

**Ruptures and Continuities of Value(s): The Case of Marriage
Payment Among the Azande of South Sudan**

By

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Abstract

Bridewealth, the popular tradition of marriage institution which has long been observed to contain a legal and compensation components of marriage transaction has adapted new components. Among the Azande, the development of fine and fees components started when marriage payment was changed from the ritual *kawaja* spears to state-issued money. Through multiple government regimes, the *barimara* brothers, brides and parents, the value of marriage payment has collectively been shaped to reflect the relevance of key modern social institution. Through a deep ethnographic description in chapter two, this thesis argues that changes in generational roles has placed the youth and educated brides as actors of marriage payment. This changes have placed the senior male members as negotiators and creator of traditions for money obtained through marriage transaction. In the last chapter, the study analyse the political and social economic that surrounds South Sudan, and the influence of humanitarian organisations on marriage and kinship institutions.

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AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Isaac Waanzi Hillary Mbugo, candidate for the MA degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology, declare herewith that the present thesis titled “Ruptures and Continuities of Value(s): The Case of Marriage Payment Among the Azande of South Sudan” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person’s or institution’s copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 18 June 2025

Isaac Mbugo

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List of abbreviation

Ar.	Arabic
CAR	Central African Republic
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DC	District Commissioner
E£	Egyptian Pound
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GESS	Girls' Education South Sudan
NGO	Non-Government Organization (Internation and local)
P.T	Piaster
PoC	Protection of Civilians
S£	Sudanese Pound
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/ Army
SSP	South Sudanese Pound
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
US\$	United States Dollar
Zne	Zande

Glossary

Badia	Zne: term used for casual relationship.
Bagimara	Zne: term for the bride's brother responsible for the marriage spears
Bagude	Zne: Father, father-in-law
Barimara	Zne: Term for the bride's brother responsible for marriage payment (cash)
Dee	Zne: Woman, bride
Faagra	Ar: Misfortune, bad luck,
Fata kasum	Ar: Open the mouth fee in some marriage payment arrangement
Gbigiwi	Zne: Furnace, place for melting iron ore and spear
Haqu dukhul	Ar: Before entry. Fee charged for entrance to the homestead of the bride
Haqu juwab	Ar: Fee for the letter
Haqu tarabiza	Ar: Fee for the table
Kasrat-bayt	Ar: Break of the home. Huge component of the marriage payment
Kawaja	Zne: Marriage spear
Khasrat	Ar: Loses
Kure	Zne: Blood
Leben	Ar: Milk
Mara	Zne: State-issued money, metal
Nagude	Zne: Mother,
Sora	Zne: Scrape
Sunge	Zne: labour, value
Tagiya	Ar: Hat
Yongo	Zne: term used for the fine component of marriage payment. See kasrat-bayt

Introduction

This thesis is a historical and anthropological investigation of the concepts of value among the Azande. The Azande people were made famous in the discipline of anthropology through the classical work of the British anthropologist, Professor Evans-Pritchard (Evans-Pritchard, 1971). From his works and that of contemporary anthropologists, we understand that the Azande live in a territory – commonly referred to as Zandeland. The Azande people were ruled by the Avongara aristocrats. During the colonial era, Zandeland was divided between three colonial empires. The French colonial administration incorporated the westernmost portion of the territory into French Equatorial Africa, that later became the Central African Republic (CAR) in 1960. The Belgian colonial administration extended their control to the southern edges of Zandeland. These territories became part of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960. The largest portion of Zandeland, both in population and by sheer size, became the southwestern most part of Anglo-Egyptian colonial Sudan (Braak, 2022, p. 34). Sudan became independent in 1956, and the southern part – which includes the Zande-majority region – seceded as South Sudan in 2011. The finding in this thesis is largely accurate in regard of the Azande of South Sudan; however, as the borders are porous and kinship, clan and family lines cut through the national borders, it has relevance for the entire ethnic group.

At the time of this research, Zandeland in independent South Sudan was administratively organized into Tambura, Ezo, Nzara, Yambio and Ibba counties of Western Equatoria state, with an administrative capital of Yambio town. While majority of the Azande practiced different denominations of Christianity as religion, some of the marriages were still polygamous. The exact population figures are not available, as the last – and probably incorrect – census was

carried out in 2008¹ under the Sudanese administration, but the estimated population of five Zande counties is anywhere between 400,000 to 650,000. This makes the Azande the third or fourth largest ethnic group of South Sudan, after the Dinka, the Nuer and potentially the Shilluk of South Sudan.

The notion of value is among the most studied themes in anthropology. Yet the phenomena under which certain the notion of value were observed has changed. In this thesis, I attempt to re-assess the concept of value in a society that has undergone critical changes due to armed conflict, displacement and modernization. Through the lens of the bridewealth institution, I seek to understand how social institutions operate amidst dominant regimes of value. Similar to Dalton's reasoning on the practice of bridewealth (Dalton, 1965, 1966), the Azande elders were quick to evoke proverbs and idioms that were supposed to guide the bridewealth institution. "Money doesn't marry a woman, but good qualities" they emphasised. Taken literally, the economic benefit of bridewealth came last after the good qualities. This highlights the multiple forms of value that exist among the Azande and in any society, and the intersections and tensions between economic value and moral or social values. My study combines both anthropological concepts of value and my personal observation and collection of the Zande body of knowledge about marriage payment as a dynamic institution.

¹ According to results of the 2008 census, the five principal counties of the Azande in Southern Sudan had about 500,000 population.

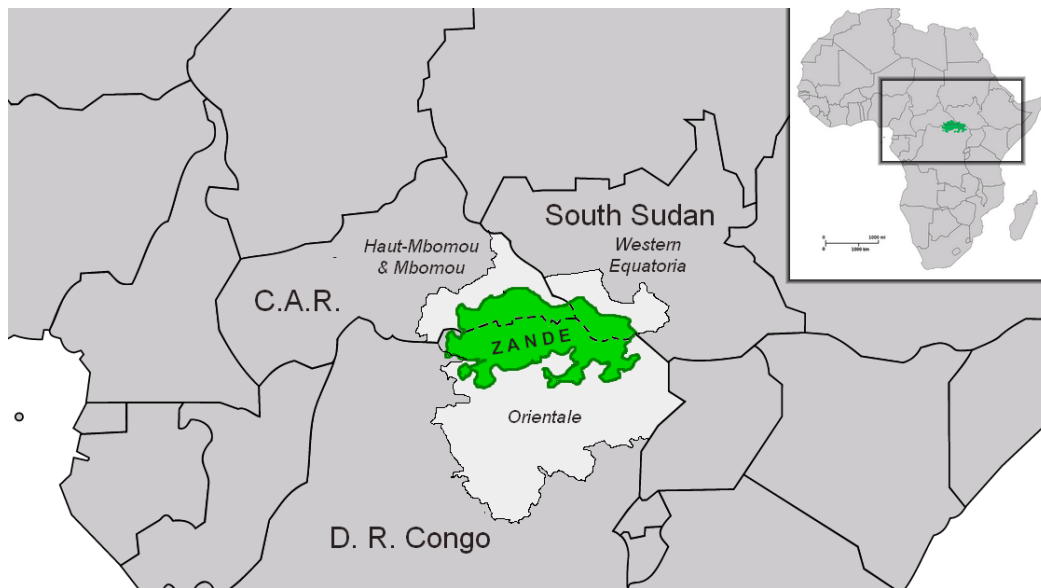


Figure 1: Map showing the location and size of the territory termed as the Zandeland.

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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28973782>)

1. Relevance of the study

This research contributes to contemporary anthropological interpretation of the concept of value in the setting of social institutions. Centred on the core institution of marriage and kinship among the Azande community in urban Yambio, it examines the valuation of bridewealth and its interpretation. Following Muniesa's (2020, 2023) critique of the value notion to be examined as a 'vernacular concept,' that functions according to the prevailing condition in the society, this study includes the perspectives of the Azande senior men, youth and women in determining the notion of vernacular concept of value assigned to bridewealth payment. Through the diverse perspectives, the research showcases how value of bridewealth has been tuned to include the *barimara* brothers, and the brides as other actors who have never surfaced in the discussion of value creation in the anthropological scholarship.

Additionally, the study demonstrates how previously understudied components of marriage payment such as the *kasrat-bayt* [Ar. Lit. break the home] and *khasrat* [Ar. Losses] fines have been introduced in bridewealth payment. The development and incorporation of the new

components, does open a conversation around the function of bridewealth payment, and the purpose it serves. The explicit approach to each component of bridewealth is intended to make a contribution that cuts beyond the field of anthropology as it informs the Non-Governmental Organizations and other institutional bodies in South Sudan that seeks to understand and prevent the practice of child marriage.

2. Emic perspectives: Value, dowry and bridewealth

Throughout this study, I have used terms and quotations from an emic perspective that warrants special attention and explanation. The Zande vernacular concepts for value was expressed using the verb *sunge* and the Zande idiom: Marriage is a purchase of kinship (Zne: Dia dee nga ngbe gume). The expression suggested the social value and connection between marriage institution and kinship network. The Zande term *sunge* which loosely translates to ‘labour’ points to the economic aspect of value. During this study, the local currency, the South Sudanese Pound was severely depreciated due to high inflation rate that started at the outbreak of armed conflict in 2013, thus the local currency was described to have no *sunge*, suggesting the economic value.

