Mixed Horizons: The Complexity of Marriage Formation and Bridewealth in Rural South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The payment of bridewealth or lobola is a longstanding cultural practice that has persisted in South Africa despite significant societal shifts over the past two decades. Lobola has always been a complex and contested practice that both reinforces gender inequalities and, at the same time, provides status to women and legitimacy to marriages. In this paper, we describe rural South African women's perceptions of lobola, their experiences related to lobola and marriage, and how they reconfigure lobola to fit within "modern" life course aspirations and trajectories. We draw on interviews with 43 women aged 18-55 to examine desires related to lobola and the meanings of lobola given current social, economic, and health (HIV) conditions in rural areas. Drawing on the theory of vital conjunctures, we show how lobola offers women mixed horizons. Although women value the economic security, social status, and respectability lobola offers, they also lament how lobola curtails their freedom to pursue education and limits their autonomy from not only a husband but also his family. Thus, for many women, lobola represents a trade off in which they give up some power in exchange for financial security for themselves and their children. We conclude that the way women incorporate lobola into their desires and plans reflects tension between the expectations of "modern" women in a post-apartheid context in which rights feature prominently but economic security is not guaranteed, and cultural scripts reinforce traditional gender norms but also ensure social and economic support.

INTRODUCTION

The payment of bridewealth or lobola—signifying the formal acceptance of a union by families through an exchange of money and gifts—is a longstanding cultural practice that has persisted in South Africa, albeit in contested and varied forms. Even though "white weddings" formalized in a church have increasingly become an essential part of a "modern marriage," particularly among the Black middle class, there is evidence that lobola remains a valuable and highly desired practice (Hunter 2016; James 2017; Parker 2015; Rudwick and Posel 2014; Shope 2006). Extant research on marriage processes across sub-Saharan Africa suggests that bridewealth limits women's agency and autonomy, especially in reproductive decision-making (Ansell 2001; Frost and Dodoo 2010; Horne, Dodoo, and Dodoo 2013). What much of this research fails to acknowledge (see Yarbrough 2018 for a notable exception), however, is the positive role lobola plays in relationships and the ways in which women may benefit from this longstanding cultural practice.

Over the past two decades, South Africa has undergone a project of reconstruction and reconciliation in the aftermath of apartheid. Most notable in this process is the disjuncture between the aspirations for upward mobility of Black South Africans experiencing freedom from oppressive apartheid era laws, and the reality, which has not delivered on these expectations. The main reason for this is the economy, which has shifted from a system highly reliant on Black men's migration from rural areas to work in mines or commercial agriculture, to a more precarious situation marked by temporary, underpaid, and uncertain employment for both men and women (see Blalock 2014). At the same time, major transformations have occurred in gender norms, marriage, and childbearing. Indeed, one dominant narrative, which is supported by official statistics, suggests that marriage for Black women is all but dead (see Hosegood, McGrath, and Moultrie 2009). However, as we show in this paper, marriage aspirations are alive and well, as are cultural practices related to formalizing

marriage. The inherent complexity of social, political, and economic forces in post-apartheid South Africa is exemplified in the perceptions and reality of lobola.

In this paper, we show how rural women are reconfiguring lobola to fit within "modern" life course aspirations and trajectories. We draw on in-depth interviews with 43 women aged 18-55 from a variety of relationship statuses to explore: 1) women desires for their partners to pay lobola; 2) what lobola means across the life course; 3) women's ideals regarding lobola vis-à-vis the reality of what they are willing to accept given current social, economic, and health (HIV) conditions; and 4) the implications of lobola for women's emotional and social wellbeing. In so doing, we illustrate the complex nature of marriage and lobola by highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of this persistent cultural practice for women in rural South Africa.

Our analysis makes both theoretical and methodological contributions. First, we contribute to debates around modernity, particularly as viewed in the developmental idealism framework (Thornton 2001). Specifically, our analysis pushes back against a teleological approach to understanding the advent of modern marriage as the shedding of traditional practices such as lobola in favor of markers such as church weddings or civil legitimization. Rather, we offer a view that considers how people selectively draw on traditional resources to construct different versions of modernity (see Johnson-Hanks 2006). Moreover, by explicitly recognizing the political economic context that offers both opportunities and constraints (Hunter 2007), we are better positioned to appreciate the material, symbolic, and practical dimensions of lobola. Second, this work advances understandings of the extent to which marriage may serve as a protective institution for women. While there have been a number of studies examining the marriage-HIV connection (Bongaarts 2007; Clark 2004), less attention has been focused on the union formation and formalization process itself, which can function as pathways through which benefits and liabilities are accrued. On the methodological front, the in-depth qualitative data that we draw on is a critical addition to the

growing suite of innovative methods being used to improve on the conventional union status categories provided in most surveys. For example, the World Bank's Kagera study in Tanzania includes a bridewealth module meant to quantify economic transactions of marriage (see http://microdata.worldbank.org). Other work has relied on focus groups and vignettes to document the disadvantages that incur to African women once they are formally married (e.g., Dodoo, Horne, and Biney 2014; Horne, Dodoo, and Dodoo 2013). Finally, our analysis can inform future data collection efforts on the marriage process, while also offering leverage in understanding maternal and child health outcomes associated with marriage in rural Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Union Formation in sub-Saharan Africa

