

# Lobola: The Perceptions of Great Zimbabwe University Students

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## Abstract

*The study was conducted to establish the views of Great Zimbabwe University students concerning the significance of the custom of Lobola. Forty-five (45) students (29 female and 16 male) who were studying Women and Religion participated in the study. A questionnaire comprising closed and open items was used to collect data. Data was summarised by means of frequency tables and analyzed qualitatively using evaluative descriptions. An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they wanted the custom of Lobola to continue on the grounds that it is part of their culture and that it links families. However, the respondents pointed out that the custom should not be commercialized as overcharging leads to the wife being treated as a piece of property. Those who were in favour of the abolishment of Lobola (a minority) noted that the custom is at odds with gender equality that contemporary women are fighting for. They perceived it as an institution of patriarchy intended to serve males not the women concerned. It was concluded that respondents generally viewed the custom positively although they noted that it is vulnerable to abuse leading to abuse of women by their husbands and in-laws. It was recommended that the custom of Lobola should be maintained in such a manner that it links families rather than creating animosity between them or causing the abuse of women in marriage.*

**Key words:** *Lobola*, gender equity, cultural practices, domestic violence, traditional practices, Zimbabwe

## Introduction

*Roora/Lobola* is a significant element of marriage among the Shona of Zimbabwe (Ansell, 2001). It is a custom that has stood the test of time. The concept of *Roora/Lobola* is translated into English as bridewealth or brideprice. Because the authors are not comfortable with the translation which seems to suggest the purchase of wives, thus being value-laden, terms *Lobola* and *Roora* will be used interchangeably to refer to the phenomenon. However, citations employing the term bridewealth or brideprice will be encountered in this work reflecting the perceptions of cited authorities, not those of the author of this article. According to Posselt (1926) cited in Zvobgo (1996) *Lobola* is a custom in which the husband (or his family on his behalf) delivers or promises to deliver to the father (or guardian) of the wife, stock or other property, in consideration of which the legal custody of the children born of the marriage is vested in their father (or his family) to the exclusion of any member of the mother's family. *Lobola* involves some payment by the husband or his family to the family of his wife. *Lobola* is negotiated by the heads of the two families or their representatives in the presence of a messenger (Bourdillon, 1998). Traditionally, cattle were transferred from the groom's family to that of the bride upon marriage, but now bride wealth is usually paid in cash (Bourdillon, 1998). Despite the changes people remain deeply attached to the institution of *Lobola*.

According to Chirawu (2006), the concept of *Lobola* as it originally existed was noble but now the focus has shifted. Everjoice Win, a Zimbabwean gender activist quoted by Chirawu (2006), asserts that *Lobola* does not benefit women. It benefits the men in her family in the sense that it is these who charge and receive the *Lobola* and often use it as they wish. *Lobola* places the husband's control over his wife's sexuality. In a similar vein, Kambarami (2006) says that *Lobola* gives a man all rights whilst the woman is stripped of all freedom and rights. She goes on to say the woman is even further reduced to the level of acquired property especially in cases where *Lobola* was set at a high price. She concludes by arguing that *Lobola*, as part of the patriarchal nature of the Shona society, breeds inequality and widens the gap between men and women, thereby placing women in a subordinate position. Kambarami (2006) thus sees *Lobola* as an instrument of patriarchy that perpetuates the subordination of women. Father Prestage denounced *Lobola* as "The purchase of a wife by a man for the purpose of begetting children" (Bhebe, 1973, 45). Seen in this light, *Lobola* dehumanizes women and relegates them to the status of commodities.

The above sentiments connote a negative perception of *Lobola*. However, this negative depiction of *Lobola* is paralleled by a positive one as epitomised by some views. Bourdillon (1998), perceiving the custom of *Lobola* as just and responsible, describes it as a stabilising factor, a significant gift and an acknowledgment of a priceless debt which the bridegroom's family group owes to the bride's family group. Apart from this *Lobola* has many secondary effects such as legitimizing the children and conferring marriage status to women. *Lobola* may be understood as a guarantee of good faith on the part of both families (Thorpe, 1991). The above sentiments suggest that it is socially beneficial.

*Lobola* has conflicting influences on the lives of women, especially with regards to domestic violence (Armstrong, 1998). In a study conducted by Armstrong across Zimbabwe men held two views on wife battering and *Lobola*. On one hand some men reported that it was more acceptable to beat a woman for whom they have paid *Lobola*. On the other hand others indicated that they were more likely to beat a woman for whom they had not paid *Lobola*, because they could get away with it. Seen from these perspectives, *Lobola* is both a promoter of domestic violence against women as well as a safeguard against the practice.