Studies on marriage payments in Africa clearly define the difference between *dowry*— payment/gifts transferred to the bride, and *bridewealth*— payments made by groom’s kins to compensate the bride’s kins for her loss. In contrast, South Sudanese communities and scholarly publications tend to interchange or attach certain components of marriage payment as dowry (Anderson, 2007; Bell, 2008; Sommers & Schwartz, 2011; Tonny, 2025). Among the Azande, the dowry has been used effectively both in colonial writings and locally to refer to the component of marriage payment that legalises, or according to Fortes’ categorization, the “Prime Prestation” (Fortes, 1962, p. 9) of bridewealth payment. I deviate slightly from the contextualisation of bridewealth that strictly portrays the function of bridewealth payment in terms of legal and tokens of appreciations. As the first chapter shall demonstrate, the institution

of bridewealth has expanded to include components that serve the function of fines and losses. For this reason, this study shall use the descriptive term ‘marriage payment’ throughout and shall refer to bridewealth payment only where direct quotation is involved.

3. Methods

The research grows out of a decade of observation, professional writing and documentary filmmaking on Zande culture, covering a wide variety of topics, from resilience of elderly female refugees (Hillary & Braak, 2022), the reestablishment of the Zande kingdom (Hillary, 2024b), the coronation ceremony of the new Zande king (2024a), the historical trauma of the extinction of elephants in Zandeland (2024) and visual documentation of the birth of a large ceremonial drum, the *gugu* (2022). As a Zande person, I have been keen to address key anthropological themes among my contemporary community. I have done so through my intensive use of Zande language, networks of kinship and of friends and long-term engagement of the community

This particular study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Yambio between June and August 2024. Yambio town is considered among the oldest pinnacle of economic development and urbanization in the Zandeland. During the colonial era, the town gained the status of an administrative headquarters for the Zande Province, and the seat of a Catholic Bishop, and continued as such through the independent regimes of Sudan (1956-2010) and the republic of South Sudan. When the Azande Kingdom was restored in 2022 in Yambio, the town gained another status as a seat for the Azande highest traditional institution. The multifaced features of Yambio town was an essential aspect for my project as it seeks to understand how the predominance of modern money, urban pressure, and modern government regimes shape and assign meaning to the vernacular concepts of values.

Methods used for this project were consciously selected in line with the study objectives. Through five Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with the Azande women who were grouped according to the year categories of 1930-50, 1960-80 and 1990-2000, and the level of formal education, the research objective that aimed at exploring women's perspective about the meaning of family when marriage payment takes the form of state-issued money. I enriched the FGDs with oral history interviews with older women, family members and their network of friends.

I further conducted in-depth interviews with six diverse samples of marriage negotiators (Zne. Suengbayo), with rich experiences of negotiating marriage payments. Private and public “negotiating tables” are moments of state formation and cultural change, as Cherry Leonardi adequately showed (Leonardi, 2015). Some of the marriage negotiators were men in their early forties, while others in their late sixties had negotiated over five marriage payments and negotiations. Their vast knowledge in negotiating marriage for their kin and friends provided a preview to a set of norms that are observed at the event of marriage payment. Moreover, I had ten semi-structured interviews with male members of the Azande community who held diverse positions in the society, including the elders, chiefs, religious leaders and business owners. Some of the elders were old enough during the last phase of colonial regime, and through their insight, I came to understand how the institution of marriage payment was administered by the colonial administrators, thus, archival research at the South Sudan Directorate of Records and Archives, in Juba provided written sources that backed up the oral histories.

Additionally, this project used participant observation method and a video camera as an ethnographic tool which assisted me to gain insight into the dynamic of marriage payment. During the period of this study, three marriage payment event were observed, each with a distinctive social status and components of marriage payment.

4. Theoretical framework: Values and value

This project is centred on the concepts of value(s) and its operation in urban settings. Graeber's (2013) argument in his classic '*Toward an anthropological theory of value*': "that value will necessarily be a key issue if we see social worlds not just as a collection of persons and things but rather as a project of mutual creation, as something collectively made and remade" pointed out an important reasoning around value as something '*collectively* made and remade.' I approach and understand value or even values as a concepts that have been shaped and adjusted by diverse members of the community.

In an attempt to avoid being caught by what Graeber stated, that "it [value] often seems as if the term could mean almost anything"(2013, p. 219), this thesis has foreground the institution of marriage payment as a signifier to the broader debates over value. While discussions around marriage payment in the African context have been extensively studied in the field of anthropology, (Bell, 2008; Ogbu, 1978), the puzzle around the actors and its value has never been fully addressed. For instance, in Leonardi's text on marriage payment in South Sudan urban region of Juba, she made the following observations: "One indicator of the resilience of marriage is that bride wealth, in particular high bride wealth, remains a topic of paramount concern. Even older people complain that their children are unable to marry and blame the inflation on the increase of money from employment abroad."(Leonardi, 2007, p. 404). The complaints of older people about high marriage payment might suggest that they were partial actors in the decision on the amount of marriage payment.

Having said that, the objective of this study was to include all perspectives available of the Azande people in order to determine 'the vernacular concepts' behind the ritual of marriage payment (Muniesa, 2023, p. 170). Through this approach, this study does not solely lean on a single perspective of the Azande in understanding how the valuation of marriage payment

operates in the urban centre of Yambio. As the vernacular conception tends to be flexible in nature, this study will demonstrate that multiple actors have shaped the notion of marriage payment and the value behind it. The same applies to the material form of the marriage payment. While certain components of marriage payment reflect some key marriage payment interpretations suggested by the school of thoughts of Dalton and Evans-Pritchard (Dalton, 1966; Evans-Pritchard, 1970), other components derive value concept from modern market function.

6. Structure of Chapters

This thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, I examine the oral history, primary archival sources and secondary literature, to explore the changing nature of marriage payment among the Azande. The centre of attention is the monetization of the marriage payment: the colonial government induced a shift from payment in objects – *kawaja* spears – to a fixed amount of money. This change coincided with the overall monetization of Azande economy with the introduction of modern taxation and the Zande scheme colonial development project during the British colonial rule (1905-1956). The introduction of fixed amount in Egyptian currency instead of a negotiable number of spears was supported by the chiefs. The thesis argues that while the chiefs had been appointed and manipulated by the colonial government, they were also conscious and powerful actors in their own right. In the case of the marriage payment, they played a crucial role in the transformation of the system that was advantageous for them. The chapter also argues that ordinary Azande did not simply accept the change but played an active role in shaping it to their advantage. We start to see the issues that drove the change for the last hundred years: urbanization, growing economic inequality between rich and poor, spreading monetization of the political economy. Due to the widening economic power of urban centres and rural countryside, urban Zande successfully introduced new categories into the marriage payment system, for example the increased payment required for educated brides. The

chapter also shows further changes introduced by the postcolonial Sudanese regime (1956-1992), exploited and used by various social groups. The case of elopement through the Arabic concept of *kasrat-bayt* empowered the youth to seek ways to make marriage more affordable while yet socially acceptable. Lastly, the chapter analyses the rebel government introduced by the SPLM in 1992. Militarization of the society created a new social group, the armed members of various military forces and militia, who not only enjoyed legal impunity – weakening the influence of chiefs – but also accessed regular salaries and they further manipulated the system of marriage payment to their advantage.

The second chapter is an ethnographic investigation of marriage payment, negotiations and related social occasions. The chapter starts with a detailed anthropological description of one marriage payment event, observed in Yambio in August 2024. The vignette showcases different agencies and concepts which play a key role in the negotiation process, and points to the importance of Zande idioms and proverbs in creating arguments by the opposing sides. The first two anthropological sections connect the issues observed in the historical chapter with contemporary social processes and inspects the spread of elopement as a way for the younger generation to create more favourable marriage arrangements for themselves, grappling with the authority of their elders. The second section shows the changing role and agency of women through the changing marriage payment practices in the cases of educated brides. The third section shows the changing roles and responsibilities of marriage payment through an analysis of the *barimara* brother. The last section connects the thesis with the more theoretical chapter on value and money. The section highlights several changing norms around monetary payments and the concepts Zande use to explain these phenomena.

The third chapter offers an analysis of the vernacular concepts of value among the Azande. The theoretical analysis is building on the work of Bossen and Muniesa about the concept of value. The first section of the chapter describes the development of the political economy of Zandeland

in the 21st century. It highlights how a new class of young male members of society rose to prominence through their association with the armed forces, and how they retained their positions in the midst of an economic meltdown. However, the section also highlights how the demand for new marriage payment categories, like the *kasrat-bayt* fine [Ar. Lit. break the door] can force people to join the army. The second section shows the massive influence of the International Non-Governmental Organizations and their dollar-dominated interventions. Large NGOs dollarize the economy, with profound effect on marriage negotiations. The second section also includes a critical review of the most relevant literature on South Sudanese marriage payments. The third section theorizes and contextualizes the issue of forced urbanisation. As analysed earlier in the chapter, parts of the marriage payments represent compensation for the lost labour force of the prospective bride. However, the useful work skills are different in rural and urban settings. The section argues that this shifting urbanization transforms the system of marriage payment once more.

Chapter 1: Historical timeline



Figure 2: Kawaja marriage spear.

