



THE TENSIONS BETWEEN CULTURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World

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Disrupting Popular Discourses on Ilobolo: The Role of Emancipatory Social Work in Engendering Human Rights and Social Justice

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Informed by critical emancipatory theory, this chapter discusses *ilobolo* (bride wealth), which is widely practised among isiZulu speaking people in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in South Africa. The practice is common in South Africa, and other parts of southern Africa, such as Lesotho, where it is known as *bohali*, and among the Ndebele and Shona people of Zimbabwe, where it is referred to as *lobola* and *roora*, respectively (Ansell, 2011). The South African Recognition of Customary Marriages Act 120 (1998), defines *ilobolo*, and in doing so lists its various terminologies:

Lobolo means the property in cash or in kind, whether known as *ilobolo*, *bogadi*, *bohali*, *xuma*, *lumalo*, *thaka*, *ikhazi*, *magadi*, *emabheka* or by any other name, which a prospective husband or the head of his family undertakes to give to the head of the prospective wife's family in consideration of a customary marriage. (p. 1)

For the purposes of this chapter, we use ilobolo, as is widely used among isiZulu speaking people in the province of KZN.

Charting historical influences, we discuss how ilobolo, which is practised throughout southern Africa, has changed over the years to become more commodified. Ilobolo, we argue, perpetuates poverty, women's oppression, and human rights violations, all of which are of central concern for social work. Among the challenges linked to the practice of ilobolo are: (1) children born out of wedlock; (2) single mothers; (3) absent fathers; (4) delayed marriages; and (5) men's inability to afford the high costs of ilobolo. Despite the drawbacks, the practice has become normalized and taken for granted, and calls for its modification are met with resistance. While some see ilobolo as a barrier to Africa's, and particularly women's development and emancipation (Mupotsa, 2014; Nkosi, 2011; Tsanga, 1999; Wagner, 1999), with Mazrui (1998) arguing that it promotes a *malignant sexism* (p. 45), others view ilobolo as positive and central to Black African cultural identity (Marewe & Marewe, 2010; Thorpe, 1991).

Ilobolo: Shifting and Contested Discourses and Practices

Ilobolo occupies a contested space, with multiple explanations for its practice. One main function that many seem to agree on is the bond the practice is believed to create between the families of the groom and the bride-to-be (Nkosi, 2011; Posel et al., 2011; Yarbrough, 2017). Another idealized notion lies in the centrality of ilobolo to the African cultural identity (Mupotsa, 2014; Nkosi, 2011; Rudwick & Posel, 2014). In addition to socio-economic considerations, Rudwick and Posel (2014) concluded that ilobolo symbolizes "cultural, gender and spiritual identities," where appeasing the ancestors is important, and that it is "widely regarded as unassailable due to its roots in Zulu cultural or ethnic consciousness" (p. 15). Murray (1981) discussed ilobolo serving the functions of conferring rights to a woman's child-bearing capacity, rights to her sexual and domestic services, and permanent rights over her children.

The contestations around ilobolo stem from the gap between its idealized notions and its actual consequences; from the tendency to commercialize its practice and from the challenge of discerning its actual functions

in contemporary society. Traditionally, paying ilobolo was viewed as a transaction of reciprocal rights and duties between families. Furthermore, ilobolo was always paid to the woman's family in cattle, the amount determined by affordability. While cattle remain a valued commodity, shifts have occurred, particularly in urban areas, to cash payments. Ilobolo was also paid in cattle in instalments, with the first payment being before the couple was married and the remaining paid after the birth of the first child (Yates, as cited in Posel et al., 2011). However, in current practice it is now mostly paid off before the wedding. Conditions of the practice were that if the wife was infertile, her younger sister had to bear children for her, or the family of her husband had the right to ask for return of the cattle—a practice that has lost some of its salience. However, some do report that women fear leaving abusive relationships as they might have to return the payments made in respect of ilobolo (Nkosi, 2011; Rudwick & Posel, 2014). As discussed below, there are arguments that some of these shifts are linked to colonialism and modernity.