The practice of paying *Lobola* has been considered because of its contentious nature. While some view it as a noble practice others, especially those of a feminist orientation, view it as one of the sources of oppression of women. Views of students studying a course called Women and Religion were considered to establish whether or not the course had some impact on their perceptions of *Lobola* as a traditional and allegedly patriarchal practice. While some studies have been conducted to establish perceptions of *Lobola* (Getecha and Chipika, 1995; Ansell, 2001) these did not focus on a group of university students studying a course (such as Women and Religion) which has some bearing on the issue, a gap that this study sought to fill. The researchers had a keen interest in establishing the views of students with a presumably 'modern' mind. Would the students view the custom of *Lobola* as a social anachronism or a social necessity? The quest for an answer propelled this investigation.

## **Method**

The study involved a conveniently selected sample of 45 students (29 female and 16 male) from Great Zimbabwe University in Zimbabwe. The students were in the Bachelor of Arts Degree Programme, studying Women and Religion.

The researchers administered questionnaires with both closed and open items to students in a class setting. The students responded to questionnaire items individually. Students were assured of confidential treatment of their responses as well as anonymity. They were asked not to write their names or any identifying information on the questionnaire. The students' participation was voluntary. The researchers collected the questionnaires immediately after they were completed by respondents. Collected data were tabulated to show frequencies and then subjected to evaluative analysis.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1: Responses to closed questionnaire items**

ITEM	RESPONSES		
	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
1. <i>Lobola</i> contributes to women's oppression	27(60%)	17(38%)	1(2%)
2. <i>Lobola</i> degrades women	11(24%)	31(69%)	3(7%)
3. <i>Lobola</i> indicates women are property	22(49%)	22(49%)	1(2%)
4. <i>Lobola</i> forces women to stay in abusive relationship	29(64%)	3(29%)	3(7%)
5. <i>Lobola</i> shows the man values his wife	34(76%)	6(13%)	5(11%)
6. <i>Lobola</i> keeps the divorce rate low	18(40%)	17(38%)	10(22%)
7. <i>Lobola</i> links families	36(80%)	6(13%)	3(7%)
8. <i>Lobola</i> promotes gender inequality	34(76%)	11(24%)	0(0%)
9. <i>Lobola</i> makes husband superior to wife	21(47%)	18(40%)	6(13%)
10. <i>Lobola</i> shows the man loves his wife	35(78%)	5(11%)	5(11%)

The results in Table 1 above show both positive and negative perceptions of *Lobola*. On the positive side a majority of respondents responded in the affirmative to the following statements: *Lobola* shows that the man loves and values his wife; *Lobola* links families. On the negative side, *Lobola* was viewed as contributing to women's oppression, forcing wives to stay in abusive relationships and promoting gender inequality. There were mixed feelings with regard to whether *Lobola* indicates that women are property of males and whether *Lobola* makes the husband superior to the wife. The results in the table suggest that respondents largely saw the custom of *Lobola* payment in an ambivalent light.

## Results from open questionnaire items

### *Support for the custom of Lobola (Lobola should not be abolished)*

Comprehensive responses on perceptions of *Lobola* were obtained from open items. On whether *Lobola* should be abolished an overwhelming majority (78%) of respondents answered in the negative, thus showing support for the continued existence of the custom of *Lobola*. This finding corresponds with results from Getecha and Chipika's 1995 survey in which 97% of Zimbabwean women interviewed indicated that *Lobola* should not be abolished. In related studies conducted among high school students (Ansell, 2001) and university students (Burn, 2005) from a neighbouring country, South Africa, similar findings were obtained. In these studies most students saw *Lobola* as a valuable part of African culture that should be allowed to thrive. The picture that emerges is that *Lobola* is certainly persistent even among urbanized and educated people, a notion expressed by May (1993). *Lobola* thus seems to be one of those enduring aspects of African culture. That *Lobola* is supported on the ground that it is a traditional practice seems to echo the saying 'longevity is legality' thus because *Lobola* has been practiced since time immemorial, it has a legal status and as such should not be abolished.

In this study students advanced a number of reasons why *Lobola* should not be abolished one of which is that *Lobola* is our tradition, a part of our culture, our cultural heritage. The implication of the response is that doing away with *Lobola* is like trying to evade one's identity which would be quite absurd. Thus, they maintained that as a traditional practice this custom should be perpetuated. Support for tradition and culture showed by a majority of respondents in this study, most of whom were women, contradicts findings from a study carried out in the United States of America by Eshelman (cited in Chalfant and LaBeff, 1988) which revealed that education makes people, especially women, less tradition bound. The results seem to suggest that the university students, with a substantial level of education, are not immune to supporting tradition. Furthermore, it appears that tradition, as represented by *Lobola*, was considered to be sacred and as such worth to be preserved.