Union formation in sub-Saharan Africa has undergone substantial transformation marked by tension between efforts to maintain cultural identity and social control over young people, and support for individual agency and decision-making. Anthropologists have documented a shift from formal to informal unions (Hetherington 2001), a rise in companionate marriage (Hattori and Dodoo 2007; Hirsch, Wardlow, and Smith 2009), and changes in the role of bridewealth and related union formation ceremonies (Adams and Mburugu 1994; Jensen 2015; Smith 2001). In addition, nonmarital fertility, which is on the rise (Lloyd and Mensch 2008), can affect a woman's marriageability (Calvès 1999; Hattori and Larsen 2007; Sennott et al. 2016) as well as paternal support to the mother and her child (Calvès 2000; Madhavan 2010). While kin now carry less authority in union formation, they continue to confer some legitimacy (Smith 2009). However, the declining role of kin and the and the lack of formalization can negatively influence the strength of the union as well as a woman's ability to maintain physical and emotional wellbeing (Parikh 2007). More recent work by demographers has focused on the prevalence of union instability on the continent (Clark and Brauner-Otto 2015) and the consequences of divorce for child survival (Clark

and Hamplova 2013) and adolescent sexual debut (Goldberg 2013). Additionally, other work has highlighted the positive role of fathers for children even after union dissolution (Clark, Cotton, and Marteleto 2015; Madhavan et al. 2014).

"Marriage in Southern Africa thus seems to be both normal and unattainable at the same time" (Pauli and van Dijk 2016: 260). This statement is an accurate reflection of both change and continuity that marks the South African context, which has been profoundly shaped by its apartheid history. Marriage rates in South Africa have historically been much lower than the rest of the continent (Budlender, Chobokoane, and Simelane 2004; Garenne 2016) and have continued to decline (Hosegood, McGrath, and Moultrie 2009). Instead, we see more informal relationships that include aspirations for marriage but often entail secondary relationships (Harrison and O'Sullivan 2010). Moreover, there is notable variation in union formation processes across racial groups with Blacks more likely to be in informal unions or cohabitations than formal marriages (Posel and Rudwick 2013). The reasons behind these trends can be attributed in part to high unemployment, which undermines men's marriageability (Hunter 2006), changing gender roles due to women's increased labor force participation (Solway 1990), changing expectations of marriage (Cole and Thomas 2009), and enduring hegemonic masculinity norms that support men's multiple partnerships (Hunter 2005). Moreover, HIV/AIDS has instigated a narrative that has further elevated the status of marriage in order to protect physical health through monogamy and preserve moral order (van Dijk 2013). One key piece of this complexity is the role of lobola*,* which we turn to next.

The Enduring Value of Lobola

Lobola or bridewealth comprises the money and gifts a man or his family provides to his wife's family as a way to solidify the union and the relationship between the two families (Kuper 2016). It is also meant to delineate rights regarding the care of children. This process typically involves negotiation and payments that extend over long periods of time (Ansell 2001; James 2017;

Yarbrough 2018). Traditionally, the main commodity took the form of cattle and was meant to signify the acquisition of the wife's future earnings and reproductive capacity by the husband's family (Goody and Tambiah 1973). However, lobola has become increasingly monetized over time, resulting in very high costs that are often out of reach for men living amidst high unemployment and low wages, especially in rural areas (Hunter 2010, 2016; Posel and Casale 2013; Posel, Rudwick, and Casale 2011). Thus, men who seek to pay lobola are often left in an endless cycle of financial obligations and debt to their in-laws (James 2017; White 2016).

These trends suggest that marriage has effectively become a mechanism of social stratification, similar to what has been observed in the United States (Cherlin 2010). Though it is still held up as the ideal, many South Africans will never officially marry through the payment of lobola (Hunter 2016). Moreover, white weddings, which are now considered the norm among (those aspiring to) the middle and upper classes provide union legitimacy within the Christian Church, but have become lavish affairs, the costs of which often render marriage further out of reach (Hunter 2016). In fact, having both lobola and a white wedding might be considered the highest form of status attainment through both "modern" and "traditional" means, though open to only a select few who have the financial resources. More common are informal unions that have emerged as an alternative way to form serious relationships in the absence of lobola (Hosegood, McGrath, and Moultrie 2009; Hunter 2016; Sennott et al. 2016). For some couples, a modest sum to begin the process of lobola may be all that is ever paid; this symbolic payment allows families to agree that the couple is cohabiting "legitimately" (Hunter 2016). Nonetheless, there is resistance to cheapening the tradition of bridewealth simply because men cannot afford to pay due to the local political economy. Even if the partner cannot pay the full lobola amount, refusing to lower the amount of bridewealth maintains a woman's honor and that of both families. Thus, even a down payment on lobola serves to legitimate a cohabiting relationship, and shift gender norms more in line with formal marriage, so

that women do more domestic labor and men commit to monogamy (Hunter 2016). In this sense, relationship legitimacy attained through lobola remains important and relationships in which there is no plan for lobola are looked down upon in rural South Africa (Moore and Govender 2013).

