

Hanlam: Marriage payment in the 21st Century: A Case Study from Wokha Town

Mhabeni W¹, Dr. Moameren Pongen²

¹Research Scholar, Tata institute of social sciences, Guwahati Campus, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Joseph University, Chumoukedima, Nagaland, India

Received: 18 Jan Dec 2023; Received in revised form: 19 Feb 2023; Accepted: 25 Feb 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by TheShillonga. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

Marriage is one of the oldest social institutions in human society. During this occasion, some marriage payments are made in the form of bride price, dowry, and dowry. In the Lotha community, a marriage payment, "Hanlam" is practiced. Hanlam is different from any of the marriage payments mentioned above. Thus the study's main objective is to find out the relevance of the Hanlam practiced among the Lotha community and its impact on women's rights. The paper is descriptive, where the respondents were selected based on purposive sampling. Altogether 50 couples from Wokha town were interviewed. The study found that Hanlam still holds relevance among the Lotha couples as it indirectly benefits the newly married couple not only in terms of monetary help but through hanlam the couples are recognised and accepted by their kin, especially the groom is regarded as one of the kin members by the brides' paternal kins. Furthermore, it is the only traditional practice left in Lotha marriage ceremony. Finally, the continuation of the practice of Hanlam has not led to the curtailment of women's rights.

Keywords— Marriage payment, Lotha, Hanlam, Relevance, Women's Right

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is considered one of the oldest social institutions in human society and is found in every known human society. It is an institution or complex of norms that sanction a man and a woman's relationship and bind them in a system of mutual obligations essential to the functioning of family life. It grants the status of a person socially acceptable and admitted to privileges maintained and upheld by the social code. Marriage is not only a union between two individuals, but it is a union between families, clans, villages, and communities. And this institution differs from community to community, religion to religion, and place to place. The marriage institution is recognized in all cultures and communities and has many rituals, customs, and traditional morals and values. Marriage marks the formation of the family, the primary unit of production, consumption, procreation, human interaction, and linkages within the larger society. Sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists have attempted to provide definitions of marriage sufficiently general to encompass its various manifestations.

Many scholars have defined marriage in different ways taking into account different aspects, ways, and generations. Therefore, there is no universal definition of marriage. However, an explanation given by

Westernmark(1992) is most acceptable by all where he defines marriage as; marriage is more or less a durable connection between a male and female, lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of offspring. He completes this definition "as a social institution, on the other hand it has a somewhat different meaning, a union regulated by custom and law. Society lays down the rules relating to the selection of partners, the mode of contracting marriage, its form, and its duration."

During marriage, some form of monetary transaction among the bride and groom's family before and at the time of marriage is not a new practice. Marriage payment can be categorized into brideprice (prevalent among the tribal), Dowry (commonplace among the Arab/Muslims), and Dowry in South Asia (Goody, 1974).

THE PRACTICE OF BRIDE PRICE AND DOWRY

The custom of bride price as marriage payment dates back to the ancient civilizations of the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Hebrews, Aztecs, and Incas. Under Islamic Law, a valid marriage contract requires a form of brideprice. Ancient China required the negotiation of a bride price for the validity of marriage, and these transfers continue to be a norm in many rural areas today. Finally, Bride price are

currently most prevalent in Africa, where more than 90% of sub-Saharan societies typically make such marriage payments (Goody, 1974). In terms of marriage payment in the form of dowry dates back to at least the Greeks and Romans. For instance, in medieval Western Europe and later, dowries were a common practice among most social and economic groups. Dowry as a marriage payment was also prevalent in Latin America until countries gained independence. In contemporary times, dowry is almost universal in India. In other parts of South Asia, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka paying a dowry at the time of marriage is increasingly common (Anderson, 2007: 13).

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND MARRIAGE PAYMENT

The social characteristics and nature of marriage payment practice go hand in hand in most societies. For instance, marriage payment of the brideprice is primarily practiced in the tribal community, where women play an active role in agriculture. Boserup (1970: pp 64-67) says the brideprice is found in societies where agriculture relies on light tools (such as the hoe) and, thus, where women are actively engaged. Hughes (1985: pp 13-58) also argues that the historical absence of bride price in Greece and Rome was an important demarcation of the complexity of Greco-Roman civilization. This contrast with contemporary Indo-European peoples (the Germanic tribes) and the ancient and more primitive people of the Mediterranean whose legal and religious literature from the code of Hammurabi to the Bible records the practice of brideprice. The dowry on the other hand as marriage payment exists in complex, advanced, non-kinship, and class-based societies.

Background of the Lotha Tribe:

Like the word Naga the derivation of the word Lotha is obscure. It has been interpreted in various ways. According to Zanao Mozhui, 'Lo' means sacrifice or offering, 'Tha' means fully or satisfactorily (Mozhui, 2004:04). Therefore Lotha means people who fully sacrificed to the satisfaction of the Gods. Another interpretation is that their original name was *kyong* which means human. J. P. Mills mentions that the Lothas called themselves as *kyon*, meaning simply Man (1922: 01).