Colonialism, Modernity, and Ilobolo

The changes in ilobolo practices are partly associated with the influences of colonialism and modernity, and, in the South African context, the impact of apartheid. While acknowledging the socially constructed nature of history, Said (1993) cogently discusses the power of the past, asserting that “there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and, . . . co-exists with the other” (p. 4). Colonialism and contemporary forms of imperialism have had profound impacts on the socio-economic and cultural landscapes of colonized people.

Historically, in KwaZulu-Natal, ilobolo did not have stipulations as to the number of cattle to be paid, and during the early 1800s, ilobolo rarely exceeded five cattle (Posel et al., 2011). Theophilus Shepstone, secretary for native affairs in KwaZulu-Natal, linked ilobolo to social status. Under his colonial administration, Shepstone formalized ilobolo to 11 cows for ordinary individuals, 15 cows for relatives of chiefs and 20-plus cows for daughters of a chief. Thus, in the mid-1800s ilobolo increased and some ilobolo prices went up to 100 cows (Posel et al., 2011). Shepstone's role

in the pricing of ilobolo from commoner to relatives of the chief and to the chief's family indirectly introduced a social classification system in a Black African community where collectivism was seen to be the norm. In pre-colonial times, the groom's father helped with ilobolo payments. However, with colonial dispossession of the lands of Black African people, fathers no longer had the means to provide this support, and this contributed to the alteration of the practice to an individualistic one (Hunter, 2010).

The system of social classification and stratification was further entrenched during apartheid, with ilobolo practices reflecting more commodified relationships, which deepened the structural, racial fissures that were designed to maintain Black African people in poor and excluded positions, with apartheid laws that deliberately split families. Separate development and influx control laws, and migrant labour, undermined "the ability of men and women to form long-term relationships" (Hunter 2006, p. 103), and migrant men often established other families in the urban areas where they lived and worked.

Ilobolo adds to the already burdened Black African family, and further entrenches a range of social problems such as unmarried motherhood, absent fathers, domestic violence, and poverty. However, the social convention of ilobolo has become so normalized that even those who acknowledge its negative consequences argue for its continuity. Part of the argument for its retention resides in its anti-colonial and anti-modernist stances. As a reactionary measure, there is a tendency to protect certain practices that are "in our culture" against Western influence. Writing about the negative effects of modernity on the Shona culture in Zimbabwe, Mawere and Mawere (2010) write: "Consequently there is a resentment of the traditional subordination of women to their husbands in the modern Shona society especially among some learned and urbanized women" (p. 229). In this discourse the "traditional subordination of women" is celebrated as it rejects the "impositions" of colonialism and modernity, which they claim support "unbridled freedom" (p. 229). Obbo and Bledsoe (as cited in Marewe & Marewe, 2010) valorize the following: "In traditional bride wealth marriages, husbands have authority; husbands expect their wives to be obedient, and they tend to make claims on their wives' labour and income" (p. 229). The relegation of women to inferior, childlike status, and access to women's free and unpaid labour, remain unscrutinized in

this discourse. Indeed, Marewe and Marewe (2010) go on to place the blame for moral degradation and social problems, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, squarely on the shoulders of urban, educated women whose “children grow up calling father to all the boyfriends the mother brings home” (p. 229).

While the need to repudiate colonial legacies, “cultural conceit” of the West, and “imperial tyranny” (Sen, 2005, p. 107) is undeniable, such repudiation—as evident in the textual discourse of Mawere and Mawere—is at times absurd. Sen (2005) posits that “the so-called ‘post-colonial critique’ can be significantly constructive when it is dialectically engaged—and thus strongly interactive—rather than defensively withdrawn and barriered” (p. 85). Sewpaul (2014, 2016) argues that while there are merits to collective responsibility and communal caring, the virtues of the collective have often been abused to condone human rights violations. She calls for the need to “desist from idealizing African cultures based on collectivism, respect for family, and as embodying unifying and holistic principles as opposed to Western culture, which is represented as fragmented, individualized and reductionist” (Sewpaul, 2016, p. 34) and appeals for a recognition of the complexities and diversities within these contexts.