Recent research by Yarbrough (2018) in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa has underscored how women reconcile their desires for lobola alongside their aspirations for a gender egalitarian marriage. That is, women who supported both lobola and gender equality reasoned that lobola signified a husband's willingness to value ideals such as intimacy, autonomy, and equality (Yarbrough 2018). However, studies have shown that bridewealth limits women's reproductive autonomy and is associated with power inequities that disadvantage women in marriage (Ansell 2001; Frost and Dodoo 2010; Horne, Dodoo, and Dodoo 2013). Moreover, monetization has fed into a perception that lobola renders women the property of men and, perhaps, more vulnerable to abuse by husbands and in-laws (Parker 2015). At the same time, scholars have noted that lobola can solidify bonds of intimacy and reciprocity between partners and families, provide relationships with legitimacy (Hunter 2016; James 2017; Parker 2015; Shope 2006), and contribute to relationship stability (Ansell 2001). Additionally, lobola serves as a form of symbolic capital for women, conferring dignity, respect, and status in families and communities and for children from the union (Shope 2006; Walker 1992). Thus, the custom continues to be viewed as a valuable cultural practice for formalizing a relationship and remains widely supported among both men and women in South Africa.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We draw upon Johnson-Hanks's (2002) theory of vital conjunctures to understand the role of lobola in women's lives in rural South Africa. "Vital" refers to key demographic events such as marriage and childbearing and "conjunctures" is taken from Bourdieu's approach to linking structure and agency. Additionally, and particularly relevant for this analysis, is the emphasis on

"indeterminancy" and "innovation" (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 865) in characterizing events. Drawing on this framework, we view marriage as a vital event that is neither fixed nor predetermined but rather processual. Moreover, the payment of lobola is characterized less by strict rules of conduct—or using Johnson-Hanks's term, an "authorized transition" (2002: 865)—and more so by the intersection of social circumstances and individual decision-making that renders the various stages of marriage and lobola fluid, uncertain, and contingent. Structural factors such as high unemployment for Black men and women, the influence of Christianity, and the quest to maintain culture and tradition clash with individual factors such as the desire for independence from kin, aspirations for egalitarian relationships, ensuring support for children, and upward mobility. Lobola, therefore, becomes an ideal issue to examine, given its significance in the union formation process (i.e., vital event) but one that is actively being resisted and reconfigured (conjuncture) to address the high level of uncertainty that marriage offers in the contemporary South African context.

In this analysis, we use marriage and lobola interchangeably to signify the process of formalizing a union. Marriage as a conjuncture can be understood more clearly using Johnson-Hanks's idea of "horizons" (2006). She explains, "These are the moments when seemingly established futures are called into question and when actors are called on to manage durations of radical uncertainty" (Johnson-Hanks 2006: 878). Given the uncertainty surrounding work, marriage, and family life due to shifts in the political economy, gender norms, and marriage rates in rural South Africa, it would be expected that women's attitudes about lobola would vary over time and in intensity depending on temporal specificities that either expand or close opportunities. In other words, when considering how lobola configures into their relationships and futures, women contend with different "successions of possible future states" (Johnson-Hanks 2006: 23). On the one hand, lobola may open up horizons in terms of economic and social status by offering a reliable source of income and stability. Moreover, it may confer a form of respectability that allows some women to

claim a higher social standing. On the other hand, lobola may be viewed as curtailing women's freedom and autonomy from not only a husband but also his family. More realistically, for many women lobola may be seen as a trade off in which they give up some power in exchange for possible financial security for themselves and their children. In sum, the "mixed horizons" that women construct are essentially a reflection of how they understand their roles as modern women and view their future aspirations amidst profound economic insecurity. Echoing Hunter (2010), Black women in post-apartheid South Africa are caught between their newly accorded rights that are supposed to open up a set of horizons for upward mobility and empowerment, and cultural obligations, which may inadvertently close these same possibilities.