The Lotha is one of the major tribe in Nagaland. Wokha is the district of the Lothas which covers an area of 1,628 sq.km. According to 2011 census, Lotha population is 166,343 and the density per sq.km is 102. The literacy rate is 87.69% as of 2011 (Nagaland census, 2011). Tokhu Emong is the post harvest festival of the Lothas, which is celebrated with the harvest done, granaries full and people settle down to enjoy with feasting. It is celebrated in

1st week of November every year (LH, Tokhu Emong Motsu, 2016: 9)

Hanlam: Marriage Payment Among the Lothas

The concept of Lotha marriage encompassed all the above conceptual understanding of the marriage institution. Marriage in Lotha society is a union of a man and woman, created by following the prescribed rules, rituals, and obligations the society set. Through marriage, a family is created, and not only that, but the marriage bond creates a linkage between two different groups, that of the husband's family and wife's family in the society. It further results in the formation of a kin group structure, whereby the families within the two kin are linked with affinal ties created by marriage between members in the group and society as a whole. Social norms- culturally defined rules for behaviour- help define marriage, which includes customs, laws, rituals or religious ceremonies, etc., that specify what is acceptable and unacceptable. It is not simply a relationship between two individuals but also creates a link between two social groups.

Among the Lothas, marriage is considered an essential obligation to be fulfilled by both man and woman for fecundity. One was disdain and looked down upon unless marriage had been fulfilled. Marriage, according to the traditional Lotha concept, is considered not only for sexual enjoyment and legalised procreation but also for the establishment of a good relationship. One of the social ties in the community was rooted in inter-clan marriage, which directly or indirectly promoted mutual understanding and kinship relations. The traditional marriage practices of Lothas, known as *hanlam*, act as a customary binding requirement without which marriage is not socially sanctioned and recognized. The etymological meaning of *hanlam* is *hanlamvu*, which literally means to carry back. *Hanlam* is practiced by giving pig's meat – a pig without blemish – given by the groom to the bride's family. Nrio (2009 p.82), after pikhuchak (feast of prosperity) a day is fix for giving *hanlam* (price of equilibrium). The meat is then distributed to the bride's paternal *jiwotsu* (phratry) members and married sisters. In return, the distribution of meat yields gift (usually in cash) in favour of the bride. This practice not only strengthens the bond between the kins; it also recognizes the man/husband as an affinal member of the kin group. Generally, marriage must pass through customary stages in a particular society to be legal.

Relevance of the Practice of Hanlam among the Lotha Community

Traditional practices of the people over various generations have evolved to adapt to the social needs of the people. However, in the process of evolution, there also exists the need to revive the culture that is fast losing its foothold in

modernization. As Longkumer (2011: 190) mentions, modernisation associates it with abandoning traditional religious and cultural practices in favour of economic and scientific notions rooted in post-Enlightenment European thought. This change, described as 'modernising,' arises in context in which there are identifiable and crucial continuities between past and future and where religious, economic, educational, medical, and domestic beliefs and practices are deeply intertwined. With the advent of modernisation, there is a fragmentation of 'traditional society' into differentiated and dispersed practices. 'Old practices' are reassessed in a new light that transforms how they are understood, while 'new practices' under the aegis of 'reform' are formulated so as to maintain continuities with the past.

Owing to the adoption of Christian faith and belief and education, the Lotha society has witnessed a number of social changes, including the marriage system. It has changed the form of compromise between indigenous practices and Christian values. As Kikon (2016:86) mentions, at present, Lotha's practices a combination of Christian marriage and an indigenous marriage system with traces of traditional customs observable in a Christian church marriage. The church has shifted from traditional marriage to the western practices of white weddings. Like any other society swept by the wave of westernization, the Lotha tribe is thoroughly blended with western ideals and traditional institutions. The bride's wealth and gift-giving as it is practiced today are different from the normative tradition prescribed by the customary laws of the traditional Lotha society. The practice of *hanlam* still exists among the Lotha society but in a more modified way.

Traditionally, the Lotha Naga marriage payments involved exchanges of objects in material and ceremonial value. The payment of marriage was commonly practiced in Lotha Naga society. Marriage price was a prestige value which indicated recognition of the girl's worth and some kind of social protection for her future married life. The marriage "payment" varied from village to village. *Hanlam* acts as a customary binding between the bride and the groom, without which marriage is not sanctioned even today and *hanlam* was a part of the 11 different marriage payments practiced in the past. In the past, the pig for giving *hanlam* was reared. Usually, the piglet would be designated for marriage and reared for anywhere between one to three years, as the case may be. As one of my informants mentioned, the pig for *hanlam* should be male and black in colour without any blemish or injuries and would be

designated for marriage purposes.¹ One ritual which is practiced even today with regard to *hanlam* is once the pig is brought to the bride's house, an elderly person prays over it, and it is speared to death. Marriage in the past was complete on the day *hanlam* exchange was done. However, with the influence of Christianity, the *hanlam* ceremony is done three days before the church wedding ceremony.