While condemning the Western appropriation of human rights, Zeleza (2006) claims: “These dichotomies fly in the face of the fact that communality in Africa is often as exaggerated as individuality is in Europe. . . . In both contexts. . . . individuals and community are mutually constituting and the practice of rights claiming, consuming or constraining them—entail a social context” (p. 47). Although to varying degrees, conservative, authoritarian, liberal, and radical views co-exist in the North, South, East, and West, differences within and across groups on a global level “must be celebrated insofar as such differences are not harmful to any group of persons” (Sewpaul, 2016, p. 34). Warning against the essentializing of Zulu culture, Rudwick and Posel (2014) assert that “there are no concrete and monolithic properties distinguishing members of one culture from those of another” (p. 6). Furthermore, Mupotsa (2014) questions the claim that ilobolo accords one a uniquely African identity, as “parallel practices exist in many cultures and national domains” (p. 226), but such logic is ignored in the face of the normalized and naturalized discourses around its practice.

Ilobolo: A Normalized and Naturalized Discourse and Practice

Discourse is a mode of social practice wherein there is a dialectical relationship between social structure and language. Language is embedded in social conventions and structures and is reproduced to retain and maintain various forms of power, privileges and/or oppressions in society, with women being at the bottom of the social ladder. Ideology—the taken-for-granted assumptions that people hold—is reflected in language, and social conventions and structures. Fairclough (1989) contends that “control over orders of discourse by institutional and societal power-holders is one factor in the maintenance of their power” (p. 37). Reflecting on the reproduction of gender and racial stereotypes, Sewpaul (2013) states that “the ideologies that we hold are reflected in, and reinforced by, activities in the home and school, cultural norms and practices, religion, politics, and the media. Our thinking, in turn, shapes social policies and social structures, reflecting a circular and dialectical relationship between structure and agency” (p. 119). Although ideology is false consciousness, it is, according to Althusser (1971), about the only consciousness we have. As products of our world, “those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology” (p. 175); thus, we rarely recognize our own collusion in reproducing prejudices, stereotypes, inequalities, and oppressions.

A discourse with a 48-year-old, isiZulu-speaking woman—Thando (not her real name)—a domestic worker, with two adult daughters, and who was unmarried, as the late father of her children could not pay ilobolo, said that “when a man pays ilobolo, he like puts the woman in a jail, and controls her.” She recalled her own experiences as an unmarried woman who suffered under the weight of raising her children single-handedly. As a single mother she will get an uncle to represent her at the ilobolo negotiations of her daughter, asserting that “in my culture women cannot talk.” When asked why, she—who is a robust woman who usually speaks her mind—responded with: “I don’t know. It’s from old, old times. That is what we are told. If you want to change it, people will say this and that, and there will be too much problems.” She could not see it any other way, and despite the apparent contradiction, asserted that if the man does not pay ilobolo, it will show that “he is not a man,” and that the woman has

no value. Thando's is not a single, isolated voice. Our numerous informal discussions with isiZulu-speaking people of KwaZulu-Natal (communities among which we live and work), the Facebook postings of friends and students, classroom online discussion forums, and empirical research with both males and females reflect that her experience and views resonate those of Black South Africans who, despite a cognitive awareness of ilobolo's drawbacks, support its continuity.

Women are strong defenders of ilobolo (Hunter, 2010; Nkosi, 2011; Rudwick & Posel, 2014; Yarborough, 2017). Nkosi (2011), who investigated the views of male and female university students toward ilobolo, found that females were more in support of ilobolo than males. A male participant in Nkosi's (2011) study ventured to propose a disruption in the dominant practice by suggesting that with greater emphasis on gender equality, perhaps ilobolo should constitute a reciprocal exchange (rather than payment from the man to the woman only), but his immediate retort to this was: "I'd probably be persecuted for making such [a suggestion]" (p. 90). Mupotsa (2014) detailed her experience of being chastised and labelled a "modern feminist" (p. 9) because of her critiques of ilobolo, and in her thought-provoking thesis reflected on "the ways tradition, even religion and consumption, and modernity are invoked in discussions of wedding work around particular subjects that both open and close off the possibilities for a liberatory agenda" (p. 11).