METHODS

Study Setting

The study is nested in the Agincourt Health and Socio-Demographic Surveillance System (Agincourt HDSS) in the rural Agincourt sub-district of Mpumalanga Province, in northeast South Africa. The Agincourt HDSS incorporates 110,000 individuals in 21,000 households in 31 villages and has been conducting an annual census to collect demographic and health information from all residents since 1992 (www.agincourt.co.za). Agincourt residents are primarily members of the Shangaan ethnic group and one-third are of Mozambican origin. Agincourt is a rural, former apartheid era homeland, where infrastructure remains limited (Kahn et al. 2012). Every village has an elementary school and some have high schools; however, educational quality is poor, leaving the bulk of the population poorly equipped to attain stable employment. Formal employment options are limited to the education, health, and tourism sectors. The lack of jobs and poor educational options serve as push factors for men and increasingly women to migrate for work. In additional to the challenges of the local political economy, HIV prevalence is nearly 20% among adults, with a

much higher prevalence among women (24%) than men (11%) (Gómez-Olivé et al. 2013). These factors have implications for the timing of union formation, childbearing, and lobola.

Data

The study was designed to explore rural South African women's experiences related to relationship formation, marriage processes, gender equality, and health and wellbeing. We draw on in-depth interview data collected in 2015 from 43 women aged 18-55. Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling methods. To determine study eligibility, we employed a quota sampling criteria informed by emic categorizations of relationship status: informal union/no lobola paid, formal marriage/lobola paid, and unmarried. Of the 43 participants, 13 (30%) were in informal unions, 13 (30%) were formally married, and 17 (40%) were unmarried at the time of the interview. Interviews were conducted in the local language (xiShangaan) by three female interviewers with experience conducting local research. Participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study. Interviews lasted 1-2 hours, were audio-recorded, and translated and transcribed by the research team. The study received ethical approval from institutional review boards in the United States and South Africa, and from the Mpumalanga Province Department of Health.

Analysis

We used a combination of deductive and inductive coding methods to analyze the interview data (Charmaz 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). We first engaged in structured coding by interview question, focusing primarily on two questions related to lobola: 1) What are the good things about lobola? 2) What are the bad things about lobola? We also analyzed several questions focused on women's overall wellbeing, happiness, and their views of their relationship with their partner. We analyzed these items by group to determine whether there were systematic differences in women's wellbeing based on their relationship status and desires related to lobola (for unmarried women). Through the coding process, the relationship between lobola and

women's "horizons" (Johnson-Hanks 2006) emerged as important, and is thus the focus of this paper. Based on this emergent theme, we went back to the data, re-analyzed and coded, and ultimately uncovered the mixed horizons that we describe below. As such, in the analysis that follows, we show how women recognize both the benefits or "opening of horizons" and the liabilities or "closing of horizons" of lobola as related to three main themes: (a) cultural expectations and respectability; (b) sexual morality and protection from disease, especially HIV; and (c) social support and relationship stability.

FINDINGS

Echoing extant literature on the enduring importance of lobola (Shope 2006), most study participants (88%, n=38) regarded lobola as an essential part of formalizing a union even if the payment process has become protracted and, in many cases, impossible. In fact, most women recognized the difficulty men face in paying lobola because of employment precarity. Yet, lobola was highly desired because it was seen as conferring dignity and respectability, and perhaps most importantly, ensuring social support and security. At the same time, these benefits, or opening of horizons, were paired in women's narratives with the closing of horizons, specifically, the difficulties marriage and lobola can bring, including the end of one's educational pursuits, a partner's infidelity, and the traditional expectation that a makoti (daughter-in-law) will unfailingly sacrifice herself to serve her in-laws. In the following sections, we discuss three themes that illustrate how marriage as a vital conjuncture both opens and closes horizons for women.

Theme One: Lobola, Cultural Expectations, and Respectability

Lobola confers dignity and respect for women in a context in which education and employment are difficult to obtain and offer a tenuous sense of status at best. The most common refrain from women, when asked about the good things about formal marriage[1], was that it provides

[1] Formal marriage are defined as unions in which lobola has been paid or is in process.

dignity. For example, Ellen, a 46 year old woman in a long term informal union with three children said:

> I think the importance of lobola is that your husband will respect you and he won't abuse you time and again as he will know that he bought you through the lobola money. I think that is important. His family too won't play with you [cause you problems] as they know that they paid money. But if lobola is not paid, they are doing what they like. In everything they are saying or doing what they want to treat you bad.

However, this view was complicated by women's depictions of formal marriage as difficult because of the gender norms regulating the behavior of makotis (daughters-in-law). Olive (41 years old, unmarried) highlighted these challenges:

> In marriage you will be treated like a domestic worker. Everybody in the family is expecting you to take care of them as if you don't have blood [you are not a human being]. Sometimes your man is getting other woman [having affairs] and coming back home he changed his attitude and his behavior. If you heard about it and asked him you will hear him saying "Voetsak [slang often used in reference to dogs], are you still here? Why don't you pack your clothes and go at once?" You see! (*She was laughing.*) So, with me I can't stand for that.

