

Winning Back Our Good luck: Bridewealth in Nowadays Maputo

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Abstract

Previously translated as "bridewealth," south Mozambican lobolo is often reduced to an archaic economic transaction that vilifies women and regulates descent. A case recently observed in Maputo rather presents it as a "traditional" toll that allows the couple to bypass problems arising from innovative conjugality, by manipulating the role of the ancestral spirits. Departing from this case and from the historical and synchronic variation of lobolo, it emerges as a polysemic institution, adaptable to very different and changeable needs. Lobolo is also seen as a source of gaining dignity for individuals and their families, thus uniquely legitimizing descent and controlling uncertainty – factors that reinforce its continuity, regardless of what happens to the hegemonic gender ideology.

Introduction

By the end of 2003, a Maputo friend invited me to take part in his *lobolo*, as one of his family representatives. I mean in his marriage, because *lobolo* is the name given in Mozambique and South Africa to that institution which anthropology usually calls "bridewealth."¹

Of course, I considered this participation an honour and a rare opportunity to understand a little better the local conceptions and ways of living; but, since my studies focused on the domestication of aleatory and danger,² I assumed that the occasion wouldn't have much to do with my research interests.

I was wrong. As with most of us, I was in the habit of thinking about bridewealth just as an abstract matter of descent regulation, "wives exchange" and gendered power relations. Even if, by that time, I already heard that ancestors are the ultimate *lobolo* receivers and notaries, and even if I knew that Mozambican women organizations discovered, by the middle 1980s, that the State struggle against "traditional marriages" was weakening the wives' actual rights (Arnfred, 2001), I wasn't indeed aware of the real importance those matters represent to real people.

However, I was lucky enough to take part in a *lobolo* crossed by several visible tensions and opposed interests, and to discuss with the involved people the motivations and the reasons for the details which called for my attention. The ceremony became thus, to me, an enlightening example of what Max Gluckman (1987 [1958]) called a "social situation."

Both the detailed description of that *lobolo* and its complete analysis as a social situation are available

elsewhere (Granjo, 2005). Here, I would rather like to present you the various meanings, aims and instrumental potentialities assumed by this institution, together with the motivations of the people involved in the case I took part.

By doing so and by taking into account relevant historical changes and variations of *lobolo*, I'll try to show that this is a polysemic and very plastic institution, which can easily change its form according to people's needs and social constraints, and is able to answer to very different motivations and expectations. By considering an issue that is often underestimated – the role of ancestors' spirits on *lobolo* and daily life – we'll see that it is even able to provide solutions to new problems and worries, arising from innovative and “modern” ways of living the conjugality.

Lobolo will therefore appear as an institution that supplies unique answers to specific needs of urban populations of both genders (besides those also given by other kinds of marriage), and isn't jeopardised by “modernisation” processes and values.

Ceremonial Routine

Even if it took place in Xipamanine neighbourhood, a popular area that is strongly suggestive both to Maputo inhabitants and to foreigners,³ the *lobolo* in which I participated wasn't more - nor less - typical and representative than any other one.

As we'll soon see, the variability of this ceremony is huge, both in its morphology and in its appropriation by people. So, we cannot talk about a standard *lobolo*. There does exist, nevertheless, a consensual notion of an

urban ceremonial routine, which helps us to spot the particularities of an actual ceremony we may observe.

A *lobolo* is preceded by another ceremony, which is independent from it; it is also performed on several other occasions: the *kuphalha*.⁴ A *kuphalha* is the conversation with the lineage ancestors' spirits, where the senior member informs them of the groom's intention, asks permission to carry on with it, presents them the goods that will be paid, and asks for ancestors' protection in order to achieve success in the negotiations. After that speech, everyone present must drink from the white wine that was opened for the spirits, starting with the family junior and finishing with the senior.

Later on, the goods to be paid – previously agreed upon with bride's relatives and often transcribed to a written list that both families keep – are checked by the family's delegation to *lobolo* and other senior kin that will not take part in it.⁵ The delegation must then walk to the bride's house, at whose gate they should be ignored for quite some time. Finally invited in, the delegation spokesman shall explain the reason of the visit. After the house spokesman welcomes them, a visitors' senior woman starts to expose the money, bill by bill, followed by the other agreed upon goods.⁶

Even if all the goods are shown, bargaining can still occur – and it might yet happen that the bride's family uses new and unacceptable demands in order to reject the marriage. If they agree to accept the gifts, the bride is called, informed about the groom's intentions and asked if she knows him. The family delegation asks her, then, if they can accept the goods. Her affirmative answer means that she agrees to marry him.

It is only then that her parents are called and informed about what happened. The bride is asked about

who shall receive the money, answering with a short mention and praise to the ancestors. The money is then delivered to her father, and the other goods to their receivers.