In a study of 45 university students' attitudes toward ilobolo in Zimbabwe, Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) found that 60 percent of students (64 percent of whom were females) saw ilobolo as contributing to women's oppression, 64 percent claimed that ilobolo forced women to stay in abusive relationships, and 76 percent believed that ilobolo promoted gender inequality. However, only 24 percent saw it as degrading of women, and an overwhelming majority (76 percent) expressed the view that the payment of ilobolo showed that the man valued his wife. The orthodoxies around its conceptualization and practices, as embedded in male and female subjectivities that have become "conterminous with the idea of a customary identity" (Mupotsa, 2014, p. 263), ensure the retention of its practice despite such identity being "invented, rehearsed, failed and reconstituted" (p. 263). The element of its validation of women allows the practice to continue, as women believe that they will be—and they indeed

are—undervalued and undermined in the eyes of their husbands, families, and communities if ilobolo has not been paid for them, so much so that even men and women who assert that they do not believe in the practice acquiesce to it (Nkosi, 2011; Rudwick & Posel, 2014). Although there are contested discourses and practices between the ideal representations of ilobolo and its consequences, ilobolo remains an “authoritative” (Yarbrough, 2017, p. 16) discourse and a “*primary* legitimating institution over marriage” (p. 17) even in contemporary times.

Mupotsa (2014) has detailed how, despite ilobolo being “contested, invented, reinvented and debated,” we have “become protagonists within a scripted fantasy” (p. 263), where within the dominant discourses “we are invited to perform our traditions and cultural identities in these processes in languages that attempt to make claims at primordial essences” (pp. 16–17). The claims to such *primordial essences*, and the construction of ilobolo as a “timeless or static tradition” (Rudwick & Posel, 2014, p. 8), fly in the face of the fact that ilobolo practices have been changing, according to the exigencies of socio-economic circumstances, the most prominent change being the shift from cattle to cash payments, as communities have become more urbanized. These naturalized discourses persist despite research evidence that details the consequences of the practice.

Unmarried Motherhood, Unemployment, and Poverty

Although most people wish to get married, many cannot afford the costs of ilololo. The 2005 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) (as cited in Posel et al., 2011) results reflect that from a national survey of 3,000 participants, 82 percent of never-married Black African adults either agreed or strongly agreed that they wished to marry. Posel et al. (2011) asserted that although marriage was highly prized, it was the high costs of ilobolo that inhibited marriage, a view supported by Yarbrough (2017), who, through a study with the residents of the village of Maqongqo in KwaZulu-Natal, concluded that while marriage was a central pillar, ilobolo served as its greatest obstacle.

Several studies reflect the primary economic imperatives associated with ilobolo where families use it for material advancement (Ansell, 2011;

Hunter, 2006; Shope, 2006). With the commercialization and individualization of *ilobolo*, rising costs of living, and increased unemployment, men cannot afford *ilobolo*. Thus, many Black African women remain unmarried, while they bear children from their partners. Drawing from the results of the SASAS, Posel et al. (2011) reported that *ilobolo* was identified by half of all never-married respondents as the main reason for couples not marrying, and by over 60 percent of isiZulu-speaking male respondents. This finding was corroborated in their interviews, with one woman asserting: “Our daughters are getting old, having unclaimed children at home. I would not have had my baby at home if this *ilobolo* thing was not there” (p. 17), while another said that “the reason we are not married, and we get old in our mothers’ homes is because of *ilobolo*. I wish it can be stopped—but they will never do that because it is culture” (p. 18).

The taken-for-granted assumptions of fertility defining femininity, and the celebration of fertility and motherhood in most communities, which authors such as Walker (1995) claim have greater salience for Black South African women within lineage and kinship structures, do place Black African women in invidious positions. They are demonized if they fall pregnant before marriage (Gilbert & Sewpaul, 2015), are denied the prospects of timely marriage on account of *ilobolo*, and they are simultaneously expected to prove their fertility by a certain age. There are, at the same time, taboos against cohabitation, so relatively few African couples live together before marriage (Posel & Casale, 2013; Yarbrough, 2017), often resulting in women raising children alone.