Traditional expectations for a makoti's role in the household reinforce women's subordination in marriage. In this sense, lobola can close horizons for women by curtailing their freedom and independence at a time when gender rights feature prominently in social and political spaces. This tension is brought to light by Glory, (52 years old, married) who described how marriage both opens and closes horizons for women:

> The good thing about being married is that you get dignity. As a woman, it is a must that after you have grown up, after you have completed your studies, it is good to be married…. But when I look on the other side of marriage, married women are suffering. (*There was*

laughter.) I think it is good to get married if you use your rights as a woman. If we don't use our rights as women we will be suffering. Men are giving us problems… If I knew my rights before [marriage], I think I will have gone far. I will be working….We [women] accept everything that men bring to us. All we want is to build a family, even if we are suffering, we don't mind. So, men are difficult.

Glory is grappling with different models of respectability, each of which she sees as both opening and closing horizons. She is aware of the risks inherent in giving up entirely on cultural expectations for behavior when there is little guarantee of what rights, as enshrined in legal documents, can bring for women (Hunter 2010; Parikh 2007). However, she is also opposed to the traditional, patriarchal arrangement that lobola presumably would support.

In a similar vein, women often weigh the relative value of education—as espoused in the conventional developmental idealism discourse—and voice concerns about how marriage eliminates opportunities to pursue additional education. Aris (37 years old, married) said:

> Sometimes you want to do things, but you can't since you are married. I can give you an example about me. This year my parents wanted me to go to university but because my husband didn't approve it, I didn't go. And it delayed my future plans.

However, Amukelo, a 27 year old never-married woman, described how the value of lobola increases in cases where women are educated or employed.

> …If a woman is married, she is separated from her family and if she is educated and she is working, she will go to use the money with her husband. The lobola is paid just to thank her family for growing her up and getting her to be educated. And that she is fine and her behavior also counts. So the man should thank her wife's parents by paying lobola.

In this case, education enhances the value of lobola thereby providing an example of how women integrate notions of modernity with tradition to elevate their status.

Respectability even continues after death, as expressed by Ripfumelo, a 35 year old married woman: "It is important to pay lobola because in our culture if a woman dies on marriage but without lobola, the lobola is a must that they [the husband] should pay it. It is good if lobola is paid to a person while still alive rather than paying while she is dead." This was a frequent refrain in the interviews, with women stressing the cultural significance of lobola to ensure a proper death.

Although we did not set out to investigate white weddings in this study, it is important to note that they are increasingly assuming currency in this community as a form of modern respectability in the eyes of the Christian Church but also as a marker—sometimes lavishly so—of social class. Several participants talked about their desires for a white wedding in addition to lobola. However, achieving this is also a source of stress as made evident in Glory's comments:

> It's like by the time lobola was to be paid for my daughter. I agreed on the ZAR23,000[2] [from her son-in-law] because they are saying they want a white wedding. That's why I did understand because a wedding is expensive. You need to budget….Her husband also said the money we charged is not enough for the wedding as it will require a lot of money.[3] That's why he is trying all his best to help his wife apply for a job [to help pay the wedding costs]…. The problem is that he still wants to recover the money that he spent.

This is an example of how lobola is being reconfigured such that a traditional custom is used to achieve a modern status. However, because of the exorbitant expense, white weddings send a signal to the community that a family is well off economically, which may cause competition and jealousy among those who do not have the means (see also Ashforth 2005; Niehaus 2013).

In sum, our respondents have a formidable task. They need to reconcile different models of

[2] This was approximately equal to $1700 USD in October 2015 when the data were collected. See www.oanda.com.
[3] Though traditionally the wife's family is responsible for paying for the wedding ceremony, the lobola is often set high enough to cover those costs. In this quote, Glory's son-in-law is expressing his concern that he will need to pay more for the white wedding costs in addition to the lobola.

respectability in a context in which traditional norms are highly valued but women also aspire to have a modern relationship, while minimizing conflict with partners and family. This tension is made more evident in the thornier issue of sexual morality.

Theme Two: Sexual Morality and Disease Transmission

Women spoke at length about lobola and sexual morality for women and men. For women, sexual morality in marriage is closely linked to the respectability that comes from being committed to one man. For example, Alina, a 44 year old married woman, said: "The good things about being married, is to be called Mrs., and it helps you to have dignity because you have your own husband." Her comments about having your "own husband" indirectly point to the experiences of unmarried participants who were often assumed to be pursuing other women's husbands (see below). Similarly, Alice's (37 years old, married) comments emphasized how the expectations of sexual morality are different for unmarried and married women:

> If you are not married you are not safe, because some other women who are not married go to the taverns, bashes, everywhere. They don't take care of themselves because they are not married, and sometimes they come home in the morning [stay out all night] because they are not married. But if you are married, you are safe. You will always come home in time, even when you can go out, you will come home early because you are a married woman, and everyone will respect you because you are married.