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“The *kawaja* was a product of the iron extracted through the *gbigiwi*. It was a spear of this height [about 40-60 cm], with a smooth larger surface, and the socket was small. It was specifically used for marriage payments. The spears used for hunting were large and had thorn-like designs that would fasten the blade of the spear in the flesh of the animal”².

1.1 Introduction

Colonial administrations brought about critical adjustments in Zande social institutions. This section (1) reviews oral history sources, literature, and colonial- and postcolonial archival records to analyse the changes introduced during the colonial period as a rupture point of marriage payment and further (2) points out how different government regimes have shaped and influenced the practice of marriage payment. I argue that while the political regimes indeed caused disruptions through conversion marriage form from the spears to state-issued money, the transition periods have shown that marriage payment is a rational institution, which expands and derives value based on the social relevance of existing institutions.

² Male interviewee, July, 2024

To begin with, it's worth highlighting the contemporary Azande local understanding regarding marriage payment, which was part of marriage custom believed to have been lost or threatened by modern government regimes and its institutions. My older respondents provided a diverse and rich body of understanding passed down to them through oral histories and literature. I have categorized these interpretations into three major groups based on gender and different family members' perspectives. The female respondents emphasized *physical work* as a quality for brides, which formal education had interfered with, while male respondents concentrated on the *material form* of marriage payment and the good *quality* that was expected from the prospective groom. I present these perspectives in detail in the chronological order of changes of government regimes in the Zandeland and transformation they brought

1.2 Colonial regime (1905-56)

Whereas the Anglo-Egyptian rule began in many parts of Sudan towards the end of the 18th century, the region under King Gbudue came under the colonial regime much later when the monarch was defeated and killed in 1905 (Kuyok, 2015; The London Gazette, 1906). The aftermath of the defeat of Gbudue, then, followed British colonial government formation, which included the establishment of an administrative base [government fort] in Yambio, the dissolution of the kingship and incorporation of indirect colonial rule into chieftainship (Leonardi, 2013). When the Azande elders narrate history that occurred in the colonial period, they speak about two colonial district commissioners: Major P. M. Larken (1911-1932) and Major Jasper William George Wyld (1932-1950), popularly remembered as Wairu. My older male respondent who lived during the tenure of Wyld, recounted to me: "Wairu, who knew much of the Azande system, would sit in the shade of a big tree and write the Azande culture just like you are doing. He would sit down with people and ask them about the culture and write

like what you are doing now.”³ In their attempt to govern the former subjects of Gbudue, the two colonial commissioners sought indigenous knowledge and what was perceived as law under the former leader.

From the colonial written accounts, we learn about different aspects of Zande social institutions before the colonial period. In the marriage institution, for example, Larken foregrounded the betrothal of brides at a young age, followed by the principal payment of twenty spears at different intervals over other customs of marriage arrangement (Larken, 1930). Iron objects, more special spears were valuable and used for marriage transaction. The sum of twenty spears was perceived to legalise the union of marriage. Anthropologist Evans-Pritchard who studied the Azande during the same period reached the following observation on the importance of iron objects; “Zande durable wealth was chiefly in metal, principally spears, but metal was valued most for its use in obtaining wives”(Evans-Pritchard, 1971, p. 223). The Azande were warriors, hunters, and had varieties of spears that served different functions; it is vital to establish the type and circulation of the marriage spears. The opening words to this chapter give a hint and offer a broader function of marriage spears beyond the context of marriage. From the description and name, the *kajawa* spears were valuable weapons used in hunting elephants, possibly for their tusks which were a highly demanded commodity at the peak of the ivory trade in the 19th century (Hillary et al., 2024).

However, at the introduction of the state-issued currency, the Egyptian Pounds [E£] in the 1920s, the use of the *kawaja* spears in marriage transactions was not only replaced by the new currency, but the regulation of marriage payment value became a primary work of the colonial administrators. Unlike the unified amount of spears that applied to all the brides, marriage payment in its new form, E£, was based on the criteria of the illiterate and literate level of the

³ Interview with male old man, July, 2024, Yambio

brides, with more emphasis placed on the latter. The lived experience of grandmother, Agatha was married during the era of the new currency offers insight marriage arrangement and payment. Her marriage was arranged by the groom's grandmother who made the first marriage payment. Although the groom, my late grandfather had migrated to the industrial Nzara town, the two families lived in rural region of Rii Yubu where the marriage was negotiated. My grandmother explained the criteria for marriage payment:

A school girl was married for E£.6.00. Village girls who were only trained to use a hoe were not married for E£ 6.00. The daughter of that man attends school and learned how to write, she will be married for E£.6.00. But those who were married for E£.3.00 were common village girls trained on a hoe and burdened with kitchen chores.⁴

But the initial traits that determined the practice of marriage payment were the bride's skills in providing hard labour. As Evans-Pritchard acknowledged the prominence of spears in Zande marriage arrangements, he concluded that the wealth was in brides who provided labour in their new homestead (1971, p. 223).

In addition to E£ 3.00/6.00 that legalized the marriage, a new component of marriage payment was created as a token of appreciation to the bride's mother. Thus, marriage payment consisted of *mara dee* [translated as dowry] and E£1.20 piasters for *mara nagude* [Zne. Lit. money for mother].⁵ The material component of the previous form of marriage payment and its function of obtaining ivory and elephant meat disappeared while creating new components that derived the social value from formal education. These changes laid the groundwork for marriage customs and laws [see the Azande laws compiled by Major Wyld cited in (Farran, 1963)] through which the colonial power extended its influence into every household.

⁴ Interview with Agata, August, 2024

⁵ In the region of Tambura, another component as token was added for the father.

Beyond the role of marriage payment, the colonial government sought to capitalize on its value for administrative purposes. Between 1952 and 1954, the divorce rate rose so significantly that the colonial government became concerned and sought ways to control it (see Reining, 1966, p. 48-49). According to the minutes of the annual meeting attended by most of the chiefs and government officials in Yambio in 1954, the chairman, Grover, proposed the following suggestion to address the overwhelming number of divorce cases at village courts (1954 TRC1.C.5.3):

The chairman suggested what had been suggested before, the dowry had better go up, if it did perhaps the people will look after their wives better if they paid a little more for them. The chiefs now spent a long time listening to divorce cases and the matter was serious and he thought a remedy must be found.

While the colonial regime developed laws that seemed to derive their meaning from the Zande customs and norms, we understand and see the influence of the government in several ways. The value of marriage payment was derived from multiple factors, including the relevance of formal education, and as a control tool to curb crises in the community.

1.3 Post-colonial regimes (1956-1990)

The independent nation-state of Sudan began its regime with greater advancements in the economy and the formation of national identity. After gaining independence in 1956, the Sudanese government introduced a new currency, the Sudanese Pound [S£], which circulated throughout all parts of Sudan and evoked changes in the value of marriage payment. Similar to the colonial pattern of imposing value on social institutions, the Zande District authority and area chiefs discussed dowry during the 1957 Annual Chiefs meetings in Yambio. Initiated by the D.C, Atoroyo Barnaba Kisanga, he proposed the following (1957 ZD66.A.1):

The chairman addressed the meeting wondering why the dowry can not be increased. It was P.T⁶. 120 in older days and was increased to LE 3.00. The increase, he said, was not proportional to the earnings of the people. He asked them to give him their views regarding its increase to LE. 6.00 for illiterate girls and LE. 10.00 for the school girl.

Although most of the chiefs seemed to be resistant to the proposal of increasing marriage payment, in the view of the district commissioner, the decision seemed practical as it was based on the increased earnings of the Azande. Moreover, the decision to ignore the views of the chiefs reflected the general policy of the Sudan regime over the southern region. On the Sudan regime objective for the South after independence, historian Poggo wrote: “Its primary objective was to undermine Southern traditional laws and customs in maintaining justice, law and order, and harmony among the various ethnic groups” (Poggo, 2009, p. 93)

The Sudanese government’s efforts to construct a singular identity through the introduction of the Islamic religion and Arabic as an official language in the Southern region paved the way for other forms of marriage payment to emerge (Thoba, 2021). In its use in courts, two Arabic words, in particular, brought to light former concepts of marriage payment that were not recognized during the colonial regime. The words *kasrat* [Ar. lit. break] and *bayt* [Ar. lit. home] describe in everyday language the act of breaking into a home by a burglar. Comparable to burglary, an alternative method to obtain a wife included engaging in premarital sex instead of seeking the consent of the bride’s family. Both the court and the homestead would resolve this illegal practice by demanding a payment of fine from the burglar/groom. Although the Azande had vernacular terms for the practice and the fine [Zne. *badia;yongo*], the concept of *kasrat-bayt* as legally accepted in the courts made the Arabic version more popular in Zande urban regions. However, if the relationship resulted in pregnancy and the birth of a child at the lady’s

⁶ Piasters.

homestead, an additional fine, *mara sora kure* [Zne, lit. money for the scrape of blood], would be imposed. The *kasrat-bayt* component of marriage payment became the first element of marriage payment to be formulated and regulated at the family level.

