and Cliffe, *Zimbabwe: politics, economics and society*, p. 72.

⁶² Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

⁶³ P.M. Bereng, *I am a Mosotho* (Moriya, Lesotho, Morija Printing Works 1987).

⁶⁴ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*, p. 19.

⁶⁵ Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ One impact of commoditization was that women could, in theory, pay their own *lobola*, thereby (very occasionally) avoiding marriages they did not want. Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

⁶⁷ E. Batezat, M. Mwalo and K. Truscott, 'Women and independence: the heritage and the struggle', in C.Stoneman (ed). *Zimbabwe's prospects: issues of race, class, state and capital in southern Africa* (Basingstoke, Macmillan 1988).

⁶⁸ Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*.

⁶⁹ J.K. Gokova, 'Conventional manhood: the need for a reassessment', *Social Change and Development* 40 (1996) pp. 9-10.

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unsurprising that she should not have been accorded rights in court cases.⁷⁰ Colonial thought was somewhat contradictory: as British Subjects, women were supposed to be free. However, it was felt that abolition of *lobola* would violate property rights, which were also upheld in British 'civilisation'.⁷¹

Regardless of such attitudes, *lobola* was exploited as a tool of colonial control.⁷² While some missionaries sought to abolish *lobola* (usually on the basis that it was 'uncivilised' rather than 'immoral') other missionaries, and also the colonial state, defended it as a 'partial check on immorality'.⁷³ *Lobola* was functional to capitalism since men would engage in labour migration in order to pay bridewealth.⁷⁴ It also facilitated control over women. Through consultation with 'legal experts' – chiefs, headmen and elders who had a stake in reasserting control over women – rigid 'customary law' was codified, affording a strong hold over women.⁷⁵ Elders' concerns about bridewealth led to a need for them to control their daughters and preserve their status as potential wives; hence they impeded their daughters' education and migration to towns or work outside the immediate community.⁷⁶ Furthermore, as a result of polygyny and *lobola*, all women were able to be married, hence, according to the colonial authorities, there were no 'surplus women' and chances of 'prostitution' were reduced.⁷⁷ From the 1930s onwards, the colonial authorities ruled that payment of *lobola* gave men custody/guardianship over children, partly because they did not consider African women suitable mothers unless they were themselves under male control.⁷⁸

⁷⁰ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*. The property analogy also led to comparison of adultery with theft, leaving no space for a woman's culpability or agency.

⁷¹ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

⁷² Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*, p. 113-4.

⁷³ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

⁷⁴ Schmidt, 'Patriarchy, capitalism and the colonial state in Zimbabwe'.

⁷⁵ Schmidt, 'Patriarchy, capitalism and the colonial state in Zimbabwe'.

⁷⁶ Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*, pp. 141, 157.

⁷⁷ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*.

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No longer is *lobola* seen as such a stabilising influence. Recent research suggests that many girls and parents as well as boys oppose it because starting marriage in debt⁷⁹ is seen to cause instability in marriage.⁸⁰ Furthermore, 'bohali "payments" are becoming increasingly erratic and difficult to enforce. As descent group solidarity erodes, the basis for bridewealth erodes also.'⁸¹

Identity Functions

Lobola has long served to symbolise the transition to adulthood, the existence of a marriage and many other aspects of social identity and relationships. Increasingly, however, *lobola* is acquiring a new symbolic importance in relation to the construction of cultural identity as an example of 're-traditionalism.'⁸² This is particularly strong among the Basotho, who, for historical reasons wish to retain a separate political identity through adherence to particular distinctive customs, including fixed levels of bridewealth.⁸³ All Basotho are agreed on the traditional requirement,⁸⁴ and even when money is given in place of cattle, it's still referred to as 'cattle.'⁸⁵

Young People's Interpretations of *Lobola*

Lobola has been shown to take on a variety of different functions and meanings within society, depending upon the particular social, economic and political conditions of the time and place. The Southern Africa of today is very different from that of the nineteenth century – inevitably *lobola* serves different roles and acquires different interpretations. This section analyses the views expressed by young people in two 'typical' rural Southern

⁷⁸ Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*, p. 110.

⁷⁹ Retrenchment of mineworkers has reduced the availability of cash, and young men often borrow to pay *lobola*, rather than remaining in debt to their in-laws.

⁸⁰ Asaba, *The changing pattern of Bohali*.

⁸¹ M.B. Mueller, *Women and men in rural Lesotho: the periphery of the periphery*, PhD (Brandeis University 1977), p. 144.

⁸² P. Chabal, 'The African crisis: context and interpretation', in R. Werbner and T. Ranger (eds). *Postcolonial identities in Africa* (London, Zed 1996).

⁸³ The specific reasons for adherence to bohali, rather than other Sesotho customs (such as initiation) are attributable to its association with subsistence. Murray, *Keeping house in Lesotho*.

⁸⁴ Asaba, *The changing pattern of Bohali*.

⁸⁵ Malahleha, *Contradictions and ironies*.