Once this is done, the bride and her parents leave the place in order to get dressed. The groom's family's delegation must then pay money to be able to see both the bride and her parents dressed-up with the clothes they gave them. In the bride's case, she comes covered with a *capulana*, between two girl friends who bargain the price to uncover her, mocking the groom's family offers, until they finally accept them.

If other moments of collective expression of joy and congratulations have already occurred, now is the right moment to cheer the bride. It is expected that, if somebody doesn't look happy, it will be she – and that her mother and aunts will comfort her, if necessary.⁷ Later on, the delegation and senior guests will share a meal and, at the end of it, the families will formally present each other as family members.

This is the end of the ceremony, in its stricter sense, but other tasks and rituals must still be performed. Straight away, the groom's family's delegation returns to his house and reports what happened. In the evening, the groom will visit his wife's parents' house, where his *cabeçais* (two chosen friends) present him to his parents-in-law, as their daughter's husband.⁸ After a welcoming meal and their departure, the bride will keep a long meeting with her mother, aunts and grandmothers, in order to be informed and advised about the married women's life and duties. When all the guests are finally gone, her father will perform an intimate *kuphalha*, presenting the *lobolo* money to his ancestors. Later on, he will drink, together

with his wife, the bottle of wine that she carried as a baby during the public ceremony.

The bride will move to her new house the next morning; but, concerning this important moment which marks definitively her status change, the ceremonial variations are too huge, in Maputo, to allow the indication of any consensual proceeding.⁹

A Mutative Tradition

This variability is not an isolated case. In fact, the very notions of rule and tradition are too strict, when we talk about this ceremony's requirements and morphology. Some exceptions are even so frequent that the way to deal with them is also codified.

For instance, the couple of the *lobolo* I attended did not fit the abstract rules, since they lived together for the last 12 years and already had two children. This situation is, though, very common and was solved through the usual remedy: besides the *lobolo*, the groom paid a 500.00 meticais fine, about 21 USD, as punishment for the conception of children before the marriage.

Another irregular - but yet very common - situation was the fact that the bride's mother hadn't been lobolated, so the daughter didn't belong to her father's lineage.¹⁰ For that reason, when asked about who should receive the *lobolo* money, she delivered one of the bills to her mother, instead of reproducing the usual speech about the ancestors. Another result of that situation was the involvement of three lineages in the ceremony, instead of two, resulting in three mutual presentations.

Also striking were the performances of several praises to the Christian God. He was begged for the success of the delegation's mission (after the checkout of

lobolo goods), was asked to keep the harmony during the bargain (before it started), and was invited to bless the meal we would share, by the end of *lobolo*. Since both families are active Presbyterians, this performance is not surprising; but its smooth integration into the ceremony shows us the easy coexistence of *lobolo* (and as well *kuphalha*) with deeply felt monotheist beliefs and practices.¹¹

Those variations, though, seem to involve just details, when we look around. For instance, the payment of *lobolo* by instalments is very recurrent amongst the less fortunate people, enduring the groom's debt and dependence towards his parents-in-law, and legitimating a stronger control and daily demands on their part.

It is even socially accepted (and not at all unusual) that the children lobolate their mother on behalf of their deceased father, in order to dignify both parents and to become members of their father's lineage. This case is seen as a fair solution to a common problem, but it highly twists the abstract rules, because the *lobolo* goods flow between people who belong to the same lineage, and who will only cease to share it when the ceremony is finished.

If we look back to recent urban history, however, we'll be able to spot even stronger variations that, as the previous case, are not just a matter of morphology. Under colonial regime, especially between the 1940's and the 1970's, it wasn't uncommon for socially respected Africans to lobolate their wives personally to their fathers. This was a practice followed mostly by *assimilados* - an intermediate subaltern status which, based on the recognition by the colonial administration of some "civilization indicators", sheltered those who obtained it from the huge abuses legally fixed to "indigenous", and opened to them some socio-economic possibilities and

putative citizenship rights.¹² Since this advantageous status was incompatible with whatever the colonial rule considered “usages and customs of the black race” (Governo Geral, 1917), we can easily understand that discretion and secrecy were very welcome wherever an *assimilado* wanted to lobolate somebody.¹³

The groom’s father was one of the several cases that came to my knowledge. Besides, it is appealing to notice that in his family – for scarcely ordinary it might be – four different entities paid the *lobolo* in four continued generations: holding a royal status, the groom’s father’s father had the *lobolo* of his main wife paid by “his people;” his son (the groom’s grandfather) followed the standard rules; and the groom and his wife mobilised together in order to save the money for the ceremony.