Amidst the influence of the Arabic language, another component of marriage payment that served as a token of appreciation to the bride's father emerged, deriving its name from the Arabic word for a hat: *tagiya*. Around the former region of Gbudue, the payment for *tagiya* arose as a result of intermarriage between the Azande and Arab traders in Yambio. In a focus group discussion, one Zande woman recounted how the presence of the Arabs in Yambio led to the creation of new components of marriage payment. Her father told her:

Based on the words of my late father, the influence of the Arabs led to that component [*tagiya*]. My father used to say that the Azande followed what they saw from the Arabs who would pay money before they entered the homestead, for the hat of their in-laws, and bring many items. When the Azande saw this practice, they adopted it and included it in their system of marriage.⁷

But the Azande who lived in the former kingdom of Tambura included a component of marriage payment that was meant to appreciate the bride's father during the colonial regime. It appears that when the concept of a separate component of marriage payment for fathers-in-law was first mentioned around Yambio, it seemed to lack logic. A Zande chief in Yambio sarcastically commented: 'In Tambura, they would include a component for *ba-gude* [Zne. father] which poses the question, who saw the father with the pregnancy? How about the *yongo* (Zne. Lit. Fine for premarital sex) and *mara dee?* (Zne.Lit. legal component).What other money does he deserve?' Despite this negative attitude, the *tagiya* and *ba-gude* terms were used interchangeably around Yambio.

⁷ Focus Group Discussion, July, 2024, Yambio

1.3 Struggle for Independent South 1990-2010

While the colonial and Sudan governments were characterized by repression and control over the Southern communities, in 1983, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A), under the leadership of the late John Garang de Mabior, was formed as a revolutionary movement against the northern Sudan government. Fuelled by resentment over underdevelopment, religious marginalization, and hopes for self-determination over lands, laws and culture, the movement appealed to the hearts of numerous communities across the Southern region (de Waal, 2021; Johnson, 2016, p. 63). When the movement arrived in the Zande region in 1990, the SPLM leaders had to “invoke the fighting spirit of the King Gbudue, through the formation of the Gbudue battalion”, a name which derived its meaning from the last Zande monarch to resist the foreign forces (Kuyok, 2015) As a result, many Azande were recruited as soldiers.

The absence of the Sudan regime and transition to the SPLM reign resulted in the revival of the customs of social institutions to take a fresh root in the community. For the many Azande men who joined the movement as soldiers, this meant empowering and favouring in solving infidelity disputes. For example, when a Zande soldier would survive and return from the frontline, he would interrogate his partner to confess the names of lovers she had involved in a sexual relationship in his absence. The named individuals would be forced to pay a fine, *kassar-at-bayt*, to the soldier as a means to solve the dispute. Most of the soldiers would charge their victims to pay double the *kassar-at-bayt* he had paid after their wives. According to court records on similar disputes, the Sudan government gave the customary ‘A’ and ‘B’ courts the powers to solve infidelity cases (the complaint of Akpaka, who served as a soldier, was solved by the ‘A’ court with a payment of a fine).⁸ As a result, *kassar-at-bayt* paid to the husband became

⁸ Akpaka, 1957, Court complaint over infidelity case, Yambio

another component of marriage payment that never involved the court nor the kinsmen of the bride. Instead, the Zande SPLA would be the recipient of this component. While *kassar-at-bayt* to the husband was first associated with individuals who were in the military, it gained popularity especially for the economic benefit it brought to the husbands.

By 1991, the SPLM-controlled areas had established state-like institutions and humanitarian supports (see the Operation Lifeline Sudan (Akol, 2005)). Yambio and Nzara were famous for the educational institutions run by the Catholic Church. While all children had access to attend school, engaging in sexual intercourse with female learners was treated as a crime punishable by imprisonment or a fine. In contrast to the *kassar-at-bayt* fine, the fine for having sex with a schoolgirl had a different connotation. Sex was viewed as an interruption and a loss to the girl's family; thus, the *khasarat* fine was demanded to cover the cost of school [Zne: *Gberesa pa school*]. For girls who were believed to be virgins, a routine medical checkup was required to assess their virginity before determining when to demand the fine. However, most families opted for military torture techniques to decide when and who should be charged with the *khasarat* fine. In situations where the girl revealed multiple names of sexual partners, priority would be given to the individual who first had sexual intercourse, or the fine would be split among her lovers.

1.4 Independent South Sudan 2011-2024

The rebirth of an independent nation-state of South Sudan in 2011, followed by political instability in 2013, presented a unique situation to the notion of value. Before the secession in 2011, the post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) period [2005-2010] had already offered a preview of what independence would mean (Gosztonyi, 2023). There was a sharp increase in money circulation, and relative peace and migration in search of economic opportunities in bigger towns. When the South Sudanese Pound (SSP) currency was introduced after

independence, its exchange rate of SSP 2.5 for US\$1 brought hope for better economic prospects. However, in 2013, when conflict broke out between President Kiir and his former vice, Dr. Riak Machar, in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, it quickly spread all over South Sudan, leading to the displacement of the rural population to urban centres. Further, the conflict left a dent in the country's economy through high inflation that lasted beyond the period of the actual conflict.

Similar to other political regimes discussed earlier, the South Sudan governments does not intervene differently in controlling marriage payment and marriage payment practices, instead, the influence of modern forms of communication (letter writing), household properties (tables and tablecloths) and home construction (walled fence and gates) has given rise to new components of marriage payment. Some of these components are fees paid for speech, letter, table and entry into the homestead of the bride's family. The Arabic terminologies for these fees includes: and *fata kasum* (Ar. Lit. Open the mouth), *haqu juwab* (Ar. Lit. For letter), *hagu tarabiza* (Ar. Lit. for table) and *haqu dukhul* (Ar. lit. for entrance).

In summary of the above discussion, the marriage payment practice is shaped by multiple factors and agents. The cases of the colonial and Sudan regimes demonstrate the influence of the state in the practice. Marriage payment turned out to be a conduit through which the state defined and assigned meaning to the ritual of marriage payment. While the (in)visible influence of the political government seemed to suppress and control the growth in certain regimes, the continuous changes in political ideology have provided the re-emergence and formulation of new meaning to marriage payment. This insight further adds fees for items that include letters, tables as part of marriage payment (Leonardi, 2011, p. 226; Reining, 1966, p. 94).

Figure 3: Development of different components of marriage payment since the inception of modern money

Political regime/time	Marriage payment components	Rationale	Authority
Colonial Regime 1905- 1955	1- Dowry (Mara dee): <i>Legalising the union</i> 2- Token of appreciation: bride's mother (leben)	Formal education vs informal education	Colonial administrators and chiefs
Sudan regime 1956-1990	3- Fine for premarital sex (kasrat-bayt fine) 4- Token of appreciation: bride's father (haqu tagiya; ba-gude) 5- Scrape blood labour (sora kure)	Legal language and concept of home Intermarriage Labour, and moral obligation	Sudan administrators and chiefs, elders
SPLM regime in controlled areas 1990-2010	6- Fine for adultery: paid to groom (Kasrat-bayt) 7- Fine: interrupting school (khasarat)	Militarized importance Fees for disruption of school	Parents and <i>barimara</i> brothers
South Sudan regime 2011-2024	8- Fee for letter (haqu juwab) 9- Fee for the gate (haqu dukhul) 10- Fee for the table (Haqu tarabiza) 11- Fee for bride's kin to speak (fata kasum)	Modern development and fees for services and objects at marriage payment	Parents, educated brides, <i>barimara</i> brothers

Chapter 2: Marriage arrangement and purchase of kinship

‘You have to see these things with your own eyes, because the Azande said: the eyes tell the truth better than the ears,’ remarked the Azande kingdom minister for culture and welfare as he handed me an invitation to a traditional marriage event. As an anthropologist, the saying reflected the core tradition upon which most anthropological studies have been conducted—the participant observation. My study required observing the marriage payment and negotiation, aspects of the marriage event that allowed only the close clan members of the bride and groom to attend. In late July, I had observed a marriage payment for a female clan relative from a low social background, and the event was attended by close clan members. Yet, the minister’s marriage invitation was for the groom and bride with high social status, an event that presented a rare chance to observe and contrast marriage payments of different social classes. Similarly, I explored the clans of the groom and bride and found out that I shared a clan with the bride.

On a Saturday afternoon, I arrived at the traditional marriage venue. Loud music from a playlist of Azande artists, who had sung about love and marriage, played on the PA system, setting the atmosphere for the event. The Master of the Ceremonies, a man in his late 30s, made several announcements and guided the guests to sit in the two tents according to their affiliation with the groom and the bride. The majority of the seats were plastic chairs, with sofa seats placed at the forefront for the guest of honor, the minister for culture and welfare. Besides the two tents, a small tent, decorated with flowers, had five Zande traditional chairs and a table arranged for the groom, bride, and the three individuals who accompanied them. As the crowd increased, the children who had initially occupied most of the seats were dislodged and found new seats on mats.

The long-awaited moment arrived, and the Master of Ceremonies commanded, ‘DJ, kill it, kill it,’ and the music came to a sudden stop. He welcomed the guests who by now had reached

about 300, and went on to recognize prominent guests with positions in the kingdom and the state government. He then announced: “We shall excuse the selected team of the bride and groom’s family to perform the custom of marriage payment before the celebration starts.” The location for the marriage payment was about 800 metres away from the main event, at the home of the bride’s relative. The team from the bride’s family consisted of three elders, two young men, and a woman, while the groom’s team consisted of four men in their mid-age (50-60), one elderly woman, and the two women who identified themselves as the older sister and niece of the groom.