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African secondary schools, one in Lesotho (Mahloko High School) and the other in Zimbabwe (Ruchera Secondary School).⁸⁶ It is based upon interpretations of *lobola* expressed by senior students in focus group sessions in the two case study schools.⁸⁷ These focus groups were set up as part of a wider research project exploring issues of gender construction. The focus group method allowed young people to express and develop (and potentially transform) their own ideas on the subject with relatively little guidance from the researcher. The themes selected for discussion were those which arose from a preliminary discussion of schooling and gender relations. In the Zimbabwean school, where the students were relatively proficient in English, very few prompts were required to develop the discussion. At Mahloko High School, students were more hesitant in expressing their views, and there were times when I needed to intervene to establish whether views expressed represented a group consensus. Although barely mentioned in the classroom, the theme of *lobola* recurred frequently in the students' discussions concerning marriage and gender relations in the household. The importance of *lobola* was debated intensely, and its meaning hotly contested. A small number of transcript extracts are presented here, selected for their representativeness and clarity.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Pseudonyms are used throughout for places and people to protect anonymity.

⁸⁷ Three focus groups were convened at Mahloko High School, comprising respectively Form D girls; Form E girls and Forms D and E boys (students aged 17-24). These met between three and seven times each for approximately 45 minutes each time. At Ruchera Secondary School, students were drawn from Form 4 (aged 15-21) to constitute a group of girls and a group of boys, each of which met several times for sessions up to two hours long. A final session was conducted at Ruchera comprising both girls and boys.

⁸⁸ Verbatim transcripts are presented, in order to minimise distortion to the views of the students. Ellipses indicate a pause. Ellipses in square brackets indicate editing.

Extract 1: Girls' focus group

Nicola: If you get married, will *lobola* be paid?

Severai: Yes! [as if this is obvious]

Yvonne: It's like, if I get married, I would like my husband to pay *lobola* to my parents, because it's ...

Yamurai: ... part of our culture.

Rudo: Anyway, can you just clarify to me, what's the exact purpose of paying *lobola*?

Netsai: It's to give thanks to the parents.

Constance: It's like part of our culture that a man will pay *lobola* to ... to our parents. [...] Paying *lobola* is part of our culture and nowadays, you know, it's like, nowadays, we are finding out that if a woman dies without being paid *lobola*, a man have to brought something before you are buried to show that she owns you.

Chido: *He* owns you.

Constance: He owns you.

Nicola: Is it good to be owned?

Constance: It's not good to be owned, but that's part of our culture. That's because men say 'if I pay *lobola* for you, that means I ...' - he owns you. Suppose ...

Rudo: You have agreed with my point which says you are under man.

Constance: I won't be under man, but, I'm part of - I'm an asset to him - a ...

[shouting]

Yvonne: Rudo, it is like - Constance is trying to say that - Constance is trying to say, if a man pays *lobola* for you, he is your husband - he is the only whom you can sleep with - that's what ...

[...]

Tsitsi: I think *lobola* is not good, because it's sort of buying someone to be your wife. So it's not good, because you'll be buying a - a woman, to sleep with you.

Constance: If you said *buying* someone, that means slavery.

Annatolia: *Lobola* is good, because it's the way of showing you that he loves you wholeheartedly.

Rebecca: Yes.

[laughter]

Shylate: Tsitsi, Tsitsi ...

Chido: A question for Tsitsi: you say that *lobola* is a way of buying someone. Does that mean money - the money you pay - is the same as that person?

Tsitsi: Yes.

Rebecca: No! [shouting]

[...]

Yvonne: Tsitsi! Tsitsi! You know why his parents charge *lobola*? They charge *lobola* in order to test how much you love their daughter, because if you do not love their daughter much, you won't pay. You won't pay!

Tsitsi: Maybe our boyfriend may give the *lobola* to the, to the, to your parents, and later on the boy will ill-treatment you - what ... what ...

Yeukai: If you know the definition of money, you can agree with Tsitsi.

[RSS, 05/08/97].

The girls in Extract 1 refer to many of the arguments students made at both schools. The functions of *lobola* are interpreted rather differently from those outlined in the section above. Firstly, *lobola* is seen as part of a valued culture. This was highlighted above, and

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is perhaps the most prominent justification for the practice among students at either school. What students mean when they refer to 'culture' and how this is located in the discursive practices of the two schools will be considered below.

Secondly, *lobola* is justified as a way of thanking a girl's parents for bringing her up (and, according to some, for educating her). This interpretation is not entirely new – indeed, it was mentioned by Casalis in relation to the Basotho in the mid-nineteenth century.⁸⁹ However, it has been noted more frequently by local observers than by anthropologists. Asaba in Lesotho⁹⁰ and Weiss in Zimbabwe⁹¹ suggest *lobola* can be understood as compensation for the expense of a girl's upbringing (including her education) and the loss of her services. For this reason, *bohali* rates in Lesotho have been increasing, especially for educated girls.⁹² However, the girls at Ruchera Secondary School do not argue this point from a simple perspective of monetary compensation for money expended/labour foregone, but also place it within a moral framework in which *lobola* has an ethical/symbolic role, as a token of gratitude.