Unmarried motherhood and female-headed households bring with them their own socio-psychological and economic problems. According to Statistics South Africa (2017a) only 29 percent of Black African children had both parents living in the same household compared to the 75.6 percent among Whites, 74.8 percent among Indians/Asian, and 52.6 percent among Coloureds in 2015. The survey also reflected that 39.4 percent of Black African children grew up in female-headed households, compared with 28.1 percent of Coloured, 14.4 percent of Indian/Asian, and 16.2 percent of White children. These differences must be considered against the complex historical, socio-economic, and cultural factors that have resulted in particularly Black African men living apart from their children, thus becoming absent fathers. The gendered and racialized dimensions

of poverty and inequality in South Africa can be seen in the fact that male-headed households earn higher average incomes than female-headed households, and that men earned almost twice what women earned from work in 2014/2015. White-headed households had an income roughly 4.5 times larger than Black African-headed households and three times larger than the average national income in 2014/2015 (Statistics South Africa, 2017b).

While the father role goes far beyond the provider role to influence a range of biopsychosocial dimensions of children's lives, Johnson (as cited in Richter, 2006) argues that "fiscal support and the fulfillment of the provider role by males have the typical effect of lifting children out of or preventing their descent into poverty" (p. 56). Children who grow up in two-parent families are more likely to dedicate their time to studying, rather than combine studying with household chores and economic activities outside the home (Statistics South Africa, 2017a), and they are more likely to enjoy better quality of education. These factors influence educational outcomes, which are an important indicator of income and quality of life, with poor education and its concomitant poor educational outcomes being significant factors in perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty (Sewpaul, 2015).

Given the evidence of the consequences of unmarried motherhood and absent fathers, and that research indicates that ilobolo is an important factor in preventing or delaying marriages, it makes sense to question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding its practice. Our arguments are based on sociological, empirical evidence reflecting that: (1) the majority of people express the desire to marry; (2) the costs of ilobolo thwart this aspiration; (3) cohabitation is frowned upon from a Zulu cultural point of view; (4) many children, particularly within Black African communities, grow up in mother-headed families with absent fathers, which has several biopsychosocial consequences; and (5) the high rates of poverty among female-headed households jeopardize the life chances of children. The ideological stances toward ilobolo, and its pragmatic and instantiated effects, must be the focus of dialogue and debate for any change to be effected. Unfortunately, the orthodoxies surrounding ilobolo often prohibit rational debate and dialogue. Apart from the psychosocial issues elucidated here, of serious concern is the gendered dimension of ilobolo.

Ilobolo, Gender Inequality and Oppression

Mupotsa (2014), challenging the dichotomy between the “modern” white wedding and the “traditional,” points out that both contain traditions and rituals that reproduce patriarchal relations of power. Writing about the consumptive and gendered characteristics of both types of marriages, she concludes that these “place women at the centre of ritualized transfer in kinship mergers and exchanges” (p. 258), but Nkosi (2011) argues that marriages appear to be “worse for women married within the lobola system” (p. 32).

There are several aspects to ilobolo that disadvantage both women and men. The gendered dimension of the ilobolo transaction is but only one element of sexist discrimination. The ilobolo negotiations are generally determined by senior men in the family, with women being silenced and treated as minors in the process. Yarbrough (2017) discusses the attempts on the part of some women to exercise agency by engaging in behind-the-scenes negotiation with men, generally to bring down the price of ilobolo, but concludes by reflecting on the “profoundly gendered disadvantage that constrains this agency’s hope” (p. 54).

Nkosi (2011) questions the relevance of ilobolo considering South Africa’s goals of gender equality, and the assumption of shared productive and reproductive responsibilities. With ilobolo, traditionally paid in cattle, a woman’s productive and reproductive capacities are transferred to her husband, and children born out of the marriage belong to the husband and his family. Thus, women give up control over their sexual and reproductive rights and share no rights in relation to children that they give birth to. In a study conducted by the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE, 2005) many participants perceived married men who had paid ilobolo to be always deserving of sexual intercourse, which wives must always submit to. Mupotsa (2014) argues that “the ritualized exchange of women for cattle is presumed more innocent than the present exchanges in cash and other consumer goods” (p. 11) and discusses how ilobolo is a site for the “contestation between men and women so the invented or ‘rediscovered’ traditions related to its practice emphasize the control of women in the name of custom. The emphasis on domesticity is then also

firmly planted to the process of lobola and part of what is expected of a wife” (p. 18).