Gavaza (43 years old, married) emphasized how married women are exempt from suspicion when husbands are unfaithful: "…Nowadays if you are not married, all married women are watching you. If their husbands don't come home, they always suspect that you must be having an affair with their husband." Thus, the dignity that comes with marriage is in part tied to gendered assumptions about the sexual behavior of married women (Sennott and Mojola 2017). In this sense, marriage can be viewed as opening horizons insofar as it provides women with a sense of sexual respectability as well

as protection from men's sexual advances. Indeed, women who are unmarried face considerable denigration and difficulty gaining respect from men and other women, particularly if they are viewed as challenging norms regulating women's sexual behavior (Sennott and Angotti 2016).

The relationship between lobola and men's sexual morality is murkier. On the one hand, women perceive the lack of lobola as giving men freedom to have extramarital sexual partners as expressed by Nori, a 39 year old woman in an informal union who has been living with her partner for 12 years. She explained, "The bad thing is when he 'steals' [cheats] on me and it causes arguments between us….. I think he is doing that because when we argue about cheating he keeps on saying that I should not forget that he didn't pay lobola for me." On the other hand, women acknowledged that men's infidelity was a common predicament that married women faced, thus complicating the benefits women might accrue from marriage. As Basani (20 years old, unmarried) remarked: "Some men are cheating, so it becomes painful if a wife finds out that her husband is cheating on her…it causes problems in a marriage." Alina (44 years old, married) further reflected on this issue: "You find that your husband is cheating on you, it's painful….But you will enjoy marriage if your husband loves you and respects you, and is not cheating on you."

The role of lobola in relation to men's sexual morality is, therefore, less about sexual fidelity (as it is for married women) and more about engaging in extramarital relationships discreetly. Nyeleti (26 years old, informal union) highlighted how lobola alters the ways married men handle their sexual affairs vis-à-vis their wives. She said that when lobola is paid, even if a man has extramarital sexual partners, he "can hide [the affair] unlike the one who didn't pay lobola." Additionally, Samara (38 years old, married) commented on men's use of condoms in marital relationships: "You are more than safe if you are married because if your husband can decide to cheat, he will protect himself [use condoms] for the sake of me as his wife or his marriage."

In sum, the payment of lobola does not necessarily mean that husbands do not have outside

sexual affairs, but it does mean that men may do so in way that preserves the respectability of the union for both partners. At the same time, married women are in a vulnerable position because they have to rely on their husbands to engage in protective behaviors—like using condoms—if they are having outside sexual relationships (Parikh 2007). Yet, women whose partners have paid lobola gain dignity and respect from their husbands, their communities, and from other men, who are less likely to approach them as sexual partners. While this could be seen as an opening of horizons, it is complicated by the fact that women still expect that their husbands will cheat. Women whose partners have not paid lobola are in more precarious situations as their partners may use the absence of lobola to justify their sexual philandering. What is common in all cases—regardless of union status—is indeterminancy in that the boundaries on sexual morality are not rigid, especially for men.

Whereas women may be quite circumspect about the power of lobola in enforcing sexual fidelity, they appear more confident in the protection marriage offers from sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV. This is particularly consequential in a community with a prevalence of 24% among adult women (Gómez-Olivé et al. 2013). Women perceive lobola as a way to decrease their risk of HIV but also acknowledge the limits of lobola in reigning in men's sexual desires. For example, Twelani, a 28 year old unmarried woman, said: "If you are married, you are safe in terms of diseases." Gavaza, a 43 year old married woman, echoed this sentiment: "Nowadays people die by diseases, so if you are married you are safe because you have your own husband. You will never get infected by diseases." What these women are suggesting is that if you are married, you are more likely to stick with one sexual partner, thus reducing your own risk of HIV, but this view clearly misses the point about men's fidelity. For instance, Alice a 37 year old widow in an informal union with a married man, explained: "…Nowadays there are diseases, so if you are married it will not be

easy to get infected by diseases[4]." The obvious contradiction between this statement and Alice's current relationship with a married man is testament to the disjuncture between aspirations and reality.

Although lobola may not stop men from having outside sexual affairs, women see marriage as important because it ensures their own sexual fidelity. Therefore, if they do contract HIV, they will know that it came from their husbands rather than from an outside boyfriend. Ripfumelo (35 years old, married) highlights this link: "…If you are married, you are avoiding many things like diseases. If I am married, I will have one partner…if I am not married I will go up and down with men [have casual sexual relationships]. Being in marriage is important." Rather than having many casual sexual relationships, Ripfumelo argues that marriage reduces the number of partners (for women) and thus protects them from blame for HIV transmission. However, as Etta (30 years old, married) describes below, this sense of security is often flawed as condom use frequently tapers off as a relationship becomes more established:

> I can say nowadays people are not committed to one marriage….To be honest between two people who are in love, you will find that condoms were used during the first month or during the first stage of love. After that we get used to each other and there are no more condoms. So I think about my husband as I don't use a condom with him. The result of cheating is to get illnesses…. I do talk with my husband every now and then about using a condom. I'm happy because I know that even if I can get ill, the one who will infect me would be my husband….I only have him.