As the readers familiarised with anthropological works already noticed, some of the previous variations indeed subvert *lobolo* subjacent meanings. So, about what ceremony and institution are we talking, after all? As the cases of mother’s being lobolated by their children help to stress, it is not about the “bride shopping” or the vague “inverted dowry” which we see mentioned, here and there, since the writings of XIX century exotic experts.

In a quite different way, anthropology consensually interprets what it called “bridewealth” as a global relationship between family groups, in which one of them mobilises in order to compensate the other for the loss of one of their members, her future children and their descendants – due to the patrilinear descent rules in the contexts where bridewealth exists.¹⁴ In other words, it is considered that what is paid for isn’t the bride, her labour force or (as it was said in the past) her “sexual services,” but the familiar belonging and the control over her children and their descendants.

In southern Mozambique, *lobolo* would be originally paid in cattle, a situation that only persists in rare rural contexts or unions of high prestige – like, for instance, the marriage between Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel (Knoetze, 1999). At the start with cattle, later as an autonomous valuation, the payment in money became however general – together with the ephemeral use of steel hoes as means of pay.

This change had a straight relation with the ancient, enduring and massive migration to South African mines. Although other origins are pointed to the need of money in the Mozambican rural areas, it's in result of the mining migration that the financial means became available in enough quantity to be applied to *lobolo*. But, whilst the *lobolo* becomes monetary, the urgency and main purpose of going to the mines also changes, since it becomes the only effective way, in that colonial framework, to get enough money to reach the status of man and to assure the physical reproduction of the lineage.

As I once stressed (Granjo, 2003), this introduces, under those conditions of access to the money, subtle changes in the social meaning of the ceremony. Before the generalisation of money use, the mobilization of means involved the family seniors and usually excluded the groom, stressing his status change and the collective character of the alliance. After it, the gathering of means to lobolate becomes mainly - or exclusively - a task of the groom, changing the relationship to one of his vertex. Although the ceremony emphasises the collective character of the alliance it creates (through the people who take part in it), that alliance can now be seen as a personal contract between an individual and a group, inducing relevant consequences on the symbolic level and on the familial, subordination and obligation relationships. In

order to get married, the groom is no longer materially dependant on his father and uncles, and from the *lobolo*'s crossings involving his family.¹⁵ Through this change, the base for the submission to elders becomes only moral, and it becomes possible to conceive of one's wife as a result of one's work, and one's marriage as an economic transaction – as some men actually do.

However, this mercantile notion is ideologically abusive, under the light of an essential *lobolo* characteristic in southern Mozambique: the role of the couple's ancestors.

Indeed, this institution is not seen as a matter that only regards the living. It is, on the contrary, usually said that the "ancestors eat the *lobolo*." This means that they are supposed to be the real receivers of the delivered goods, and the ultimate signers of the agreement and the alliance it recognises. From this point of view, the living are those who receive and spend the *lobolo* money almost by procuracy, no matter how prosaic the practical use. More than an extension or part of the family that is consulted as well, the ancestors are the target and the guarantors of the ceremony; they are the notaries and guardians of the union, having from now on the responsibility to protect the couple and their descendents.¹⁶

That is why it is recurrently considered that the negotiations will fail if the ancestors do not agree upon them, that the nonfulfilment of some part of the contract will bring their retaliation (without necessity of sorcery use by the living), or that it is impossible to lobolate a European woman, because her ancestors' spirits are too faraway and, therefore, cannot receive the *lobolo*.

“Tradition” Serving Innovation

This ancestors' role was, together with the locally hegemonic interpretation of uncertainty and misfortune, essential to the realization of the *lobolo* I witnessed. Indeed, it resulted from the conjugation of interests and motivations of three different groups.

To the grooms' family, the *lobolo* was above all a matter of honour, of cessation of fault and debt – especially because the faulty person was the future leader of a high ranked lineage, despite the family's economic fragility.

The bride's family wished to regularize her situation, pointing to the necessity of appeasing the ancestors and, by doing so, ensuring their protection of her.

Although sensitive to the worries of their families, the engaged couple had a joint and specific motivation: to surpass conjugal difficulties.

Their neighbours and relatives would not most probably consider these as “problems” but, if this couple seems quite “normal” from a contemporary European point of view, their conjugality is not at all usual in their socio-cultural context. On one hand, they consider themselves a team which functions, defines strategies and makes decisions together – only negotiating them later on, if necessary, with other relatives. On the affective field, they both claim to love each other; nevertheless, love is not at all considered a *sine qua non* condition to the marriage, in this context or even in the opinion of those two people.¹⁷ The fact that the groom does not keep extra-marital lovers is also a fairly rare one (Silva, 2003). Finally, although he recognises he would like to keep more families, as his father and previous ancestors did, he abdicates that idea by a sense of respect for his wife's

feelings, and by considering that such a situation would not be compatible with the kind of conjugal relationship they have - and, he believes, with the demands of urban contemporary life.