A third argument the girls make in support of *lobola* is that it serves to demonstrate a man's love for his wife. This perhaps represents a rather superficial application of a European discourse of 'love' to explain the sense that *lobola* represents commitment. Many girls feel *lobola* offers security in marriage: a man who spends a large sum of money to obtain a bride is unlikely to leave her. At the same time, it is felt that payment of *lobola* ensures a woman's fidelity. Social pressure will not permit a woman for whom *lobola* has

⁸⁹ E. Casalis, *The Basutos* (Morija, Morija Museum and Archives 1997).

⁹⁰ Asaba, *The changing pattern of Bohali*.

⁹¹ Weiss, *The women of Zimbabwe*.

⁹² E.M. Sebatane, *The family in Lesotho: perspectives on its changing life and structure*. The changing family in the African Context (Maseru, Lesotho, 5-9/9/1983 1983). Although, in Lesotho, the number of cattle 'charged' remains constant, they may be translated into a higher monetary value for girls who are better educated. There is no fixed price for an ox. In Lesotho, even in the mid-1980s, up to M 8,000 (US\$ 4,000) might be charged for an educated girl. Asaba, *The changing pattern of Bohali*. In Zimbabwe in the mid-1990s, payments of up to Z\$10,000 (US\$ 800) were made. Essof and van der Wijk, 'Women in Zimbabwe'.

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been paid to sleep with other men. This is of particular importance in Southern Africa at a time of heightened awareness of the risks posed by AIDS.

However, the young women recognise that *lobola* makes it difficult for a woman to escape a marriage, even if ill-treated by her husband. *Lobola* has long been implicated in domestic violence, as a result of women's fear of returning to the natal home without being able to repay bridewealth, which may have already been consumed.⁹³ Equally, women for whom bridewealth is not paid lack any status or authority in their brothers' families, and are thus deprived of security – their natal families have no responsibilities towards them.⁹⁴

More notable in the students' discussions than the negative practical implications of *lobola*, however, was their discomfort with the symbolic impacts of understanding *lobola* as a financial transaction. The girls' discussion of *lobola* in Extract 1 reflects an uneasy belief that *lobola* is a financial transaction which implies that women are 'bought', 'owned' or equated with a sum of money.⁹⁵ This was even more of an issue for the boys (Extract 2). The boys were clearly uncomfortable equating *lobola* with buying labour: an equivalence tainted with notions of slavery.⁹⁶ At the same time, they felt they were being expected to pay a substantial sum of money, and this should bring a return, generally understood to mean unpaid labour from women in the household. Some argued against *lobola* on the basis that it meant paying twice: paying *lobola* and maintaining the wife (clearly assuming she would not have paid work and her unpaid work would be worthless).

⁹³ Schmidt, *Peasants, traders and wives*, R. Mhangu, 'The work of the Musasa Project', *Social Change and Development* 40 (1996) pp. 3-5.

⁹⁴ Auret, *A decade of development in Zimbabwe*. In Lesotho customary divorce requires the return of *lobola*: the woman returns to her parents' family, taking only personal possessions D. Gill, *The situation of children and women in Lesotho*.

⁹⁵ Weiss similarly observes Zimbabwean women's ambivalence towards *lobola*: some resent the implication of male ownership; others feel *lobola* accords them value. Weiss, *The women of Zimbabwe*.

⁹⁶ The girls, too, drew this analogy. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that *lobola* payments are a way of giving (monetary) recognition to women's reproductive labour that is otherwise unpaid. J.S. Gay, *Basotho women's options: a study of marital careers in rural Lesotho*, PhD (University of Cambridge 1980).

Extract 2: Boys' focus group

Josiah: That's why some people agree that there is no purpose of paying *lobola*, whilst after, in the house, you can do the duty which can be done by a woman. Let's ... taking this example, that of seeing a man cooking whilst his wife watching television. So, there - you will be the only person paying *lobola*, because paying *lobola*, it means you will ... the woman who you have married should have to do some duties for you, because that's why you have married - for you to be helped. So if she refuses, it means there is no reason for paying *lobola*.

Thomas: Yes. If they want to that, er, that er sort of, er, injury, for them to help each other and ... If the woman wants to remove that sort of idea of being the ones who are responsible for cooking, that means *lobola* should be removed, and that should - when we remove *lobola*, we will be damaging our culture to do so. We have to remain with those cultural things and we have to remain with ... a man will have to remain with his duties and a woman with his duties at the house..

Blessing: Er, I disagree with what Josiah has said, because when one is paying *lobola*, it doesn't pay the fact of a man being getting the wife for labour force.

Thomas: No, that is not labour. That is not labour.

Same: That's what I have said.

Josiah: I am saying paying *lobola* you will be paying for a woman, for her to help you, not to ...

Norman: Yes, that's labour.

Josiah: No. Helping. It's helping her.