While such discourses are generally more nuanced, couched in the language of respect, value, obligations, and responsibilities—defining a “good wife” and a “good mother”—the totally crude affirmation of such control and domesticity is reflected in the views of Marewe and Marewe (2010) discussed above. Ilobolo entraps women in the homemaker role, even though they might be employed and adopting provider roles. A female participant in Nkosi’s (2011) study elucidated what she believed ilobolo ought to be and how it is conceptualized:

I don’t believe hore [that] lobola was meant for that, to say you’re buying someone and you’re buying them as a slave mara [but] most men use that thing in that way ya hore [that] she’s your slave now, you bought her and she has to cook for you, wash for you and do whatever and whatever. If she doesn’t then you have the right to claim your money back. (p. 78)

The text of one of Nkosi’s (2011) male participants reflects the relationship between monetary transaction, power, and possession: “When you have . . . the idea behind money, you exchange money to receive something that will be your possession” (p. 74). Several factors, including the level of education of the woman, whether she is a virgin, whether she has a child before marriage, and whether the child is the offspring of the intended spouse, influence the market value of the woman. Thus, women become tradable commodities, with there being identifiable markers of the commodity price. Some authors have discussed how ilobolo might render women more open to domestic violence and abuse (Mazrui, 1998; Nkosi, 2011; Wagner, 1999).

The discourse on power, possession, and violence brings us to the realm of HIV/AIDS, which disproportionately affects populations of southern African countries. There is an extensive body of literature that details the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS at all societal levels. In their edited UNESCO publication, Klot and Nguyen (2009) elucidate how “gender organizes relational interactions within families, communities

and institutions in everyday life” (p. 16) and explain “the mutually reinforcing ways that sociocultural, political and economic factors interact and influence physiological susceptibility to HIV” (p. 16).

Despite the dire consequences of gender role stereotypes, women are complicit in their reproduction on a global scale (Opoku, 2016; Sewpaul, 2013) and, within certain cultural practices such as ilobolo, in their own commodification, reflecting complex relations of power that challenge the binary of men as oppressors and women as victims. Mwamwenda and Monyooe (1997) argue that in patriarchal societies, where men are more valued than women, the payment of ilobolo might signify, for women, respect and value that they might not otherwise enjoy. Theorizing around the relationships between men and women in Somalia, where family honour is paramount, where the majority of women are subject to female genital mutilation/cutting, and where bride wealth is common, Barnes and Brody (1995) offer uncommon insights into gendered power dynamics, claiming that voluntary submission might indicate an assertion of power. They proclaim that women “partially resolve the contradiction between their acceptance of the ideals of honour, and their incomplete ability to realize them, by deferring to those in authority voluntarily” (p. 317). They quote Lila Abu-Lughod, who avers that “what is voluntary is by nature free and is thus also a sign of independence. Voluntary deference is therefore the honourable mode of dependency” (Barnes & Brody, 1995, p. 317). While this might exemplify a strategic mode of being in the face of authority and oppression, it more likely supports the thesis of our becoming “subjected beings” (Althusser, 1971, p. 182), trapped in common-sense, taken-for-granted assumptions (Gramsci, 1971), or the “voluntary intellectual imprisonment of the free subject” (Sewpaul, 2013, p. 120), where oppression is internalized and normalized (Freire, 1970; 1973).

The financial burden that ilobolo imposes on men, together with the dominant, essentialist construction of masculinity in terms of the provider role, wherein ilobolo is seen as a rite of passage into manhood, all against a background of increasing unemployment where men are unable to meet societal expectations, produces a crisis for men (Hunter, 2006; Morrell, 1998; Nkosi, 2011), *fathers without power*, as the title of Hunter’s (2006) article suggests, and an “ambiguous fatherhood” (p. 101). Kometsi (2004) argues that threats to masculine identity may contribute to undue

assertion of power and control, and to abuse. Some men see the gendered pattern of ilobolo as an injustice and as an oppression of them. In Nkosi's (2011) study one of the male participants was reported to have said that "it does seem unfair. . . . You pay ilobola and again you're expected to provide for your family. . . . You have to pay this certain amount and have your pockets empty and still again you have to manje [now] find a house together and so forth. . . . It's more pressure on the guy" (p. 72). When both partners in a relationship are economically productive, the principle of reciprocity can be used, as was suggested by the participant in Nkosi's study cited earlier on. With laws, policies, and social conventions overtly (there are hidden agendas to social conventions!) supporting gender equality, one might legitimately ask, if one of the functions of ilobolo is compensation to the parents for the costs of raising their daughters (Ansell, 2011; Rudwick & Posel, 2014), why should parents not be compensated for raising their sons? All the foregoing discussions have enormous implications for social work.