In sum, even if they respect the local gender roles and power relations, this is a couple with a fairly innovative relationship - and I guess that a several years-long stay of the husband in former GDR has much to do with it.

Even so, they started to feel that something was not right in their conjugal life. The harmony between them stopped suiting the standards they demanded, frequent discussions arose, and the tensions even affected their intimacy. Cumulatively, they were failing to improve or stabilize their material situation, and even health problems started to happen.

The couple analysed the situation together. Since they agreed about their love, their will to stay together and common purposes, the problems they felt should not exist. So, they concluded that the luck they were entitled to - individually and as a couple - was being "frozen" by their ancestors' spirits, because they were in fault towards them.

This diagnosis is, in fact, very coherent. The prevalent local interpretation of undesired events does not leave room for random coincidence. Those events are supposed to arise from material or social relations of cause/effect, but to only be able to affect the individuals due to three possible reasons: because of one's negligence; because of sorcery; or because of some lack of protection from one's ancestors' spirits, the result of some offence towards them or the living.¹⁸ This social control of the living by the deceased is expected as their protection against daily dangers; so, if a conspicuous fault does exist,

“misfortune” will tend to be interpreted as ancestors’ indirect expression that they are displeased and demand a remedy – since they are unable to explicitly transmit their demands or reasons for disapproval.

Because of discretion and fear, the couple did not seek professional divinatory expertise, but they did apply the dominant cultural references and, according to them, identified the most plausible and probable cause.

They needed, next, to define a solution to the problem. They talked to the bride’s mother – to whose descent group the bride belongs, since she wasn’t lobolated – and she *pahlhate* her ancestors in the presence of the couple, transmitting their intention to regularise their matrimonial situation and their promise to start saving money to the *lobolo*. Regarding that promise, she asked the ancestors to not intervene negatively into their lives and, on the contrary, to help the couple.

However, they needed almost two years to gather the necessary financial means. During that time, one may say that, although the groom’s salary was the main family income, the bride had an important participation in the economical effort, organizing little commercial businesses that allowed them to save money.

This *lobolo* is, therefore, a project planned and realized in common. But, more than this fact which drives us so far away from the logics of “wife shopping” or simple acquisition of descent, we should notice that, in the process leading to this *lobolo*, modern concerns arising from an innovative conjugality discovered in the “traditional” exegesis the language that could express them. They found out, as well, in the “traditional” wedding ceremony the tool to surpass the problems felt by the couple.

Lobolo, Descent and Rights

The motivations of the couple eventually had important consequences on the ceremony details and morphology.

In fact, it was conspicuous that - unlike she should - the bride's mother had a downcast and sullen look, while the current partner of the bride's father was the most exuberant performer of dances and congratulations, although she had no formal kinship with the others. Meanwhile, the bride received the congratulations from her father and informal stepmother with a very distant attitude.

On the other hand, the bride's family delegation included both her mother's and father's relatives, with the latter performing the most important roles. Though, given that the bride's father did not lobolate her mother, it was debatable if they should even be there, and it was quite clear that neither the bride's father nor his family were entitled to *lobolo* money, or to negotiate the status change of somebody who does not belong to their lineage.

Their participation in the ceremony was, indeed, the result of long negotiations. At first, the bride's father proposed to receive all the money and to use it to lobolate her mother. Besides its formal incoherence, the idea was unacceptable because the bride's mother didn't wanted to be lobolated anymore. As they had not lived together for many years and she ensured financial and lodging autonomy, a *lobolo* would formalise a relationship that did not exist anymore, and would jeopardise her independence and personal property.¹⁹ The negotiations dealt, then, with money percents, and both families agreed to rend one third of the *lobolo* to the bride's father.

As both parties knew, this agreement was unfair and abusive according to the customary rules. This was the reason for the silent protest in the bride's mother's face, and for the excessive affective gestures of the "stepmother" – whom, as I was later told, was compelled to do it because "she knew she was taking home other people's money." That is, furthermore, the reason why the bride – showing solidarity with her mother – received the congratulations of her father and his companion with such a bitter attitude.

The most relevant issue is, though, that the agreement between those families did not arise from negotiation pressures, but essentially from the motivations that led the couple to perform *lobolo*.