[...]

Josiah: [...] When it comes to paying *lobola*, I am meaning to help you - sharing ideas in the house, for you to proceed to be successful. Or even the work itself - that's helping - not labour.

[RSS, 06/08/97].

Apart from domestic labour, the girls in Extract 1 make a connection between paying for a wife and prostitution (a connection that, interestingly, boys do not make at either school). Girls at Mahloko High School (Extract 3) similarly saw *lobola* as payment for sexual favours.

Extract 3: Girls' focus group

Nkhetheleng: [*Lobola*] is important, because I don't think I can give somebody my daughter and not pay me, because ...

Ilumaleng: He is going to use her! [mischievously – the others laugh]

[MHS, 03/09/96].

Viewing *lobola* as a financial transaction implies, not only a demand on women's labour (whether household or sexual), but also, their being cast in the role of property, and hence 'controlled' by their husbands. This, too, was controversial. Maxwell observed: 'the

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payment of *lobola* is the one which can cause quarrels, because the man will end up saying 'I bought you, so I need to control you'.⁹⁷ Mahloko High School boys unanimously agreed there could be 'equal rights' in the household if *lobola* was abolished (Extract 4). However, given that they expected to pay *lobola*, they were concerned that they should be able to protect their property rights over their wives. Like boys at Ruchera Secondary School, they used *lobola* as a justification for beating. If they found their wife sleeping with another man, they would beat her 'Because it's you who paid *lobola* for that woman'.⁹⁸ In contrast, were *lobola* not paid, 'If she wronged me, many times, I would let her, and talk about a divorce'.⁹⁹ In this way, wife beating could be reconciled with 'equal rights' through the medium of *lobola*.

Extract 4: Boys' focus group

Nicola: ... Should men be heads of families?

[...]

Soloane: [...] it's the man who go and collect the woman. The boy who go and collect the girl to make her his wife.

Koaleli: His wife.

Soloane: So he have to pay a lot of ...

Mosioua: *Lobola*.

Soloane: *Lobola*.

Nicola: So that gives him the right to make decisions for her?

Mosioua: Yes.

Ntsone: Yes.

Tumisang: But ...

Fusi: Before you [Tlali] ... you talk about equal rights, so how can the man be the head in the family, as we have equal rights?

Koaleli: *E!* [Yes] he said that it's a exchange.

[...]

Tlali: Because if we shared equal rights, we have ... we have not ... we must not pay *lobola*

[...]

Thabo: Both of us should pay

Bereng: *E!*

Tlali: If we are sharing equal rights ...

Taelo: What the girl must pay the *lobola* too.

Makhabane: ... and share the saving!

Koaleli: and build us house!

⁹⁷ Focus group, RSS, boys, 06/08/97.

⁹⁸ Focus group, MHS boys, 11/09/96.

⁹⁹ Focus group, MHS boys, 11/09/96.

Nicola: So is *lobola* a bad thing?¹⁰⁰

Bereng: Yes.

[...]

Nicola: And if you did not have *lobola*, men would not be heads of the family?

Mahloua: Of course.

Several: Yes.¹⁰¹

Bereng: *E!* You are nothing.

Several: Yes!

[MHS, 11/09/96].

Occasionally boys see *lobola* as indicating, not only their control over women, but also their greater worth. Josiah remarked: "if I have got the challenge of paying *lobola* and you will move for me, it means I am greater than you."¹⁰² This is more disempowering of women than seeing *lobola* as a contract which requires women to work or to be obedient: a transaction perceived by many students as compatible with 'equal rights' and not affecting women's 'worth' outside the *lobola* contract.

Most clearly absent from the students' discussions are interpretations of *lobola* relating to lineage and bonding between families. *Lobola* is seen as a transaction between individuals – the wider extended family does not enter the picture, nor is establishing paternity highlighted as an issue by the students. This may relate to the particular (self-absorbed) concerns of youth, or it might reflect a broader societal change.

School Discourses and Interpreting *Lobola*

In order to account for the meanings young people attach to *lobola*, it is necessary to explore the wider discursive environment of the secondary school. The views the students put forward relate to three particular discursive strands within the schools: normative notions of 'culture' and 'equal rights' and systems of thought embedded in economic

¹⁰⁰ My interventions in this discussion represent an attempt to establish whether my interpretation of the students' views is correct, and how representative they are of the group.

¹⁰¹ In Lesotho it is common to use 'yes' to affirm a negative.

¹⁰² Focus group, RSS, mixed, 24/09/97. On the initial payment of *lobola*, a woman moves to her husband's homestead.

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rationalism. On the one hand, *lobola* is valued because it is part of 'African culture', which students wish to associate themselves with and take pride in. On the other hand, they see a conflict between *lobola* and 'equal rights'. As in Extract 4, they try to reconcile these conflicting view points from a perspective of economic rationalism.