Why is it so important to know the source of infection? We suggest that the answer may lie in the importance of role performance. For a married woman, a display of sexual fidelity on her part

[4] HIV is commonly referred to through indirect references, such as the "disease of nowadays" (Sennott and Angotti 2016).

is consistent with both traditional gendered expectations and notions of a modern marriage often sanctioned by Christianity (Parikh 2007; Smith 2007). By ruling out the possibility that infection could occur through her infidelity, a married woman stakes a claim to morality that is denied to her peers who are in informal unions. Thus, married women who display pride in being monogamous with their husbands can absolve themselves of wrongdoing (i.e., transmitting HIV) even as their husbands continue to have outside sexual relationships in which they do not use condoms. So in reality—and reinforced by data—marriage does not confer protection from HIV for women and, in fact, may increase the risk of transmission (Bongaarts 2007; Clark 2004). Put another way, marriage opens horizons by offering women some claim to moral superiority and greater respectability, albeit fragile, but at the same time closes horizons by increasing their risk of HIV. Put more bluntly, marriage as a conjuncture forces women into a Faustian bargain in which they unwittingly give up protection from HIV in exchange for a boost to their moral status and perhaps more social support, as explained below.

Theme Three: Social Support and Relationship Stability

Participants agreed that a primary function of lobola is to build a stronger relationship between a couple and their respective families. Dutuva (55 years old, married) said: "Lobola is paid to bring families together so that they should have good relationship. And that I should live in the household that my family will know." This can also increase the security that women feel as explained by Khana (28 years old, informal union):

> If he is really in love he should pay lobola so that both parents can become satisfied and women can also become satisfied that they are really staying in their own household. But if my man didn't pay lobola, it means that I am not complete and they [in-laws] don't like me. If he paid lobola I will be free and there is nowhere I can go [to leave the marriage] and my parents are happy about me.

Moreover, because lobola is also a public declaration of the relationship, it ensures accountability and responsibility of the family for the wellbeing of the couple and their children. This support often plays an essential role in keeping marriages together, as Lanah (36 years old, informal union) emphasized:

> It [lobola] builds a big relationship that you can be able to work together; it builds unity where there is love, particularly when something bad happened to my family. My in-laws should feel pain with me as we are family. That's why if a death can occur in my family, my in-laws will support me financially and also they will come to help in preparations for burial.

The benefits of lobola in providing stability and support to relationships render it highly desirable, and thus, for the women in this study it figured prominently into their life projects (Smith and Mbakwem 2007). In this sense, lobola opens horizons.

Yet, because the payment of lobola has become more protracted, the rules governing what is sanctioned at what point (e.g., pregnancy) have become more indeterminant and the delegation of responsibility to families has become less clear (Madhavan, Harrison, and Sennott 2013). In this sense, lobola is no longer an authorized transition but more so a fluid, sometimes contested, process in which roles are characterized more by ambiguity than clarity. This has consequences for the support provided to the woman and her children and often becomes a source of tension for the couple. Amukelo, a 27 year old unmarried woman who aspired to formally marry, described the differences in how couples deal with difficulty in informal unions versus in formal marriages:

> If it can happen that the couple has conflict, it is hard for the wife's parents to come in and solve the problem. They can say, "Why are you staying with him meanwhile your husband didn't pay lobola?" They can say that they won't be able to support her [their daughter]. They can also say if the man really loves you [the woman], he should pay lobola. If lobola has been paid, they will tell the couple to discuss and solve the problem. Sometimes when

she can go to her parents to report it [the problem], they can send her back to talk to her husband. If there is no lobola, families won't gather and solve the problem. The lobola should be paid so that the families should be united.

Without the formal recognition and relationship between the two families that lobola provides, women are often left in a state of uncertainty as described by Lanah, a 36 year old woman who has been in an informal union for 18 years:

> There are no good things [about living together without lobola] but it's only being patient. Because it sometimes happens that you feel bad that he didn't pay lobola, or maybe he can change his mind. You can stay with him meanwhile he's got his own plans. Your parents didn't receive any cent. Sometimes you can stay here at home and after you can get news that say your husband is getting married at Jozi (Johannesburg), who knows! I'm always thinking about this.

However, aspirational ideas about what marriage may bring are not often met in reality, as expressed by Hlekani (23 years old, unmarried) when describing her past experiences as a makoti in an informal union:

> By then I was a real makoti. I woke up in the morning and [built a] fire while other people were still sleeping. I prepared breakfast for everyone. On the other side, you are pregnant and you have to cook, meanwhile the sun is hot. (*There was laughter.*) He [her husband] was going out with his friends since daylight and if you check the time you find that it's ten o'clock at night and still he is not home. By then you are thinking of him and you won't be able to sleep. You also ask yourself questions like is he safe? By then I became so stressed and he was coming back home maybe at two o'clock in the morning while people are sleeping. That's where I have learned that marriage is difficult and it's better if I stay at home….That's why I decided to be separated with him.