Since their purpose was to appease the ancestors in order to surpass their conjugal problems, the pacification had to include the ancestors of the bride's father – both because they already had complaints about his previous incomppliance, and because of the threatening role given to fathers-in-law in Maputo. Indeed, it is feared that a man uses sorcery against his son-in-law, if he thinks he was not well received in his house. The accusation is also common that a father offered his daughter as wife and physical residence to a wandering spirit (in order to get material advantages through magic means), turning any further marriage with a living man into a succession of crises of what psychiatrists call hysteria. This potential threat may be generalised to his ancestors, with the additional reason that spirits are believed to act capriciously and obstinately, as children do (Honwana, 2002).

Consequently, the father's absence or dissatisfaction, generalised to his ancestors, would nullify the effect that the engaged couple sought when organizing

the *lobolo*. If they were not able to appease all the possible responsible parties for their problems, to perform the ceremony would be "throw money to the street."

On the contrary, to share the *lobolo* money with the bride's father, and to attribute the main ceremonial roles to his representatives, was a reiteration of the importance ascribed to the ties with his family (even if not formalised) and, concomitantly, the importance conferred to those ancestors.

This matter, so hard to solve and arising from the *lobolo* role in descent regulation, strongly contrasts with the situation lived amongst the groom's family.

In fact, the older son of the engaged couple was the first person to drink the *kuphalha* wine, as the youngest lineage male should do. But, he couldn't have participated in such an important ritual holding this status; even if by civil law he shares his father's family name, according to local descent rules he was not a Zucula²⁰ before his parent's *lobolo*, which was just about to start. Only through it (and not even through a civil or religious marriage) he ceased belonging to his mother's lineage and became a member of his father's one.

Moreover, the groom's parents never performed *lobolo*, either. His father tried indeed to do it (as it later happened with another woman, when she got pregnant), but his father-in-law did not accept it. Both men were *assimilados*, so the father-in-law answered that he did not want to take part in those "savage" practices, and that he would not accept "selling his daughter," leaving her at the mercy of what ever her new family would do to her. To him, he said, marriage was something to be done in church – as it soon happened.

The family history registered that he nevertheless took away one of the many bank bills which the groom's

father presented to him, in a sign of acceptance of the union he proposed.²¹ Even so, and even if official marriage was highly respected amongst *assimilados* and other Africans during the colonial regime, a strict interpretation of descent rules would attribute to the groom his mother's family name, and not his father's one.

Nevertheless, he and his son always used that family name, always were recognised as Zuculas, without any objections raised.

This unexpected social consensus has to do with the fact that they both belong, as far as the family memory is kept, to the direct line of the older sons of an important lineage.

Although the groom's father never accepted political posts (during the colonial regime, because he held a rarely well paid job; later on, because of post-independence hostility towards the so-called "traditional authorities"), he was so respected and influential in his neighbourhood that people used to bring their disputes to his arbitration.

This influence and ability came partially from his personal characteristics; but maybe mostly from the fact that his father (the groom's grandfather) had been the first and still the only "*régulo*" of Xipamanine – a post that the authorities compelled him to accept, after much resistance.²²

Neither the authorities' commitment nor this man's refusal was fortuitous. He was the heir of his father, in Manhiça, at the head of a royal family preceding the N'guni invasions. As it happened with other Thonga royal lineages integrated in the structure of Gaza Empire,²³ this groom's grand-grandfather governed the territory once dominated by his ancestors as a high *induna* of Gungunhana and commander of one of his regiments.

The later defeat of that African state did not change his royal condition and dignity, which was kept during the effective Portuguese domination over the territory, after 1895. The groom's grandfather was therefore an important character to the credibility and legitimacy of the new suburban *regulados*, which however represented a demotion to him. But although he was secluded from the territory that legitimated his status, his new "subjects" knew and respected his genealogy and the importance of his name.

So, in spite of their financial humility, we're talking about a royal lineage, together with three generations of men who are very highly considered at Xipamanine - since even the groom carried out some respected actions, dictated by a feeling of personal responsibility towards the community.

We therefore notice that, if strict rules do exist about the name and status transmission through *lobolo*, there is as well the social space for exceptions. As far as we can judge from this case, those bypasses became possible and accepted when the prestige of a lineage goes together with the prestige of those who occupy a central position in it. So, we found subversion of the rules precisely where we should expect a stricter rigidity - i.e., in what is after all a dynastic succession, even if without throne.

***Lobolo* Consequences**

To lobolate or to be lobolated is not, however, just a matter of descent, economy or relation with the spirits. The consequences of that act on daily life are also striking and, according to our engaged couple, perceptible in a matter of weeks.

But before I present you those points they spontaneously stress, we should keep in mind that *lobolo* might often have very negative outcomes for women.

Indeed, the general principle of obedience and submission to the husband (locally attached to any kind of marriage) may induce the reinforcement of gender domination already present in daily life and informal unions.