School tends to promote a very rationalist view of the world.¹⁰³ There is an emphasis on science, and in most subjects students are encouraged to seek rational explanations for things (and assessed on their ability to do so). Students at both schools study commercial subjects and learn to think in terms of the economic value of different activities. It is therefore unsurprising that they should extend this way of thinking beyond the context of the classroom.

It might be added here that the world views espoused by Southern African education systems draw heavily upon the world views of the early colonial administrators and missionaries who were involved in their inception. The enduring impact of such a world view can be seen in many aspects of the education systems, not least in the syllabuses employed (which have in many cases changed little from those which pertained under colonial rule), in the emphasis on examinations and quantification of knowledge etc. It is worth noting that this colonial world view which continues to shape Southern African schooling, also underlay early colonial interpretations of *lobola*. This is not to deny the changes that have taken place in education in Southern Africa. In particular, areas of post-Independence education in Zimbabwe were deliberately altered from the perspective of 'Scientific Socialism', which, again, promotes a rationalist understanding of the world.

¹⁰³ E.g. A. Inkeles and D. Smith, *Becoming Modern* (London, Heinemann 1974).



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While students remain largely unconscious of the extent to which education prompts them to think in ways that differ from those of their parents and grandparents. 'Culture' and 'equal rights', by contrast, are discourses students are highly conscious of, and which have normative value for them. No less than economic rationalism, however, they are discourses produced through colonial and postcolonial interaction with Western ideas. In the sections which follow, I shall explore how these two discourses are embedded in the practices of the secondary school (as well as in other aspects of Southern African society) and the consequences they have for students' understandings of the practice of *lobola*.

'Equal Rights'

'Equal rights' were mentioned frequently in students' discussions of *lobola* as well as in relation to other aspects of gender relations. The concept was associated with 'modernity', and with knowledge from elsewhere (Extract 5). In interviews, people involved in the administration of education at local and national levels, in both Lesotho and Zimbabwe, spoke enthusiastically of 'equal rights'.

Extract 5: Boys' focus group

Tlali: Nowadays ... now we have to share, because they ... Beijing!

Ntsone: Beijing! ... They are already saying that they will have to share equal rights.

[MHS, 11/09/96].

Equal rights are seldom mentioned in the classroom, but the term is encountered in Development Studies lessons in Lesotho, and Guidance and Counselling in Zimbabwe. There is somewhat greater emphasis in Zimbabwe, where the concept has been more readily adopted at the national level. (It is perhaps noteworthy that it was Basotho students who associated it with Beijing.) However, 'equal rights' is understood mainly in relation, not to the curriculum, but to practices and procedures in the school, and to related discourses concerning fairness and justice, prominent in school. In both schools girls and boys follow the same curriculum; compete on an equal basis for prizes; and head girls and boys have (theoretically) equal standing.

Extract 6: Interview with Catholic Priest

[...] as far as I've seen and followed, well, the, our system here - the place here, I mean, in fact, there's no really discrimination between the two [genders], or favour in this, because all of these, the students, the teachers, they are governed by one and the same - the same policy, the same syllabus, the same, let's say, school books, same money and the same teachers, teachers, teachers' guides for both, let's say the teachers, mistresses and so on. There's no discrimination between the two.
[Mahloko, 28/08/97].

As with the 'equal rights' discourse of liberal feminism, concern is with equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome (Extract 6). In practice, girls and boys are not treated equally. While teachers claim this should be the case,¹⁰⁴ they are unaware of the extent to which they themselves discriminate in class. Furthermore, outside the classroom there are marked distinctions, notably in uniforms, sports and other extra-curricular activities, which, even if open to both sexes, tend to attract predominantly single sex groups. This encourages a bounded conception of 'equal rights', which need not be applied to all areas of life.¹⁰⁵ This facilitates contestation among students as to whether *lobola* is an area of life to which 'equal rights' should apply. (In Lesotho they circumscribed it more, but were more ready to apply it to *lobola*????)

Furthermore, the 'equal rights' discourse dovetails with that of 'economic rationalism'. Students believe, for example, that decision-making in the household should relate to economic contribution. It has already been demonstrated that *lobola* is seen by young men, in particular, as an exchange which should bring a return – in relation to power within the household if nothing more. It is thus possible to reconcile payment of *lobola* with 'equal rights', within an economic rationalist framework. Thinking of *lobola* as a transaction provides a rationale for the unequal position of women in the household.

¹⁰⁴ This was also found in a survey in Zimbabwe. R. Gordon, 'Causes of girls' academic underachievement: the influence of teachers' attitudes and expectations on the academic performance of secondary school girls', (Harare, Human Resources Research Centre, University of Zimbabwe 1995).

¹⁰⁵ Gordon found that of 77.5% of boys who believed it equally important for girls and boys to be educated, 18.2% gave 'equal rights' as their reason. However, answers to other questions suggested these rights applied only to education. Interestingly, girls talked of 'equal rights' in relation to careers and marriage, but not education. R. Gordon, 'Attitudes towards girls in Zimbabwe', (Harare, UNICEF 1995), p. 11.