The other reason supplied in support of the custom of *Lobola* is that *Lobola* validates a marriage and shows the seriousness of the man, thereby reducing the divorce rate. This finding tallies with Thorpe's (1991) conviction that *Lobola* is a guarantee of good faith on the part of both the husband's and the wife's families; a gift symbolizing an earnest belief in the successful outcome of the marriage. In a similar vein, Gelfand (1981) observes that although there are provisions of divorce among the Shona, divorce is not common due to the restraint placed on the couple by the bridewealth. *Lobola* was also viewed as a gesture of gratitude to the wife's parents. In this connection *Lobola* was understood as a token of appreciation, a way of thanking in-laws for bearing and rearing a wife for them. This finding seems to reflect Tsanga's (1999) sentiment that the primary reason for the payment of *Roora* is to compensate the family of the bride for the loss of their daughter who will now belong to the husband's family for the purpose of bearing children and extending the husband's clan.

The justification of *Lobola* on the ground that the wife extends the husband's clan through male offspring was clearly articulated by one respondent who put it thus: "If you don't want to pay *Lobola* but you want to have sons then you are mad" implying the absurdity of having one's clan extended without one having paid anything to one's in-laws. Further justifying the perpetuation of *Lobola*, a number of respondents described it as a unifying force, binding and cementing the relationship between two families; a sentiment expressed by Bourdillon (1990) when he describes bridewealth as a chain linking two families.

For some respondents, the custom of *Lobola* ought to be maintained because it attaches some value on the wife. A woman for whom *Lobola* has not been paid is, according to Shona culture, not a legitimate wife but one of whiling up time with, a kind of toy. *Lobola* was cited as an indicator that the man values his wife. It was also pointed out that since the wife is an asset as she ensures the perpetuation of the other family, *Lobola* ought to be paid for her to show her value. Thus *Lobola* was depicted as a custom that shows that the wife is valued and respected by both her parents and her husband. *Lobola* was also depicted as a custom that gives a woman a sense of self-worth. These findings concur with Gelfand's (1981) conviction that *Roora* payment gives the woman value in the eyes of all, especially the man. Furthermore, respondents who registered support for *Lobola* indicated that payment of *Lobola* shows the husband's complete acceptance of his wife and his total commitment to her.

In defence of the perpetuation of *Lobola* some respondents argued that if *Lobola* is abolished, women would be abused at a very alarming rate. As one respondent put it, "Without *Lobola* the man would take it as a simple thing to marry and divorce, abusing and violating women, causing gender inequality problems." A number of respondents, echoing similar sentiments, noted that *Lobola* preserves marriages; thereby reducing the divorce rate, a finding in keeping with Hamisu's (2000) assertion that brideprice is a socially stabilizing factor.

While a majority of respondents showed support for the custom of *Lobola*, they were quick to point out that abuse of the custom has detrimental effects on marriage. They noted that *Lobola* should not be overcharged because '*mukwasha muonde haaperi kudyiwa*' (meaning even if a son-in-law has paid his bridewealth he is still expected to help his father-in-law). The implication of this response is that if *Lobola* is overcharged the son-in-law will no longer feel indebted to his in-laws and will not be willing to offer them any economic assistance. Thus while a large brideprice gives status to the wife and to the marriage, in some areas *Lobola* payments have "inflated to a degree that disturbs many" (Bourdillon, 1998, 45).

## **Criticism of *Lobola* (*Lobola* should be abolished)**

Respondents who said that *Lobola* should be abolished saw the custom as a facilitator of the oppression and abuse of women in marriages. They perceived it as a dehumanising practice that equates women to property. This perception concurs with Wagner's (1999) assertion that in countries where brideprice is still common, women are seen as property owned by their husbands. The perception is also consistent with Kambarami's (2006) argument that *Lobola*, which is part of the patriarchal nature of the Zimbabwean society, breeds inequality and widens the gap between men and women thereby placing women in a subordinate position.

The study revealed that due to *Lobola* some men see their wives as objects who are always reminded 'mind you I paid *Lobola* for you' or '*ndakakutenga*' (I bought you). It was also noted that some husbands insist that their wives should obey their commandments because they paid *Lobola*. This finding is consistent with Tsanga's (1999) view that *Rooro* gives men unfettered rights and control over women. Thus *Lobola* renders women vulnerable to abuse by their husbands. That women are abused as a result of *Lobola* is also expressed by Kethusegile, Kwaramba and Lopi (2000) who argue that some husbands claim that they can do whatever they want with their wives because they paid *Lobola* for them. The man acquires the status of a demigod that has a right to mete out punishment if the subject fails to remain subordinate (McFadden, 1999; Tsanga, 1999). Similar sentiments are also shared by Tichagwa (1998), Burn (2000), and Hamisu (2000). Men who abuse their wives on the ground that they have paid *Lobola* for them show lack of understanding of the essence of this cultural practice (Mapara, 2007). Mapara here implies that *Lobola* is a noble practice which is meant to promote harmony within the society rather than domestic violence.