Implications for Social Work

The practice of ilobolo may seem innocuous compared with other cultural practices that violate human dignity and human security, and that constitute a threat to life, but the dynamics of its gendered practice are reflective of similar social conventions that underscore dominant discourses on femininities and masculinities within patriarchal societies. Opoku (2016), for example, describes the normalization of practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting, widow cleansing (where a woman has to have unprotected sex with a man upon the death of her husband), and circumstances where older women pay bride wealth, "marry," and often abuse poor younger women who can bear them sons (a practice called *Nyumba Ntobhu*), among certain ethnic groups in Tanzania. The normalization is such that it is women who are the "the 'torchbearers' of customary rites [who] choose to preserve these practices" (Opoku, 2016, p. 15). One of the challenges facing social work across the globe is the compromising of civil and socio-economic rights on account of culture. While principles such as doing no harm, self-determination, and respect for human dignity are held as sacrosanct in social work, these are often violated as

culture trumps legislation, policy, and national and international human rights instruments (Sewpaul, 2014, 2016). The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training specifically call for social work students to be schooled in a basic human rights approach (Sewpaul & Jones, 2005, p. 223), with the following footnote accompanying this standard:

Such an approach might facilitate constructive confrontation and change where certain cultural beliefs, values and traditions violate people's basic human rights. As culture is socially constructed and dynamic, it is subject to deconstruction and change. Such constructive confrontation, deconstruction and change may be facilitated through a tuning into, and an understanding of particular values, beliefs and traditions and via critical and reflective dialogue with members of that cultural group vis-à-vis broader human rights issues (p. 228).

Sewpaul (2013, 2014) earlier called for more critical and emancipatory approaches to underscore social work education, research, and practice and for social workers to adopt the role of cultural mediators by facilitating intercultural dialogue, debate, and constructive confrontation when necessary. Emancipatory social work is directed at a heightening of awareness of external sources of oppression and/or privilege that holds the possibility of increasing self-esteem and courage to confront structural sources of poverty, inequality, marginalization, oppression, and exclusion (Sewpaul & Larsen, 2014). These strategies work for professionals as much as they do for the people social workers engage with. As it is difficult to think outside the box, conventional forms of community education are, in themselves, inadequate to address the complex challenges of culture and human rights. Emancipatory theorists have argued that critical awareness can contribute to developing alternative paradigms and to radical change. Social workers can benefit from the theses of Freire (1970), Giroux (1997), Gramsci (1971), and Hall (1985) that speak to the power of emancipatory pedagogical strategies as catalysts in engendering human agency. Informed by emancipatory theorists, we appreciate that the claim to the *primordial essence* of ilobolo can be challenged and changed, as “we

are not entirely stitched into place in our relation to the complex field of historically-situated ideological discourses. . . . We remain open to be positioned and situated in different ways, at different moments throughout our existence” (Hall, 1985. p. 103).

Gramsci (1971) argued that on account of ideological hegemony and our common-sense assumptions, change could not come from the masses, at least not at the beginning, except through the mediation of intellectuals—thus, the important role of social workers as public intellectuals in community education and of social work educators who use emancipatory strategies. The role of ideology becomes critical to the extent that it has the potential to reveal truths by deconstructing historically conditioned social forces or to reinforce the concealing function of common sense. It is thus vital that common sense be subject to critical interrogation (Gramsci, 1971), so we can shift from being the “subjected being” to a subject that is the “author of and responsible for its actions” (Althusser, 1971, p. 182). As social workers, we are products of our socio-political, economic, and cultural worlds, and we are subject to their dominant ideologies. But we also reproduce our worlds. It is, therefore, critical that we become aware of cultural, political, and capitalist ideological hegemony and appreciate how we can use our heightened consciousness and voices to contribute to socio-economic, political, and cultural change and development.