Part of the reason for the students' discomfort with the idea of *lobola* as a financial transaction, apart from its association with slavery or prostitution, was the idea that it was a practice belonging to 'African culture': a culture they prefer to see as untainted by Western commercialisation. In Extracts 1 and 2, the students defended the payment of *lobola* as an important part of their 'culture': a 'culture' that they valued highly. However, the students were appealing to a particular (and narrow) understanding of 'culture': not those everyday practices in which they participate, but are seldom conscious of (Bourdieu's 'habitus'), but those which they learn, self-consciously, to name 'culture' as a consequence of their schooling. This is not so much a discourse deriving from rural community life outside the school, but a discourse of 'culture' very much rooted in school. Culture is packaged in a particular way in school, and students develop a very clear idea of what constitutes their 'culture'. When I invited questions from a class at Ruchera Secondary School, the first was 'How is the culture in England?' suggesting this was an item of 'knowledge' that could be described in a few sentences.

'African culture' as presented through school textbooks, derives largely from colonial portrayals of African culture, designed to support patriarchal authority, through which the stability of the colonised could be assured. Although *lobola* itself may receive little attention, the general understanding of culture draws upon nineteenth century European thinking, and a view of culture that encompassed female subordination.¹⁰⁶ Culture in school textbooks is a narrowly defined body of knowledge, encompassing only certain aspects of life. However, while depictions of African life in modern textbooks differ little from the writings of early European anthropologists, students today are exhorted to take pride in their culture. Teachers, too, frequently talk about 'our African culture' in lessons in both schools, and try to promote a positive image.

¹⁰⁶ Similarly, in West Africa, 'negritude' defined African culture in largely colonial terms, with black women as 'repositories of rustic sensuality and mystique, objects of desire and sources of nurturance rather than thinking human beings.' A. Mama, 'Shedding the masks and tearing the veils: cultural studies for a post-colonial Africa', in A.M. Imam, A. Mama, and F. Sow (eds). *Engendering Africa social sciences* (Dakar, Senegal, CODESRIA 1997), p. 72. African literature in English chosen for use in schools is that which is published in the West, and this, too, often portrays African culture in ways that demean women. R. Cobham, 'Problems of gender and history in the teaching of "Things fall apart"'. in R. Granquist (ed). *Canonization and teaching of African literatures* (n.d.).

The Lesotho Junior Certificate Development Studies course recommends group and class discussion of the value of Sesotho culture, and cultural change (Extract 7). However, despite acknowledging that culture changes, the textbook presents a view of Sesotho culture as static and synonymous with tradition. The existence of an 'approved version' of culture, in the texts written specifically to accompany Lesotho's Development Studies course (and upon which students are annually examined), emphasises an understanding of 'culture' as something predefined and unchanging. Whether 'culture' is located in the past or the present is often ambiguous in the textbooks. In Extract 8 traditional marriage arrangements are described in the present tense. Students at Mahloko High School insist that, while parents may veto their child's choice of marriage partner, it is young people themselves who decide whom and when to marry. This is one of many instances where students are encouraged to value 'their' culture, presented as a set of traditions practised in the past, but described as 'the whole way of life of the people.'¹⁰⁷ One such tradition, which happens to have continued to the present day, is *lobola*. As Murray has observed in Lesotho, adherence to *lobola* 'takes the form of a nostalgic reconstruction of the past.'¹⁰⁸

Extract 7: Development Studies textbook¹⁰⁹

The Sesotho culture

The Sesotho culture has a number of beliefs and customs handed down by our forefathers to the succeeding generations.

[...]

It is important for a nation to keep its culture. One way of doing this is to teach about culture in the schools. In this way the children will carry it through to the next generation. If people do not know or do not understand their culture they become strangers in their own society. They are misfits; they do not know where they belong.

Changes in culture.

Culture does not stand still; it changes and develops. When the Basotho came into contact with the white people, Sesotho culture was affected by Western culture...For example, young people today wear different clothes, eat different food and enjoy different music than in their grandparents' time. They often have different ideas and value different things. Some of these changes may be good, but others may be bad.

We must learn to respect our culture. It is not inferior to the Western culture. In some ways it is much better. In order to know who we are and where we belong, we need to know about our own culture.

¹⁰⁷ T. Monaheng, *Development studies for Lesotho, book 1* (Mazenod, Lesotho, Mazenod Book Centre n.d.). This was precisely the answer I received from the Form D girls' focus group in response to the question 'what is culture?'

¹⁰⁸ Murray, *Keeping house in Lesotho*, p. 323.

¹⁰⁹ Monaheng, *Development studies for Lesotho, book 1*, pp. 84-85.



Extract 8: Development Studies textbook¹¹⁰

Among the Basotho [...] Either, the father asks the son which girl he wishes to marry or, the parents decide to choose a wife for their son without consulting him.