Moreover, since nowadays it is mostly the groom who pays the *lobolo*, the conjugation between those two factors creates the opportunity for attitudes that treat the wife as a property. This stance gets some room from the ambiguous character of local ownership and appertenance language (the expression "it's mine" is also used to refer someone who belongs to the same group as the speaker)²⁴ and is even endorsed by songs which interpret this ambiguity in an abusive, yet vivid, way: "Man: it was God, because He loves you, who gave you that right [to] be woman's owner. The woman is really yours, she is. Handle her gently" (Conceição, 2000).

A second aspect is that, once *lobolo* is done, the husband's family becomes the first instance of the couple's conflict regulation. It is expected from them (as from a State juridical Court) a reasonable and proportional interpretation of the rules and events; but only if an abuse is clearly unacceptable according to the large tolerance towards male behaviour and violence may a lobolated woman expect a favourable verdict (Silva, 2003; Osório, 2003).²⁵

Finally, as said before, a lobolated or married woman faces the real risk of being dispossessed of the couple's goods when her husband dies.

Why should, then, a woman want to be lobolated?

A first point is that, in the present urban framework, *lobolo* commonly leads to a cohabitation that may endure for several years.²⁶ Amongst the same couple, it is not probable that the negative aspects I mentioned will differ much from what happened before the *lobolo*: in the cases they were attenuated, a reversion is not to be expected; when they were prominent, they shouldn't become much worse – and the woman's tolerance towards them already existed, diminishing the reasons to not formalise the conjugal relation.

Besides this uncomfortable observation, we should remember that the negative aspects I mentioned are just – as it happens with descent, economic matters or spirits' importance – some amongst several factors that individuals take into consideration. In fact, the bride's and the groom's status indeed changes with visible consequences in daily life, and that's not at all irrelevant to them.

To a woman, the main aftermath is (besides becoming an envied example), the respectability and the full adult status that *lobolo* brings. To be a mother doesn't give necessarily that status. If a young girl becomes pregnant, that's a disagreeable problem to her family, but it is as well a common and not at all stigmatising event. Even if a single mother creates the conditions of living in her own house, with her children, this doesn't imply that she is recognised as a woman.²⁷

Concerning the way respectability is considered, to try to seduce a woman who lives conjugally with someone, even if she gave birth to children, is essentially an offensive and treacherous roguery towards her consort; to do the same thing to a lobolated or married woman is, first of all, an unforgivable action which infringes upon her dignity. After the *lobolo*, the woman will also have to be invited to family meetings and, finally (an issue which

is symbolically and sociologically more important than it might seem), it becomes unacceptable to call her screaming "Hei," or by any other way but her name.

So, instead of waiting for other people's consensual recognition of her qualities and sense of responsibility in order to be treated as a complete and respectable woman (in a process of informal negotiation which can endure for many years), the lobolated woman acquires straight away that dignity, no matter how young she might be.²⁸

In the men's case, someone who performs *lobolo* becomes senior in his generation. This status and its underlying reason brings, as well, an actual change of attitudes from his friends and kin.

A first point is that the man who lobolates becomes an example to be followed. The imitation is so frequent that the ceremony is popularly presented as an epidemic phenomenon, since it is said that three others, in every remaining cardinal point of the neighbourhood, will follow each *lobolo*. In a less cosmologic and more prosaic way, it is also said that, when a man lobolates, his friends feel compelled to do the same thing, in order to "not be less than he is."

Friends' behaviour also changes in another aspect: the man who lobolates is treated in a more respectful and careful way that creates distances not experienced before. For instance, he is not invited to most of the male social activities that he used to attend. Since they used to happen during the night, it is presupposed that his new responsibilities are incompatible with frequent absences from home, during the very moment he should be there to support his family. On the other hand, those who live in informal conjugality avoid having, with their friend who lobolated, the inebriated discussions and verbal

knavery that used to be common. The reason is, in this case, the fear that he hush the impudent person by saying "you aren't even married" - a strong and embarrassing accusation of irresponsibility and incomplete manhood, which doesn't even allow an answer, since it is a consensual right of the married man.

Finally, the man is no longer received in a relaxed way in his parents-in-law's house; they begin to have a chair waiting for him and all other etiquette proceedings used during formal visits to and from senior people.

Therefore, even if in daily practices the economical vector of *lobolo* might, in some cases, be assumed to legitimate an oppressive husband's power (which reinforces the already asymmetric general gender relations), it is the dignity and the higher status that the ceremony brings that people of both genders valorise and underline, when they are not faced with those extreme situations.