At the venue for the marriage payment, the team was welcomed by a young lady into a sitting room of the two-room house. In the sitting room, the team for the groom was offered the rear seats, while the bride’s team occupied the front seats next to the two doors. This sitting arrangement reminded me of the sad experience narrated by my interlocutor. They were locked inside the house during marriage payment for having paid less amount for the marriage payment. Luckily, in all the marriage payments I observed, the groom’s team was never locked inside the house. After the prayers and formal introduction of each member, the spokesperson of the bride’s team, of the young man, mentioned that due to time constraints, the details for all the marriage payments have been printed on a document. The document contained four components, i.e., dowry, a token of appreciation to mother and father, and *kasrat-bayt* fine and items for the mother [shoes, chair, hoe, saucepan, cloth], and a walking stick, hoe, a pair of shoes, a machete, and a chair for the father. The document further contained an endnote referring to the SSP and US\$ that was cited: ‘NB: We have done this in both currencies because of the current inflation in South Sudan.’

As the groom’s team read through the document, the youngest woman reached out for the brand-new small table they had brought along to the venue. In a situation where the groom’s kinsmen forget to carry a table, ta fee is charged for the table. She then placed a tablecloth on it and

crawled on her knees and placed it in the middle of the group. She went back and crawled again with a bag filled with brand-new, sealed bundles of SSP. 1000 notes. As she took her seat, the marriage negotiator spoke to the in-laws as he referred to them as *my chiefs*, a term often used in the context of customary courts. Marriage payment was similar to but showed a vital difference from the court as the young men occupied the seats of the *chiefs*, who, in court settings, are elderly men. Throughout the negotiation, the two youth from the bride's team led the negotiation, as their senior male clan members served as the audience. These changes in generational roles were not confined to the discussion of marriage payment, but were widespread in Zande social life. I follow these changes through the marriage procedure, the status of the bride, and the actors of the marriage payment to highlight the influence of monetization and the modern regime in Zande social life.

2.1 'Through a window': Marriage procedure

Contrary to the marriage procedure described by Evans-Pritchard, Larken, and Reining, in which the parents of the prospective groom and bride were involved and tasked with the marriage decision, contemporary Zande marriage arrangements stem from the agreed consent of the bride and the groom (Evans-Pritchard, 1970; Larken, 1930; Reining, 1966). This



Figure 4: A hut and a small window
All photos taken by the author

marriage procedure was described by women as 'he came through the window,' an expression that was coined from the physical window, a key feature of houses among the Azande in Yambio. Although concrete houses were seen in some homesteads, the majority of the homesteads had huts built out of clay brick walls with grass-thatched roofs (Braak, 2022, p. 3).

The sizes of the windows corresponded to the size of the hut, with the smaller hut having one small window. Large families had separate huts for girls and boys, with independent huts for children who had reached the age of puberty. Beyond its primary role in ventilation, the windows played a critical role in forming relationships that ended up in marriages.

The entire procedure of the ‘through the window’ marriage arrangement was conducted in secret and would only come to the attention of the lady’s family through pregnancy or when the lover is caught. The first phase would begin when the man verbally expresses his intention of romantic affection for the woman [Zne. *pe sangba*]. At this stage, women are required to show some reluctance before accepting the offer. It may take weeks, months, or even a year for women to consent to the relationship. This delay allows women to identify men with genuine marriage intentions through their persistence while waiting for a response. If a man quickly gives up and seeks another woman, he would be perceived as motivated by a desire for a sexual relationship rather than marriage intentions. Similarly, men viewed women who take enough time to accept the love intention as potential wives.

The literal function of the physical window comes into play after the woman accepts the proposal. The next arrangements include a visit to the woman’s homestead at night, when her guardians have entered their huts to sleep. During these visits, the boyfriend would primarily signal his arrival through a knock on the window. The causal relationship may remain a secret as long as the woman has not conceived a pregnancy. Children who are conceived and born in such a relationship were termed *awiri badia* (bastard), a Zande term that carries a negative connotation.

2.2 ‘Educated brides are terrible ’: social status of women

“It’s a crime when a woman studies before she’s married,” remarked the Master of Ceremonies in a conversation with the groom’s kin who had just returned from the marriage negotiation. After a long wait to declare the start of the marriage celebration, the Master of Ceremonies was relieved upon seeing the negotiation team returning to the main event. He pulled one of the kinsmen towards where I was parking the motorbike and inquired about the cause of the delay. This particular marriage event had two sessions that happened on the same day: the marriage payment and the traditional marriage celebration.

After the marriage celebration, the remark of the Master of Ceremonies shaped the interviews I conducted and provided more insight on how internal grouping influences the larger discussion of marriage payment. The women I spoke with placed women into four groups. The first two groups were women who lived in urban centres (*adee gbata*) and rural areas (*adee line*). The last two groups were the educated (*na gedapai*) and non-educated women. Since my respondents were predominantly urban dwellers, my interpretation may be biased against women in the rural regions. However, at the time of this study, many peripheral areas around Yambio had undergone armed conflict and displaced the rural population to seek safety in Yambio town. Out of the four groups, more emphasis was placed on the women who fit in the urban and educated groups. Such women were regarded as civilized and were potential wealth creator through employment.

The vernacular terms used for educated and non-educated women need attention as they tend to blur at certain points. The Zande words *deegude school* and *na gedipai*, which translate to "schoolgirl" and "mother-reader," were used interchangeably for the schooled women. However, the *na gedipai* was mostly associated with ladies who had attained high school and tertiary education. The marriage payment and negotiation that kept the Master of Ceremonies

waiting was for a woman from the latter group. The bride had completed both secondary school and obtained a university degree in business field in neighbouring Uganda before she settled into this relationship culminating in her marriage. Additionally, she had a vast lived experience in the urban centres of Yambio, Kampala, and Juba. Similarly, on the other two marriage payment negotiation that I have observed, the brides had attained their higher education in Uganda and had lived in Yambio for a long period of time. The disparity between educated and uneducated brides cuts beyond the economic aspect of marriage payments. The more women navigated into the higher hierarchy of their groups, the more their voices were heard in the discussion regarding marriage payments. Other studies on the relation between the role of formal education of women and marriage payment concluded that formal education increases the amount of marriage payment (Ashraf et al., 2020), formal education also plays another role beyond the economic rewards of marriage payment. In the past, the brides were never involved in the pre-marriage payment meeting at which major decisions on marriage payment were made. But when the number of highly educated brides increased, their voices started to be heard in such meetings. This was best explained in an interview with Amato, an elderly man who married off his daughter, also an educated bride, some seven months before my fieldwork.

Amato: Ladies who have studied are terrible! [laughing]. You should write it down.

Isaac: Why are they terrible?

Amato: Because their mind has grown (emancipated) and they are keen to know how much is being asked as marriage payment in case the man will one day want to divorce, when the relatives can't afford to refund the money, she will be the one to refund. It does not concern the uneducated lady to know the amount, she has no issue because she is just *taken*.

This development created an unconventional environment through which the male clan members had to seek alternatives which resulted in the inclusion of the mature female clan members and the views of the brides in the discussion. For most marriage arrangements, the male organizers would start the preparation by assigning a female clan member to spy on the bride while collecting information on the financial status of the prospective husband, and the bride's view and reactions in regards to high marriage payment. The female clan members who are tasked to collect this information are selected based on criteria of closeness to the bride, and discernment. Her findings would later be shared with male clan members before the pre-marriage payment meetings. Moreover, some educated brides would exploit the ties with their female clan members to amplify their perspectives.

Under these circumstances, a divergent interpretation of what marriage payment means to different groups of women emerged. As the interview excerpt gives a hint, the perspectives of the educated and non-educated brides differed based on the nature of influence they exerted on the clan's male members. While non-educated brides were described as conforming to marriage customs reflected the notion of marriage payment practice as the field of men, the educated brides, on the other hand, influenced the practice per the situation they faced or predicted to occur in the future. In a situation where the groom has introduced a second bride or has a track record of physically abusing the wife, yet has not completed all the marriage payments, the educated bride would influence the marriage payment to act as a disciplining tool as the idiom "she has hit a nail on his head" is used to describe brides who collaborate with their kinsfolk to reach high marriage payment. On the other hand, they would advocate for a reasonable marriage payment and secretly contribute an amount to grooms who struggle financially, yet they have desirable characters and treat their educated wives with respect. Furthermore, the distinct role of each component of marriage payment has shaped how women interpret the meaning of marriage. In contrast to the popular view that perceives every component of

payment to mean marriage, educated women stipulated the distinctive role played by each component of marriage payment. As the words of Didi (2025) through her TikTok page reveals, “When a man pays *kasrat-bayt* un educated gals think it’s marriage...”. This view about the *kasrat-bayt*, a popular component of marriage payment among the Azande may only come to clarity when it is examined as a single component instead of the wholeness of marriage payment which suggests marriage. The rationale behind *kasrat-bayt* as explained in the historical section, conveys the notion of a *fine* for pre-marital sex, instead of a marriage notion.

2.3 Negotiating value and wealth: Agents of marriage payments

The role played by senior men in marriage payments has been a key trend in marriage scholarship, yet their autonomy over family and marriage institutions has never been the same throughout the years. As pointed out earlier, the elders had lost authority over the selection of spouses for their children, and this extended even further their primary role as key decision makers during marriage payments. In this shift of hierarchy, the sons were focal agents, followed by their parents. Amidst these changes, the perspective of the brothers-in-law turned out to make an essential contribution to the study of the valuation of marriage payments.