This ambiguity is reflected in the ways students think about 'culture'. While some students insist 'culture' remains an important aspect of their lives, others are less sure. Thato, in Lesotho, comments: 'Culture was important in the past. ... Not now'.¹¹¹ Although resistant to the idea that it is 'disappearing', students generally associate 'culture' with past ways of life, particularly the customs of their grandparents. Most students reject the view that pride in 'culture' implies adherence to all traditional practices (Extract 9). Young people recognise that some practices have disappeared, while others continue to be practised, and that they are entitled to have opinions as to whether particular practices should be allowed to persist.

Extract 9: Mixed focus group

Rudo: I am trying to explain. You are saying we must follow our fathers' rules, we must follow our culture. So do we have to follow our culture that women are not allowed to go to school? We don't have to follow that! So we are now living in a modern world - we should follow with generation from generation, so we must follow in our generation.
[RSS, 24/09/97].

'Culture', then, is perceived as a set of distinct and coherent individual practices, of which *lobola* is one. Even in Zimbabwe, where textbooks suggest greater flexibility, cultural change is portrayed as the abandonment of some of these practices and adoption of new practices from 'other cultures', rather than as a broader process whereby practices take on new meanings as an indigenous process (Extracts 7 and 10). The implication is that individual practices can be assessed on the basis of their self-evident nature and be declared 'good' or 'bad'. This concern to differentiate 'African' from 'other' culture obscures the fact that cultures are not bounded and homogeneous and neglects processes internal to local culture. As Mama has noted: 'African cultural theory has concentrated on challenging imperialist cultural domination. This outwardly directed posture has meant that the attention to the internal dynamics of cultural struggle and change has been minimal.'¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Monaheng, *Development studies for Lesotho, book 1*, pp. 84-85.

¹¹¹ Focus group, MHS, D girls, 12/09/96.

¹¹² Mama, 'Shedding the masks and tearing the veils', p. 72.

Extract 10: English textbook¹¹³

The exercise presents a news article for discussion:

[...] Zimbabweans, like all socio-cultural groupings the world over, have good and bad customs.

The bad customs are those that are negative, and disintegrative in their social consequences. They are also uniquely at variance with universal moral values.

[...]

We are in the Jet Age. There is no way we can retrace our steps to the Stone Age. We can only move forward together with other nations along the path paved by modern enlightenment. [...]

2. According to the newspaper comment, Zimbabweans 'have good and bad customs'.

Apart from the giving away of young girls in compensation, what other practice is specifically singled out for criticism?

Can you give other examples of bad customs still practised today?

Do you agree with the comment that because we live in the 'Jet Age' we should do away with certain customs, even though they are part of our culture?

Schooling has a profound impact on young people's relationship with their culture. As Appadurai has observed in relation to a different context:

As group pasts become increasingly parts of museums, exhibits and collections, both in national and transnational spectacles, culture becomes less what Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation.¹¹⁴

'Culture' is presented to students as a set of historical artefacts which are to be venerated as signs, but which are devoid of any real substance. They are what Fanon describes as 'mummified fragments which because they are static are in fact symbols of negation and outworn contrivances.'¹¹⁵ Young people understand they have an element of choice, but their choice is not well-informed. They do not recognise that *lobola* means different things to them from what it meant to their grandparents: they do not learn to interrogate the meaning of *lobola* within a 'traditional culture' which is itself poorly understood. They do not recognise that old customs are inevitably 'reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies.'¹¹⁶

¹¹³ S. Chinodya, *Step ahead: new secondary English, students' book 4* (Harare, Longman Zimbabwe 1993), pp. 52-54.

¹¹⁴ A. Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy', in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds). *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: a reader* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf 1993).

¹¹⁵ F. Fanon, *The wretched of the Earth* (London, Penguin 1967), p. 180.

¹¹⁶ Fanon, *The wretched of the Earth*, p. 179.

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The custom is simply accepted as valuable in itself. The choice the young people are asked to make, then, with regard to *lobola*, is 'between a regressive "nativist" or equally questionable "Westernised" position'¹¹⁷ – A situation Makdisi describes as an 'institutionalized Manichaeism.'¹¹⁸

Young People's Agency and the (Re)negotiation of *Lobola*

Schools may represent 'culture' in particular ways, which limit their meaning in the eyes of their students. Young people, however, are not passive absorbers of these discourses, but are actively engaged in their (re)construction within the institution of the school, including through applying them to *lobola*. In the early twentieth century, Jeater argues, Shona elders were able to see that *lobola* could be redefined in their own interests:

confusions within the white communities about definitions of 'traditional' bridewealth practices created a 'gap' in the 'master narrative', into which powerful interests within the African communities were able to insert their own, new definitions, claiming for them the authority of 'tradition' but, in the process, transforming established gender and marriage systems.¹¹⁹

Today young people are again transforming the meaning of *lobola*. Through their valuing of 'culture', combined with economic rationalist discourse, the meanings students attach to *lobola* tend to place women in less powerful positions relative to men. One might question the extent to which this is a deliberate reinterpretation by boys to serve their own interests.¹²⁰ However, it was not only boys who interpreted *lobola* in this way, and many students, both girls and boys, appeared far from comfortable with the implications. It

¹¹⁷ A. Loomba, 'Overworlding the "Third World"', in Williams and Chrisman (eds). *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*, p. 306.