An Adaptive Continuity

Reliable statistical data on this kind of marriage are not available. Indeed, besides other potential misunderstandings,²⁹ the last census (INE, 1997) aggregates under the expression "marital unions" both the customary marriages and couples who just live together. On the other hand, since civil marriage doesn't exclude *lobolo* at all, many couples classified as "married" could be accounted simultaneously as lobolated.

Even so, the census can tell us that informal unions plus the *lobolos* which weren't followed by marriage are three times more frequent than the civil marriage - data which reinforces the significance of the *lobolo* when we notice that it is very probable that a couple who lives

steadily together will eventually perform *lobolo*, whilst the chronological evolution from *lobolo* to civil marriage is less frequent.

We can thus assume with reasonable confidence that this “traditional” marriage is the predominant matrimonial form in Maputo, an evaluation already made in the middle 1980s, when state authorities became aware of their inability to substitute *lobolo* with civil marriage, as they attempted (Arnfred, 2001).

So, after the cataloguing of *lobolo* by the colonizers as an exotic and uncivilized archaism, and after its inclusion amongst the practices and institutions to be destroyed by the independent state during the era popularly known as “*Abaixo!*,”³⁰ *lobolo* maintains and seems to reinforce its existence – nowadays in a new frame where public speech usually accepts or even emphasises “tradition.”

It is plausible that this new ideological ambiance has much to do with the current public rehabilitation of the institution by socio-economic elites.³¹ However, its resilience in semi-clandestineness during the adverse phases – to *assimilados* who jeopardized their privileged colonial status by performing it, or to the citizens of the independent country who, by doing it, could be marginalized and become more vulnerable to accusations of being retrograde and contra-revolutionary – indicates that the recent rhetoric valorising “tradition” cannot explain *lobolo* vitality.

The perverse effects of colonial repression on local customs - as with sorcery in South Africa (Gluckman, 1987 [1958]) and in Portuguese colonies (Cabral, 2002) - cannot work as an explanation, either, since *lobolo* was not an object of colonial repression while an “indigenous”

practice, and there is no evidence of its later manipulation as an instrument of cultural resistance.

Some would be tempted to read the succession of different entities that paid the Zucula's *lobolos* during the last four generations as an uninterrupted road towards modernity, which might be projected over society. Besides the debatable representativeness of the case, I believe this point of view to be simplistic. On one hand, it would appease our minds with a supposed explanation that does not explain much; secondly, it would assume the existence of a course towards individualisation, when we can hardly see those cases as a course, and when "individualistic" attitudes often arise from the use of old systems to interpret reality, and not really from the contexts of "modernity" to which those systems may be employed (as seen in Granjo, 2003); finally and most importantly, it wouldn't take into consideration the conjuncture constraints - arising from other factors than "modernity" - and how much there is, in each case, of a people's answer to them.³²

This is exactly the point that, I believe, must be highlighted - since it shows that *lobolo* can be modified in an easy and socially acceptable way, answering to multiple needs and external conditions that might frame it in each case and historical situation. So, I suggest, its continuity is closely connected to its polysemy, to the multiplicity of motivations to which, by that reason, it is able to answer, and to its plasticity.

Relativism and Rights

To ask why *lobolo* endures in a vital way is, thus, a bit of a misplaced question. By asking it, we are surreptitiously presupposing that: (1) an old practice becomes incompatible with "modernity" once the

conditions that it originated from disappear; (2) the formal elements considered undignified by external observers should eventually lead to its rejection, especially during "modernization" processes.

The first presupposition forgets that seldom are codified practises used to respond only to one outdated necessity, that people can (re)appropriate them to serve new and different needs, and the sharp Max Gluckman's (1987 [1958]) early suggestions on the dynamics of cultural change.³³

The second raises the uncomfortable confrontation between ethnocentrism and the observers' moral positions in an always-changing world.

On this second issue, I should clarify that I consider the projection of cultural relativism over human rights issues (however *avant-garde*, fair and respectful of difference it might sound, and however influential the people who sustain it might be) to be scientifically dilettante and based in serious equivocations.

On one hand, it is a reasoning that pretends to ignore the existence of such a thing as endogenous hegemony processes in societies considered "different."³⁴ I mean, while trying to confront the abuses arising from the "Western" imposition of values in a context of intercultural dominance, it legitimates the abuses arising from the values imposed by local dominant groups - assuming those values to be local, "genuine" and, therefore, representative of "all" society as if it was undifferentiated, and as if their apparent acceptance by subalterns is not itself the result of domination processes.

This is, of course, a moral and political issue; but it is as well a scientific one.

Besides the systematic references to interests conflicts and groups' domination (including gendered

ones) in the studies about "different" societies printed in the last five decades, we should have learned something from the belated anthropological "discovery" that, by basing the interpretations of the Indian caste systems on the classical texts (written by Brahmans), we reproduced and turned into a monolithic reality the higher castes' views and legitimized both the system and their dominion inside it.