In a Zande family setup, a female child has a designated brother who is entitled to receive her marriage payment. In the era of spears as a form of marriage payment, such a brother had the title of *bagimara* a Zande word consisting of a verb of *bagi* ‘sell’ and *mara* ‘iron’, suggesting how marriage spears were traded in an exchange for a wife (Larken, 1930, p. 100). However, in modern currency, the title was slightly adjusted to reflect the function of money as a transactional device, especially its function in purchasing food items in urban centres. Thus, the Zande word *barimara* (Zne. Lit. Eater of money) reflected the shift in the use of marriage payment. This concept is in close association with what Bayart called the ‘politics of the belly’ in the Cameroonian context: the elite and the local politics described and understood in terms

of food consumption (Bayart, 1993). While the *barimara* brother had little influence over marriage payments made in spears, a significant turning point occurred during the rebel SPLM/A regime [1992-2005] before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This period was marked by the massive recruitment of youth into the army. Money, means violence, guns, and impunity were granted for these youth, which elevated their status above their elders. These changes compelled the elders to give up some of their roles to the youth

During my fieldwork, I observed that the role of the *barimara* brother had surpassed that of all the family and clan members during the marriage discussions. For each marriage event, young male members of the bride's family or clan served as the chair of the discussion, while another documented the marriage payment, amounts paid, and outstanding balance. With the tradition of marriage payment, one bride explained during a FGD: 'If he [*barimara* brother] has never lived in Yambio or Juba, the marriage payment will follow the Zande tradition.' In the urban centres of Yambio and Juba, people adapted to the unstable economy, commonly measured by the day-to-day exchange rate of the local currency to US dollars. As the brothers looked to the market price of the dollar to determine the amount of marriage payment, the debate surrounding the traditional concept of marriage payment became a common discussion among the elders and women. While this debate seemed new in Zande society, it was not unfamiliar to anthropologists. In the field of anthropology, the debate evolved around the use and interpretation of the terms 'brideprice vs bridewealth' (Dalton, 1966). Similar to the reasoning of the Azande elders who seemed to derive the customs of marriage payment for the material objects, Evans-Pritchard's position in the debate pointed to the material form of marriage payment, the spears among the Azande, the cattle among the Nuer, etc, and he concluded: "The material goods and the services that form a necessary payment at marriage—bridewealth—are not the same as the dollar price of a commodity:" (1966, p. 732). But while this interpretation suited the notion of marriage payment in the absence of modern money, the presence of state-

issued currency with its ties to the global value of the dollar altered the source of authority of marriage payment. Similar to the price of an essential commodity in the market, the amount of marriage payment fluctuated with the market price of the dollar. This was evident in the reflection of Takoyo, a groom I observed and filmed his marriage payment in late August. He stated: “In January, the component of marriage payment for the bride’s mother was around SSP 800,000. But in July, the amount had increased to SSP 4,000,000.” While the changes may be associated with the inflation of the local currencies, it equally demonstrates that marriage payments during the monetized form derived their meaning of value from the market behaviour. While any amount of material goods was interpreted to seal the marriage, the *barimara* brothers changed the order and altered the component of marriage payment that legalizes marriage as the last item of payment. Completion of the first two components of marriage payments: a *fee for scraping of blood*, and the *speech* were compulsory and had direct connection to service that was rendered to the bride when she delivered the child at her homestead, while the latter for marriage discussion. Next was a payment of the *kasrat-bayt* fine for premarital sex was to be at least 50% the total amount . It should be noted that the amount of the *kasrat-bayt* fine doubled the amount that were paid as a token of appreciation to the parents. Through this arrangement, the *barimara* influenced the marriage payment to benefit himself before the parents, and the marriage aspect was affected. The last component, dowry (*Zne. mara dee*), was the minimal amount of the payment, given that both traditional and lower courts required part of the component to be refunded at divorce.

But the parents-in-law, the second agent of the marriage payments, emphasised the value of kinship that marriages introduced. In proverbial sayings, the parents emphasised that marriage was a purchase of kinship, and kinship, on the other hand, was compared to a scar that never disappeared, as agreed to what Anderson (2007, p. 159) observed of marriage payments in sub-Saharan Africa in forming kinship alliances among groups. Through the lens of the parents, the

marriage negotiators were able to prepare the prospective grooms for a suitable kin. Zingorani, a marriage negotiator, explained:

If I am told some three months earlier that we will go to make a marriage payment to the family of Mr. X, I will investigate the relationship between the groom and his in-laws. If he has a good *sino* [personality, manner, quality], I will further provide him a cheating clue, encouraging him to build a friendship with more family members of the lady. This may include the people who will lead the negotiation, the paternal aunts and the mother. He should be good with them, provide them assistance, pay them visits with basic gifts like salt. When the time comes for the kinsmen of the bride to discuss the amount for marriage, one group will ask for SSP ten million, while the others will refuse and say the groom has good *sino*, and suggest SSP three million as marriage payment.

For the parents, the amount of marriage payment was decided with the thought that the son-in-law would continue to come to their aid and offer them services that as the title, the son suggested. While the parents hoped for the continued service from their sons-in-law, the decision for major components of marriage payments was made by *barimara*, who, in many marriages, charged double the tokens of appreciation for their parents. Moreover, the payment was required to be fully paid or at least 50% before the tokens for the parents were allowed

2.4 ‘Money of misfortune’: Circulation of marriage payment

Two days after I observed the first marriage payment of a clan member, I was surprised to receive a notification of a deposit of ssp. 20.000 in my mobile money account. At first, I thought the sender had mistaken the contact to which the amount was supposed to be deposited. However, I was mistaken. After a few minutes, I received a text message explaining why the amount was transferred to my account. It was from the marriage payment I attended a few days earlier, and the text message indicated that I should use the amount to buy water. Although the

message was clear on how I should use the amount, I was still reluctant on how best to spend the money until my elder brother who had attended the marriage payment and received a similar amount, advised me: ‘You should eat it, that is how money received after a woman is spent.’ I pursue the notion of ‘eating marriage payment’ in this section and seek further explanation from the Azande about how such money is perceived and circulated.

During the transition from marriage spears to Egyptian pounds, the elders seemed to continue with their role as custodians of the marriage payment. The elders I interviewed indicated that most of the marriage payments were kept by the elders in a safe place and would be used only when the *barimara* reached the age of marriage or when the new marriage had shown no signs of divorce. This points to what Reining (1966:49) observed about the increased rate of divorce among the Azande. In the past, marriage arrangements and their stability were checked through consultation of the poison oracle, the *bengei*. However, the practice came into disuse during colonial era which coincided with marriage crisis (Markó, 2024).

However, when other components of marriage payments were increasingly paid in monetary form, the question of norms emerged. The earliest norms of marriage payment became clear on the token paid for the mother-in-law (*mara leben*). Once the bride’s mother would receive her token in full, she would, in return, prepare meals and beer for her son-in-law. Through this reciprocal gesture, the son-in-law would not seek a refund of the token that was paid to the mother-in-law. But this norm had fallen into disuse a long time ago, and was replaced with two broader expressions: ‘*mara faagara* and *mara kure*’ (Zne. Money of misfortune; money of blood). *Mara* is a Zande term for iron, which continued to be used for state-issued money. *Faagara* is an Arabic Juba term for misfortune, bad luck, while *kure* is a Zande term for blood. To the Azande, money obtained through marriage payments contains an element of misfortune and blood. I discuss two components of marriage payment, which are perceived to contain both elements.

1. The *mara dee* (Zande, mostly translated as dowry) carries both legal and symbolic aspects. From a legal viewpoint, the *mara dee* seals the marriage arrangement and is treated with the ritual of placing the amount on the ground. The earth had to bear witness to such money. Additionally, from the emic approach, the money (*mara*) is placed before the woman (*dee*), which in other words signifies the exchange of money (object) for a woman (being blood). In the words of a youth leader of Kuzee residential area of Yambio, such money had the notion of blood:

That money is exactly the money for blood (*mara kure*). When money is paid after a living person and it's equated into business, the idea is that the business can't flourish, because it's associated with environmental rituals.⁹

The expression of 'money of blood' was reported among the Azande hunters, who categorized money obtained from animal products as having 'no value' (Leonardi, 2024). Like marriage payment, money obtained from selling animal products (meat, tusk, hide) were never to be used in trade related activities. In all three marriage payments I observed, I noticed that the

⁹ Interview, July 2024, Yambio

mara deewas the minimum amount of all the components.



Figure 5: A woman crawls back after payment of the *mara dee*, placed on the ground, and other marriage components

2. The *kasrat-bayt* fine (for premarital sex), on the other hand, carried the notion of money paid for the act of sexual intercourse. Although this amount was the highest paid component of the marriage payment, the Azande perceived such money unfit for business related activities, instead it was shared among the kinsfolk of the bride. Many tales were narrated about individuals who had attempted to use the *kasrat-bayt* money for different purposes. Consider the following experience of a man who declared his intention to his kinsfolk to divert the amount to cover the cost of school for his son:

They charged the component for *deception* (See. *Kasrat-bayt* fine) to which the father mentioned that the whole amount shall be used as school fees for her younger brother. The brothers and people who attended the event angrily refused the idea. They told him that is not how that money is supposed to be used. That money is not fit for school fees, it is money received for the act of deception, and should not be used that way. That amount is shared among us who attended the marriage payment. Another person

commented that money is dirty, which can evoke calamity. The money itself is a calamity.