Hlekani's concerns about her partner's infidelity prompted her to leave him and go back to her natal family. Since Hlekani's partner had not paid lobola, the process of leaving was simplified because she did not need to consider whether her family would have to repay the lobola. In this sense, the absence of lobola could be seen as an opening of horizons, though it might be argued that had lobola been there, more effort would have gone into saving the marriage by the families.

Viewed from the horizons framework, lobola opens horizons by expanding social support from both families. At the same time, lobola can extend the life of an unhappy marriage and close off possibilities to find more suitable partners. In this sense, the expectations, often highly gendered, that accompany lobola can be beneficial to women's sense of financial and economic security but detrimental to their independence.

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that lobola continues to be a critical element of establishing a formal marriage. Although the majority of women in the study wanted their partners to pay lobola, they were also aware of the tradeoffs they must make to attain respectability through meeting both traditional and modern gender norms. Indeed, the transformation underway in post-apartheid South Africa has left many—in particular, young women—in search of clear cultural scripts to follow. Moreover, a political economic framework brings into stark relief the lack of clear choices amidst high unemployment, uncertain returns to education, and frustratingly limited pathways to upward mobility. On this point, similarities can be drawn with the U.S. context where scholars have noted the formidable challenges that low income couples face in getting married (Cherlin 2010). Indeed, similar to the women in our study, aspirations for marriage are very high for women of low socioeconomic status in the United States, but the chances of actually making it a reality are slim (Edin and Kefalas 2011). While lobola as a cultural marker of union formalization is not present in the U.S. context, the issues facing women regarding the need for respectability, economic and

emotional security, and sexual fidelity (and protection from disease) are remarkably similar. Therefore, the findings from our study may shed light on larger discussions about the changing contours of union formation processes globally.

Our analysis also contributes to a growing literature pushing back on developmental idealism, which situates modern aspirations (e.g., love, marriage) as replacing traditional practices such as lobola. Similar to Smith's findings for Nigeria (2001), rural women in South Africa are not necessarily eschewing lobola; in fact, most of them desire it. Moreover, unlike Smith's participants who are educated and urban, the rural women in our study challenge the view that aspirations to attain modern respectability are the exclusive prerogative of urban women. Indeed, the South African context provides an ideal backdrop to interrogate and reconfigure the very definition of "modern" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) amidst a post-apartheid setting in which rights have been granted in the absence of economic security, and gendered sexual morality is being tested alongside efforts to prevent HIV transmission. By opening and closing horizons, lobola continues to feature prominently into the ways in which women assess their physical, economic, and emotional security and their aspirations for upward mobility. In some cases, there is evidence of women's agency in deciding how to use lobola to attain benefits, while, in others, it may be more of a matter of quiet resignation regarding lobola's limits (e.g., men's infidelity) coupled with post facto rationalization (e.g., lobola offers protection from HIV). What is exceedingly clear is that women (and men) are drawing on multiples—often contradictory—scripts to navigate a challenging set of circumstances and expectations that they were poorly prepared to face in the context of South Africa's transition to democracy. In this sense, the inadequacy of developmental idealism is eminently clear, necessitating instead an alternative conceptual lever rooted in fluidity, inconsistency, and syncretism. The analysis we have presented offers precisely such an approach.

By analyzing women's own desires, aspirations, and experiences related to marriage and lobola, our study adds new insights to scholarly debates on bridewealth and other marriage formalization processes across sub-Saharan Africa. Our interviews allow for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which marriage processes play out against a background of profound social change and economic insecurity, and the consequences for women and their children. Our approach also complicates the view that bridewealth necessarily perpetuates gender inequality by illustrating how it can also benefit women as they navigate competing norms surrounding gender, tradition, and modernity. One limitation of our study is the lack of data on men's views of marriage and lobola, which would allow us to assess whether women's desires and experiences resonate with men's, the role of the political economy in shaping men's desires and decisions related to marriage, and how lobola opens and/or close their future horizons. Ideally, we would also want to follow women's relationship and union formation trajectories prospectively to determine the extent to which their aspirations are met, and to identify the turning points or conjunctures that may be critical for later outcomes.

Our study provides insight into how enduring cultural practices become reshaped and imbued with new meanings in societies undergoing rapid social change. In post-apartheid South Africa, the mixed horizons that lobola brings for women echo the country's larger project of social transformation. In the context of globalization, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and shifts in the social organization of work, childbearing, and systems of kinship, women and men must grapple with competing notions of what it means to be "modern." This means reconciling practical concerns related to financial security with social pressures to fulfill traditional expectations, while navigating the politically charged terrain of women's status and rights. Ultimately, these competing pressures and the decisions women and couples make about lobola have implications for the persistence of social inequality, the success of global campaigns promoting gender-based rights and visions of

modernity, and the perpetuation of identity politics based on race, ethnicity, and culture in South Africa and beyond.

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