

Abstract

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The present study examines the persistence of bridewealth and its manifestation with changing social and economic conditions among the Gusii people of Kenya. I examine the changing role of bridewealth in structuring male-female relationships with a focus on resource allocation and family affairs. The analysis focuses on the marginalization of women and the prevalence of informal unions among poor farmers, as well as in altered relationships between employed women and their natal kin, and between wife-givers and wife-takers among the members of the wealthy educated.

Bridewealth transactions have come to concern rights in land and property as well as rights in people. Elopement and informal unions are the common way for young men and women to establish households. Meanwhile, jural norms connected with women's access to resources and the definition of their social status have remained largely intact since the colonial period.

Through the use of a diachronic perspective I have also attempted a contribution to the theoretical approaches to bridewealth. The theoretical perspective relates the social form to individual actions and their use of bridewealth to reach certain goals as well as including the norms concerning expected and binding rights and obligations adhering to transactions, and their transformations.

At present a transformation of bridewealth and connected institutions is in progress with respect to norms, values and social form.

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