Beyond the view of misfortune and money for blood, the entire marriage payment was tied to the quality of pride negatively. This quality of pride manifested in two ways. First, the groom, who had paid a substantial marriage payment, would taunt his wife about how his money benefited her family. In situations where the marriage payments were invested in tangible items (house construction, transportation), the groom would point to these assets as proof of the material advantages of the paid amount. Second, the bride, who suffers mistreatment at her husband's home, would inform her kinsmen how the payments received from her marriage arrangement made them wealthy—an assertion that provokes the beneficiaries of the marriage payment. Consequently, the marriage payment is often shared among the bride's kinsmen, obscuring all traces of how the money was spent. While the brothers typically share the *kasrat-bayt* among themselves, the token of appreciation given to parents is distributed among their clan relations. Through such circulation, the monetization of marriage payments is ongoing and serves a social function within the clan relationship.

Chapter 3: Value amidst turbulent political economy, forced urbanisation, and NGO regimes



Figure 6: Three components of marriage payment

The marriage payment negotiation had lasted for about 3 hours, yet the marriage negotiator kept pleading with the bride's elders to intervene and reduce the amount. The marriage negotiator, an old man with an accumulated knowledge in marriage negotiation, persisted and went to interpret each Zande proverb to his advantage. When one of the bride's senior men had earlier evoked the Zande proverb; 'where there is an elder, a shelter over the tomb doesn't get burned', a proverb that compels the elders to act before events get bad, the marriage negotiator had capitalized on the interpretation and as a result, a certain amount was reduced at the request of one of the elders. Despite the 5% reduction in the amount, the marriage negotiator did not seem content. As silence began to fill the room, the last senior man who had not spoken from the bride's side cleared his throat, an indication that he wanted to speak. His words touched on several elements of the discussion before he concluded with the following explanation about money:

The issue concerning money, it is our country that has compelled us to act in such a manner. In the past, a million was a lot of money, but today it is just a simple amount. You should not blame us for millions; that is not our intention, but since that is the

culture of our country, that's why we charge such an amount. The white money [US dollar] has reduced our currency to nothing.¹⁰

It was now clear that neither the elders nor the young men would lower the marriage payment beyond the initial 5% that had been previously reduced. The elders' presence was insufficient to salvage the state of the negotiations. Both elders appeared helpless, as the marriage payment was tied to the country, the local currency, and the U.S. dollar¹¹. This chapter generally reflects on the political economy and environment of South Sudan and how it influences the role of the local currency in social settings.

My analytical approach is shaped by the theoretical insights of Bossen and Muniesa. For marriage payment in Africa, Bossen (1988, pp. 132–135) associates the practice with societies that practice horticulture and pastoralism, where it derives its value concept through the socioeconomic benefits that the bride and groom provide to the bride's kinsfolk and the husband (1988, p. 133):

... women, particularly in horticultural or horticultural-pastoral systems, are valuable as producers and reproducers. Kin groups are reluctant to part with them unless they are compensated for the cost of raising them, and for the future return that could be expected from their labor. This is consistent with women's prominence as farmers.

Bossen further articulates that bridewealth is found with 'patrilineal descent' and 'polygyny', which tends to favour wealthier men to marry more wives and expand their kinship relations. Through the expanded kinship network, "numerous interconnected obligations between the dyads of sister/brother, wife/husband, and brother/brother-in-law are formed"(1988, p. 136).

¹⁰ See documentary: marriage payment in Yambio/ Isaac 2025

¹¹ At the declaration of independence in 2011, the South Sudanese Pounds was tied to the US dollar at a rate of 3:1. Salaries for civil servants and members of the armed forces were among the highest in East Africa. In 2013, the country faced civil war, and the oil-dependent economy largely crumbled, the exchange rate gradually collapsed. At the time of the writing of this thesis (May 2025), the exchange rate reached 600:1. This is among the highest hyperinflation rates in the 21st century.

She concluded that in societies where bridewealth is paid in the form of cattle, they are further shared among a large network of kinsmen (1988, p. 134).

Besides the value derived from the hard labor provided by the brides, Bossen stressed that the amount of marriage payment does not equate to the woman, but instead covers certain rights: ‘sexual, and reproductive’(1988, p. 133). It’s through such payment that marriage unions are viewed to be valid, and the same applies to the children that are born in such a union. While the interpretation of marriage payment value surrounds the notion of labor and rights from the perspective of a single gender (men), Bossen invited anthropologists to explore ‘the economic significance of bridewealth to women’(1988, p. 133).

In contrast, Muniesa’s approach to the concept of ‘value and value creation’ focused on the ‘vernacular concepts’ rather than the usual ‘analytical categories’ that have framed value as a static notion (Muniesa, 2023, p. 170). Through the lens of the vernacular concept, Muniesa argues that the notion of value is found at work as ‘a yardstick’ in situations where there are disputes over ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ [in case of price] and ‘determination and justification for resource distribution’(171).

While Muniesa admits the challenges posed by the emic approach to the study of value notions, he stressed its application in historical settings with diverse political and moral economy (171):

Concepts of value are indeed embedded in the scientific-normative narratives of political economy. An abundant number of such narratives are about signaling contradictions between one particular economic process and what its inherent value is or should be about – or, on the contrary, about demonstrating that value is reflected perfectly within that particular economic process

In other words, the notion of value from all aspects adjusts according to the existing economic process, which in the case of the Azande in South Sudan has been in constant evolution.

Following Muniesa's emic approach to the notion of value, this chapter explores South Sudan's political economy, which over the years has been characterized by civil wars, displacement, prominence of International Non-Governmental organisations (INGOs). It seeks to understand how the Azande perceive and navigate marriage payments amidst these changes. Yet, the chapter also aspires to understand Bossen's economic significance of marriage payment and its impact on the Azande women and men. It asks, what happens to the notion of values when the monetary form becomes dominant?

3.1 Political economy

Significant economic development in autonomous Southern Sudan began during the interim period (2005-2010), when the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army leader, the late John Garang, and the Sudan government signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Naivasha, Kenya, in January 2005. A report by Rolandsen and Kindersley (2017) described the post-CPA political economy of funds from international donors and oil revenue, with the latter used mostly to pay salaries for the Sudan People's Army. The main economic source —oil— started on the wrong foot, a resource that safeguarded the political stability of the ruling elites and the country rather than building the national economy (Crisis Group, 2021). Towards the end of the interim period, the fever of the referendum, in which a decision on the secession of the South as an independent country, saw an increase in the size and payment of the army. Alex De Waal (2014, p. 355) writes:

Kiir was afraid not only that militia leaders could disrupt southern Sudan, but also that Khartoum's security paymasters would use cash to buy the support of discontented southern Sudanese provincial elites, who could make the referendum impossible or swing the results towards unity. For that reason, shortly after the Juba Agreement, the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly voted to double the pay of private soldiers to

\$150/month, twice that of their counterparts in the Sudan Armed Forces. As the referendum approached, this was again raised to \$220.

Not only the salaries, but the number of waged soldiers rose rapidly in the post-CPA period. Salva Kiir – the leader of the autonomous Southern region after the death of Garang in 2005 – announced the Big Tent policy, the absorption and integration of militias into the SPLA. In 2005, there were an estimated 40,000 soldiers in the SPLA, while the largest militia, the largely Nuer SSDF numbered between 10,000 and 30,000. Integration was not simply adding up the numbers, but military commanders had an interest in beefing up their own numbers to receive a larger cut from the salaries, that always arrived in bulk from the centre. At the time of independence, the army of the new nation consisted of at least 240,000 paid soldiers, all financed by petroleum revenue (Craze, 2021).

What these accounts do not reveal, however, is how the economy that focuses on the army operates at the local level and influences social institutions. The experience of James, a man who was compelled to join the army in 2008, provides an overview of the post-CPA economy and marriage payment. In late 2007, 20-year-old James snuck out of his hut at night to meet his girlfriend. As he usually did, he whispered for her to open the door, but she did not respond. He then turned to option B, opening the small window and, tapped on her. James was caught off guard when his hand was grabbed, followed by a screaming voice of male. He exerted himself, pulled back his hand, and fled into the darkness. The previous day, a male clan member had visited the homestead of his girlfriend, and her room was offered to this visitor. The incident changed everything in James's life. The following day, he was summoned by the girl's family and charged with a hefty *kasrat-bayt* fine, an amount he couldn't afford. He sought the assistance of his older brother, who served in the army in the far region of Bor town. However, the only assistance he would offer upon meeting his brother was to join the army. James recalled

his advice: ‘Join the army, and you’ll have money to pay after your wife.’ While the experience of James may not contain entirely the motivation for all army personnel, at least the economic benefit that came along with being in the army might be cited among others.