According to the couples that I interviewed about the practices of *hanlam* in Wokha Town, almost the couples state that *hanlam* still has its significance in marriage. It carries with it many indirect benefits to the newly married couple not only in terms of monetary help but through *hanlam* the couples are recognised and accepted by their kins, especially the groom is regarded as one of the kin members by the bride's paternal kins. Thus, *Hanlam* has a numerous role and purposes within Lotha society in which materials (in terms of distribution of both productive and consumable resources), symbolic (relating to the construction of social identity, particularly sexual and gender identities, and also the transition to adulthood), and establishing the nature of relationships between people. These functions are intricately interconnected. As one of my informants explain,

*Hanlam is more than giving live pig to the bride's family. It denotes or marks the man and woman who have become one and are committed to each other. Not only that, hanlam helps recognise and extends family kinship. It marks the sign that they are a married couple. Hanlam invokes the unseen blessing for the newly couple for the procreation of children, long life, during the olden days. It invokes blessings of bountiful harvests, blessing during hunting, and everyday life.*²

Similarly, young couples I interviewed are of the opinion that *hanlam* alone does not cause any economic burden to the couple, but the practices of *sotak* (distributing junk of meat to relatives, friends, colony etc.), which can even range up to slaughtering of 14 to 15 pigs or more and other unplanned expenses do.³ Maybe at present, *hanlam* does not play the same role like it did in the past because back then, there was no money economy, so understandably, there was no personal savings. Only after marriage, a couple was regarded as a responsible member of the community. However, with the changing of time, it still holds customary binding significance, and most of the couples in the present generation wish to continue this practice. Reason being it is the only traditional practice left in Lotha's marriage system, and all other ceremonies and practices are influenced by western culture.

¹ Oral Interview Alamo Tsaglaio, Elumyo Village age 86 years

² Oral Interview on 4/07/2022 Mr. Phalanthung Ezung from Longsachung Village, age 89 years

³ At present, Wokha town Baptist church regulates the *hanlam* weight to 150 kg and encourages the public not to practice *sotak* however; it is less or no cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Despite the practice of giving and receiving *hanlam*, an age-old tradition, such marriage payment customs has been questioned on several grounds. First, whether such practices are detrimental to women's rights in marriage, especially economic rights, secondly, does it cause newly wedded couples to experience severe financial issues that rob them of the joys of being freshly married, does continuation of such practices do more harm than good? Based on the data collected, Lothas considered Hanlam essential traditional marriage practice, which most advocate being upheld, and does not see the practice as detrimental to women's rights. Therefore the way forward for the community would be to ensure that such indigenous marriage practices like *hanlam* should not be misused as a source of income for the bride's family and relatives and prevent such practice from becoming a burden for the groom's family in the pretext of upholding age-old marriage practices. Finally, the community must ensure that such practice should be educated to the present generation about its significance and not allowed to become a license for the groom's family to deprive the bride of her rights in the marriage relationship under the pretext of tradition and culture.

REFERENCES

- [1] Westermarck, Edward (1992). The History of Human marriage.
- [2] Goody, J. "Bridewealth and dowry in Africa and Eurasia." In: Goody, J., and S. J. Tambiah (eds). *Bridewealth and Dowry*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1974; pp. 1–58.]
- [3] Goody, J. "Bridewealth and dowry in Africa and Eurasia." In: Goody, J., and S. J. Tambiah (eds). *Bridewealth and Dowry*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1974; pp. 1–58.]
- [4] Anderson, Siwam (2007), the economics of dowry and bride price, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Volume 21, Number 4, Fall .Pages 151–174
- [5] Boserup, Ester (1970), 'Women's role in economic development' Cromwell Press UK
- [6] Hughes, Diane O.1985 'Aspects of marriage in Three Mediterranean Europe'. In *Marriage in bargain: women and Dowries in European history*, ed. Marion A. Kaplan, pp 13-58 New York: Havorth Press
- [7] Mozhui, Zanao. (2004). *The impact of Christianity on the Naga people*. Dimapur: Lotha Baptist church
- [8] Mills. J.P (1922). *The Lhota Nagas*. London: Macmillan
- [9] Tokhu Emong Motsu (2016), Published by Lotha Hoho, Oking Wokha
- [10] Ezung, Nrio, 2009, Socio- Cultural theology of marriage in tribal context: with a special reference to kyong customary practices.
- [11] Longkumer ,Arkotong (2011) 'Cleanliness is next to godliness': Religious change, hygiene and the renewal of Heraka villages in Assam *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 45, 2: 189–216
- [12] Kikon, Rosanna, (2016) ' Women, Polygyny and economy: An Analysis n the pre-colonial Naga society of North East India with Special Reference to the Lotha Nagas' *Journal of Humanities and social sciences*, Vol.21. Issue 9. Sep. pp 84-89