The general sentiment expressed by those who advocated for abolition of the custom of *Lobola* was that the custom has outlived its usefulness, thereby becoming a social anachronism. As one respondent put it: "In essence the practice (*Lobola*) is one of antiquity, yet insignificant in the contemporary sense". The payment of *Lobola* was viewed as being at odds with the current wave of feminism and calls for gender equity. Some respondents noted that while it is a reality that contemporary women are fighting for a voice, they are hacked down by the custom of *Lobola* which relegates them to a secondary position in relation to men. In view of this the hope of women's liberation from patriarchal oppression, the search for 'a land flowing with milk and honey'; a land where women can enjoy equality with men (Russel and Wendel, 1995 cited in Mukonyora, 2001,11) is thwarted by the custom of *Lobola*. Implicitly, if gender equality is an epitome of the feminist 'paradise' then the custom of *Lobola* is one of the roadblocks on the highway to this 'paradise'. Thus although a number of legislative measures to address gender inequality have been put in place, their practical application is impeded by customary practices such as *Lobola* payment (Gopal and Salim, 1988; Hellum and Stewart, 1999). Partly because of the custom of *Lobola* the principle of shared power, enshrined in the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), cannot be fully applied in the home. Viewed as an impediment to gender equality, *Lobola* is an aspect of malignant sexism (Mazrui, 1998, 45).

Mazrui (1998) further contends that since bride wealth often gives the husband more power after the payment is made, the practice is stripped of all pretences of benevolence. From the views of those respondents who opposed the custom of *Lobola* it can be extrapolated that the voice of those crying for gender equality is like the voice of one crying in the wilderness with no one listening. The custom seems to place women in the position of the colonized- silent and castrated in their ability to exercise their right to self-determination.

The study also revealed that abuse of *Lobola* is also perpetrated by fathers who now see their daughters as money-spinning projects. Such fathers tend to overcharge *Lobola*. Overcharging *Lobola* in turn leads to abuse of women by both their husbands and their in-laws. *Lobola* often gives the husband or his family members the feeling that they have rights over the wife and even own her (Kethusegile, Kwaramba and Lopi, 2000). One respondent succinctly put “*Lobola* should be abolished because at times when the in-laws charge exorbitant amounts of money women tend to be seen as property or objects.” In a similar vein another respondent echoed “The practice is now abused by men to get rich through their daughters whom they watch with a greedy eye from birth.” In this context daughters have become a high priced commodity in Zimbabwe, where *Lobola* has become a means of escaping poverty in a rapidly declining economy. *Lobola* nowadays has thus tended to become an epitome of the commodification of daughters wherein daughters are seen as a pension fund. The Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA) director Mrs Emilia Muchawa (The Sunday Mail November 26- December 2, 2006) condemned the demand for exorbitant *Lobola*. She indicated that this was a violation of the essence of the custom. This demand for large amounts of *Lobola* has led to a scenario in which some parents refuse to bury their dead daughters as surety for *Lobola* payment. The Minister of Women’s Affairs and Community Development Oppah Muchinguri described this scenario as extortion (The Sunday Mail, November 26- December 2, 2006:7). Like all traditional customs, *Lobola* is open to abuse and distortion in the modern world, a sentiment expressed by May (1983).

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study, based on the responses of 45 Bachelor of Arts (BA) students studying Women and Religion, revealed that the practice of *Lobola* has a paradoxical role in the lives of women. On the one hand, it places value on women while on the other hand it degrades them by fostering male dominance in the home and relegating them to the position of appendages. Unexpectedly, the study revealed students’ support for the perpetuation of the practice of *Lobola*. It was expected that the educated university students, (most of whom were female) exposed to gender studies, would overwhelmingly call for the abolishment of *Lobola*, a practice which is largely viewed as an impediment to gender equality by those of a feminist orientation. The study has also revealed that while *Lobola* is a noble practice with social utility, it can be detrimental to family harmony if it is abused.



As the study revealed overwhelming support for the continued existence of *Lobola* with a cautionary statement against overcharging it, it is recommended that parents should not treat their sons-in-law as cash cows by overcharging *Lobola* as this is likely to lead to the abuse of their daughters in marriage. Husbands should view *Lobola* as a token of appreciation to in-laws and not the purchase price of wives as this often leads to domestic violence and often forces women to stay in abusive relationships. Since the present study was confined to university students at one learning institution in Zimbabwe, further research should be done with a more diverse sample covering a wider geographical scope. Perceptions of *Lobola* by lecturers in the university also remain to be investigated.

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