James’s experience stems from the time when South Sudan’s forces were actually paid for their service. But the civil wars of 2013 and 2016 led to severe changes in the economy of South Sudan. In 2013, two prominent political figures in South Sudan, President Salva Kiir and Vice President Dr. Riek Machar, had a disagreement that resulted in the outbreak of the 2013 conflict (Johnson, 2014; Nyadera, 2018). When the conflict reached Western Equatoria State around 2015, many Azande youth were motivated to join the rebel group affiliated with the former Vice President under the expression: ‘We’re searching for our rights.’ Our rights, in this context, were tied to the economic benefits that high-ranked army personnel, mostly from the Dinka and Nuer groups, enjoyed in South Sudan. The mostly civilian youth seized this political instability to join the army and quickly climbed up to the top ranks of the army (Braak, 2020). At the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARSS) in 2018, the rebel forces emerged with self-claimed military ranks, which reflected their hopes for high salaries. But due to the civil war in Sudan, the oil flow had stopped putting the main source of South Sudan’s revenue and entire economy on its knees (Crisis Group, 2024). Even in the 2023 and 2024 fiscal years, local news outlets suggested that the South Sudan national government had not paid its civil servants for a year (Eye Radio, 2024; Radio Tamazuj, 2023). Amidst the economic crisis, the role of the *barimara* brothers in social institution settings—marriage payments became much prominent.

But South Sudan’s long experience of armed conflict has suggested that individuals in the army sit atop the societal hierarchy. Their influence in marriage institution has mostly been associated with rape, and forced marriages as has also been the case in Sierra Leone (Marks, 2014). Yet, their role as active agents in marriage payment and negotiation tends to be missed out. While

not every Zande homestead had a family member in the army, it was generally believed that the persistence of conflict and militarization had empowered the youth and made them major actors in social events. As the former SPLA training slogan implicitly puts it: “even my father, I will give him a bullet,” the gun holders perceived themselves as equals or even superiors to the elders (Leonardi, 2007). I was told many ill-tales and Zande songs that complained of the *barimara* brothers who flogged and imprisoned their prospective in-laws. The influence of the militarised *barimara* brother spread and manifested in many marriage payments as the army-based economy dwindled.

3.2 Global Humanitarian Organisation

The presence of humanitarian organizations in the South[ern] Sudan region dates back to 1989, when Operational Lifeline Sudan provided essential aid to war victims. Following the signing of the 2005 CPA, the number and influence of humanitarian aid agencies increased. While the humanitarian field in South Sudan is primarily concerned with the crises posed by internal conflict, displacement, and climate-related disasters, around Yambio, humanitarian organizations were cited for their contributions to economic and knowledge production. In this section, I examine the economic aspect and reflect on published knowledge related to the marriage arrangement.

While the South Sudanese government devoted much of its national resources to politically related matters, humanitarian agencies found themselves as the sole providers of both aid and essential services to the population of South Sudan (See: Craze, 2023a, 2023b). Like elsewhere, most of the humanitarian intervention in South Sudan has shifted from food aid to cash. For instance, resilience-related interventions supported by the United Nations agencies targeting displaced persons and Girls’ Education South Sudan (GESS funds for female learners, among other interventions) were in the form of cash. Through the cash aid and the dollar based salaries

they paid, the humanitarian organizations had penetrated almost all aspects of the local society and economy, positioning the NGO as a lucrative economic hub.¹²

Meanwhile, South Sudanese humanitarian workers themselves were perceived as the epitome of the actual economic value of the aid intervention. At the inception of humanitarian operations in South Sudan, their fame was relatively low especially when the exchange rate of the US\$ had little difference from the local currency. Coupled with that, humanitarian agencies were locally perceived as temporary bodies that would leave the country in a few years after the new nation had established itself. However, that view had completely changed as the aid intervention lasted long and proved to be the only source of foreign currency.

Besides the socioeconomic benefits, studies on marriage arrangements in South Sudan are largely driven by the humanitarian organizations, who examine the payment practice as an engine of social disturbance, or a tool through which the elders oppress the youth and dominate the women of society. Women were largely projected as victims of patriarchal custom. For instance, Pospisil et al. conducted the largest quantitative survey of marriage payment among South Sudanese communities, and they sought to show the “empirical link between brideprice and violence against women” (Pospisil et al., 2024). While some of such reports acknowledge the “cultural and spiritual dimensions” behind the norms that guide the social institutions, they tend to calculate the economic value of the local practice in dollars.

A 2021 report by the United Nations Development Programme on the traditional and changing role of gender and women in peacebuilding in South Sudan explicitly links marriage payment – incorrectly called dowry in the report – and violence. At the center of this issue is the concept of the daughter as an economic commodity, with dowry being the central strategy upon which the household economic plan is constructed. Because marriage payment is the foundation upon

¹² In Yambio, attendance of workshop initiated but the humanitarian agencies are often reward with stipend, with the least \$ 5 per participant.

which the economic and social well-being of the male members of the girl's family relies, girls are vulnerable to violence. when they are used for compensation (UNDP, 2021).

Earlier reports, for instance, the 2011 report by Sommers and Schwartz published by the United States Institute of Peace argues that the high marriage payment force “many male youth enlist in militias, join cattle raids, or seek wives from different ethnic groups or countries” (Sommers & Schwartz, 2011). Human rights organizations also tie the high monetary value of marriage payment to violence and forced child marriages (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Other studies argue that marriage payment is a force of male dominance to maintain extreme violence or even abduction of women by men (Lacey, 2013).

The knowledge that has been produced in this way, often sponsored by humanitarian organisations, is one-sided and lacks nuance. None of these articles seeks to showcase the complex nature of marriage payments and the potential positive social role of the institution in contemporary South Sudan. Only a handful of articles showcase and analyse the issue of South Sudanese marriage payments in its complexity. Hutchinson shows the development of four wealth categories among the Nuer that “play a prominent role in determining relations of autonomy and dependence”, including in marriage arrangements. Hutchinson show the marked distinction between “the money of work” and the “money of cattle”, and their counterbalancing parallels between two sorts of cattle, “the cattle of money” and the “cattle of girls” (Hutchinson, 1992). Leonardi shows how money had been historically associated with government, and how South Sudanese communities develop alternative value systems into rural economies (Leonardi 2011).

3.3 Forced urbanisation

The changing pattern of armed conflict in South Sudan created a unique opportunity to assess the operation of vernacular concepts of value. Before the outbreak of the 2013 conflict in Juba, the Azande sought safety and refuge during civil wars in the periphery, where the ‘bush’ acted as a shield from attacks. When armed conflict erupted in Juba in 2013 and 2016, thousands of urban civilians sought safety at the United Nations Protection of Civilians (PoC), while others crossed international borders into Uganda or Kenya as refugees. However, some fled the cities toward their villages, hoping for both safety and access to farm produce. Yet as civil war spread throughout the country, these villages became strategic locations for the militias’ operations, which again led to the displacement of the rural population toward urban centers. The shift towards urban areas and limited access to the rural regions where subsistence farming occurred fundamentally altered the understanding of labor that bridewealth scholarship has traditionally linked to agricultural work. Women needed a different skillset to survive in the city, here the market became the primary source for obtaining food, mostly imported from neighboring Uganda.

The dependency on money in the urban centres was expressed in everyday language and sets of idioms that tend to highlight how many Azande viewed money. A popular idiom focused on the dog, a domestic animal which had been associated to its role in hunting game and providing security to the Azande homestead. On several occasions, the elders I interacted with would evoke the idiom: ‘the hardship in Yambio forced the dog to feed on its tail to survive.’ This idiom suggests the turning point in Zande life and approach to life in the urban centres. Principles that once guided the social life and institutions of the Azande were to be bent to survive the hardship that was posed in the urban centres

Conclusion

“Our kingdom has come, and the King has continued to appeal to the parents to allow their daughters to be married. But it will take us sometimes before we reach to where our kingdom wants us to be” remarked an elder during the last marriage payment I attended for this study. The restoration of the Azande Kingdom and its ambiguous objective to “restore norms and the lost Zande values” had appeared to give assurance to the parents, who sounded like defeated actors in marriage arrangements (Hillary, 2024 p.608) . The hope for the former days when the elders had sole authority over most social institutions was associated with the new kingdom. While the restoration of these ‘values’ are yet to come to reality, in the last three years of the existence of the Azande kingdom, marriage celebration was mostly marked with the brides and groom dressed in the brownish clothes that resembled the traditional colour of the barkcloth formed from the trees.

In sum, this thesis has discussed the notion of value through a thorough historical and anthropological study of the Azande marriage payment. In the first chapter, the study project traces the historical origin of components of the marriage payments and highlights the rationale. The influence of government regimes, modern social institutions including formal school, and urbanization shaped the collective value of marriage payment. The first chapter also demonstrates the influence of key actors of marriage institution and marriage payment through the role played by colonial administrators, chiefs, elders, and the *barimara* brothers during times of armed conflict.

The Second and Third chapters are centred on the ethnographic investigation and analysis of the current practice of marriage payments among the Azande. Through these chapters, the role of parents, educated brides, and *barimara* brothers as essential actors of marriage payment emerges out. The vernacular concept of the marriage payment are altogether shaped amidst the

economic crisis, heavy militarised operation and the presence of the humanitarian organization with characterized by the dollarization aid.

This study has argued that, the creation of value of marriage payment is a collective work which included the role played by government regimes, traditional leaders and family members. The notion of value as the case of marriage institution and marriage payment showcase, is dynamic and adjust accordingly, hence the interpretation of bridewealth as transaction that cover the legal and compensation has changed. The concept of value in marriage transaction takes moral, social and economic value.

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