Such critical interrogation must begin in our classrooms where, by adopting critical, emancipatory approaches, we can help students to appreciate the structural determinants of life and to confront and transform their own taken-for-granted assumptions. Education must remain student-centred and simultaneously emphasize human agency and the impacts of structural factors and social conventions on our lives, and the relationship between freedom and responsibility (Sewpaul, 2013). As social work educators, we can adopt a critical multiculturalism (Giroux, 1997) to help students to examine how various forms of oppressions, rooted in “race,” culture, gender, class, geographic location, sexual orientation, etc., get reproduced historically and institutionally, and in doing so, we must consistently reject essentialist and stereotypical views.

Conclusion

Discourses on ilobolo intersect with discourses on culture, economics, gender, human rights, and social justice. Because language plays a powerful role in maintaining ideological hegemony, we must analyze and deconstruct language—and deconstruct stereotypes and attributes attached to certain categories (Giroux, 1997; Hall, 1985; Sewpaul 2013). As Hall (1985) emphasized, “Ideological struggle actually consists of attempting to win some new set of meanings for an existing term or category, of dis-articulating it from its place in a signifying structure” (p. 112). The signifying structures within which ilobolo is placed—its *primordial essence*; its socio-cultural constructions of ideal femininity and masculinity; and its being the cornerstone of “African cultural identity”—need to be debated, dis-articulated, and reconstructed. Ilobolo is deemed to be “the most enduring part of African culture” (Mawere & Mawere, 2010, p. 5)—culture’s quintessence. Contrary to this, Muptsoa (2014) argues that central to ilobolo is the way that “belonging and kinship are imagined and regulated” (p. 226).

We argue that rather than through ilobolo, which evidence shows has detrimental effects, continuity and affirmation of ethnic identities can be assured through cultural elements such as food, music, dance, dress, theatre, celebratory non-sexist birth and marriage rituals, and non-punitive, non-sexist cultural mourning practices. Developing critical consciousness through dialogue, rather than foreclosing debate on the grounds that “it’s in our culture,” may lead to critical action (Freire, 1970, 1973; Giroux, 1997; Gramsci, 1971). Awareness represents an important step in getting people to act in engaged and responsible ways to question, challenge, and confront the structural basis and social conventions of life, thus supporting the view that the Self must be the main site of politicization (Giroux, 1997; Sewpaul, 2014, 2015).

To attribute the negative aspects of ilobolo to colonialism and, at the same time, claim a timelessness and primordial essence for its practice is a paradox. It is incumbent on Africans (of all “races”) to exercise agency, undo colonial legacies, and not remain slaves to colonial and imperialist impositions. One needs to question the logic of practices being reproduced simply because they have always been there, as these must be “decided by

those who live today” (Sen, 1999, p. 32). One also needs to question whether holding onto an essentialist and fossilized ethnic identity might work against the goals of national unity and peace. We witness extreme forms of ethnic violence based on group identification in many parts of the world. Writing within the context of the Rwandan genocide, Adejumobi (2006) warned about the dangers of ethnic identification, asserting that “rights and citizenship have been largely defined and institutionalized as a group affair. . . . Citizenship . . . was not a ‘universal’ and common public good. . . . It was *exclusionary and bifurcated*.” (p. 255).

We are particularly concerned with the sociological evidence that points to the detrimental consequences of ilobolo for women, men, and children, which social workers deal with on a day-to-day basis. But we need to go beyond the remedial and merely picking up the pieces to work toward prevention, and the rebuilding of the fragmented fabrics of our societies. Social workers have roles to play in promoting social justice and human rights at micro and macro levels, and more especially at the intersections of these. Social work, as Sewpaul (2015) asserts, holds the potential to function in that “intermediary site where *life politics* meets Politics with a capital P, where private problems are translated as public issues and public solutions are sought, negotiated and agreed for private troubles” (Bauman, 2007, p. 24). Sociological evidence and practice experience must be used to influence social policy and legislation, and to engender attitudinal changes. Social workers have the requisite skills in empathy, active listening, facilitation, mediation, and interpersonal relationships to build bridges across cultures, to engage people in such a way that the harmful aspects of culture are confronted, while retaining those aspects that are positive, and that allow for intergenerational cultural continuity and human flourishing.

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