¹¹⁸ S.S. Makdisi, 'The empire renarrated: *Season of Migration to the North* and the reinvention of the present', in Williams and Chrisman (eds). *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*, p. 537.

¹¹⁹ Jeater, *Marriage, perversion and power*, p. 264.

¹²⁰ The use of 'culture' to sanction women's subordination has often been noted, e.g. J.L. Parpart and M.H. Marchand, 'Exploding the canon: an introduction/conclusion', in J.L. Parpart and M.H. Marchand (eds). *Feminism/postmodernism/development* (London, Routledge 1995). While women are portrayed as bearers of culture, men are its articulators. Mama, 'Shedding the masks and tearing the veils'.

seemed, instead, that the young people had few options available to them other than to understand *lobola* in this way.

This is not to suggest that young people are presented with a given definition of *lobola* which they have no possibility of challenging. Inherent in all discourses are contradictions and spaces for resistance, and the meaning of *lobola* was hotly contested among the students. Some girls, in particular, rejected the implications of male control, and female domestic labour as necessary implications of *lobola*, preferring to regard *lobola* as a gift, not a transaction. In their view, *lobola* need not disempower and can offer security in relationships. However, others were aware that many boys do not share these views, and payment of *lobola* might be used to justify behaviour prejudicial to female empowerment. Ultimately, it was very difficult for any students to defend an interpretation of *lobola* that did not disadvantage women. Given the limited range of interpretations available to young people, some students of both sexes argued forcefully against both *lobola* and the subordinate relationship of women to men that the practice is used to justify.

Conclusions and Implications

The meanings and functions of all cultural practices change over time and cannot be understood without regard for the contemporary context in which they operate. This is as true for the practice of *lobola* as for any other cultural form. It is argued here that schooling provides a very important element of the context for *lobola* – that the changing meaning and function of *lobola* cannot be understood without regard for the effects of secondary schooling on the way in which young people make sense of the practice. This is particularly true given the increasing influence of secondary education on the lives of young Southern Africans: currently 50% of young people in Lesotho and 70% in Zimbabwe begin secondary school and most invest a very significant proportion of their time in school.

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For young people in Southern Africa today, *lobola* remains an important part of a valued culture. However, it is a part of that culture that, although contested can only be understood by most students as a financial exchange. This interpretation has serious and negative implications for the symbolic placement of women through the practice.

It is necessary for academics working in Southern Africa to take on board such changing interpretations of *lobola*. Historically, Western academic writing on *lobola* has been characterised by an avoidance of the association made by early colonialists who saw *lobola* as 'buying women', and efforts to confine its meanings to those acceptable to Western morality. This may have been justified in the past, but for some young Southern Africans today, *lobola* is about 'buying women', however, uneasy they themselves may feel about expressing this view. To ignore this interpretation, and to confine the interpretation of *lobola* to a politically correct 'neutrality' towards women, is as problematic as the assumptions made by early colonialists who tried to fit *lobola* to their world view. It risks the dangers anticipated by Fanon who warns: 'The colonialist specialists ... rush to the help of the traditions of the indigenous society. It is the colonialists who become defenders of the native style.'¹²¹ To insist, unquestioningly, on an interpretation of *lobola* which no longer coincides with the way it is understood by those practising the custom, is to participate in a process of 'normalis[ing] and appropriat[ing] Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past.'¹²²

This is not to side with those in the NGO community who condemn *lobola* for according ownership of a woman's reproductive and income earning capacities and thereby

¹²¹ Fanon, *The wretched of the Earth*, p. 195.

¹²² S. Hall, 'Cultural identity and diaspora', in Williams and Chrisman (eds). *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*, p. 399.

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commodifying women, casting them as just another piece of property.¹²³ It is reasonable, from certain perspectives, to argue that *lobola* itself is not a problem: that the problem is the meanings that have become attached to it through (among other things). schooling. '[W]omen are not subordinate because of the *fact* of the exchange, but because of the *modes* of exchange instituted, and the values attached to these modes.'¹²⁴ Nor is it to advocate removal from young people of the possibility of recourse to a 'culture' in which they can take pride. 'Given a pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics.'¹²⁵ However, if interpretations of *lobola* are not to support the disempowerment of girls and women, there is a need for young people to be presented with a more flexible notion of 'culture' and opportunities to deconstruct the discourses of economic rationalism and 'culture'.

¹²³ S. Essof and L. van der Wijk, 'Women in Zimbabwe: a fact sheet on gender issues' (Harare, ZWR CN 1996).

¹²⁴ C.T. Mohanty, 'Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', *Feminist Review* 30 (1988) pp. 65-88, p. 71.

¹²⁵ b. hooks, 'Postmodern blackness', in Williams and Chrisman (eds). *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*, p. 423.