Secondly, to project cultural relativism over human rights is conceptually incorrect because human rights is not, to be precise, a cultural phenomenon, but a political one.³⁵ They are the result, in every moment and place, of the relations of power and domination that exist in society, which also manipulate such notions as "tradition", "culture" or "modernity" for legitimacy purposes. Even where human rights have more to do with culture – in their connection to the locally hegemonic notion of humanity – we should underline that, wherever this notion legitimates different rights for different groups of people, it is already the result of a political process, and not just a further ontological cause.³⁶

Nevertheless, it is one thing to assume that "culture" and "tradition" are not valid impediments to people's rights and equity. A very different thing is to assume that, when some practices present formal elements that seem abusive to our values of equity and human rights, those values must superimpose the meanings invested by people in those practices and their social consequences. Another thing is to simply consider those practices socially negative and something to be combated, through other hegemonic processes led by "modernistic" elites - which are as well a "tradition," since that was the stance of the post-independence state and, before it, of Creole elites.

Coming back to our subject, Mozambican women's organizations and activists started to cope with *lobolo* mainly due to pragmatic reasons, meaning to safeguard the actual rights of those women who, unlike them, are not social or intellectual elites. Through their later efforts, they even managed to impose its legal parity to civil marriage, together with other major improvements of women's legal situation inside the family (Boletim da República, 2004). However, I noticed that they continue interpreting it as an insulting archaism, which can legitimate abuses and vilify women by merchandising them. It's a quite understandable and legitimate feeling. But I think they agree, as well, that family abuses arise from a gender ideology that could be reproduced without *lobolo*,³⁷ as I think that few urban lobolated women would view their situation as vilifying.

Is it due to the hegemony of local gender ideology that involved women regard, on the contrary, *lobolo* as a sign of husbands' respect towards them? It might be so, but that is debatable and, before further studies on the subject, the *pro* and *contra* arguments that may be used in such a debate would eventually become tautological.

What we can say for sure is that *lobolo* is popularly seen by both genders as a dignifying ceremony and that the money involved is not considered either a woman's shop³⁸ or the basis for the male's assertions of women ownership.

The ancestors' role in *lobolo* seems to be a key aspect of this money sublimation (in contrast to its current uses), which maintains a continuous logic with the old payments of cattle with exclusive symbolic and ritual value. But the ancestors' role brings as well a unique value to this institution: its believed ability to domesticate aleatory and misfortune.

When we notice that the manipulation of technological rationality by highly school-educated people is complementary to instead of opposed to the spirits-based vision of uncertainty (Granjo, in print), we shouldn't expect this vision to disappear through some "modernity" effect or demand. If we agree that the domestication of uncertainty is a central concern to every known culture, then *lobolo* provides an essential social answer that no other kind of marriage can locally supply. It is not only a marriage institution but also an instrument of misfortune expression and control.

Another *lobolo* particularity comes from the fact that the Mozambican state does not recognize patrilineal descent. They hardly could since there is also matrilineal descent, in a "western-style" bilateral form. So, other kinds of marriage are able to legitimate filiation and the couple's relation but not descent.

It's conspicuous that urban Mozambican youngsters, confronted with Euro-American hegemony, are nowadays forced to rethink the lineage model and their position in it (Cabral, 2005). But, independently of those adaptations and legal framework, patrilineal descent remains undisputed, if not for inheritance purposes, for many other social and ritual rights. Again *lobolo* provides a unique answer to an actual people's need.

Adding those two unique characteristics to conjugal legitimacy and to the couple's and families' dignification (which other kinds of marriage also supply), *lobolo* is indeed in advantage compared with other matrimonial institutions. Since it is not incompatible with innovative conjugal attitudes and, on the contrary, may be manipulated in order to surpass new problems arising from them, it is not a surviving archaism, but a dynamic institution. So, as far as patrilinear descent remains

consensual where it is performed, and as far *lobolo* keeps the plasticity to be adapted to people's new problems and needs, there is not any logical reason for its spontaneous disappearance.

On the other hand, to view it as an institution to be destroyed in the name of equity and "modernity" would be to impose, more than a vision of what is right, uneasiness towards the ceremony morphology, which ignores or disregards the meanings that men and women ascribe to *lobolo*, and the needs they try to answer through it.

It would also be, I believe, an ultimately counterproductive demarche.

¹ I will use here, instead, the less ideological local expression and the verb “to lobolate,” a straight translation from the current Portuguese spoken in Mozambique. “*Lobolo*” means, simultaneously, this kind of matrimonial institution, the ceremony itself, and the goods that are paid there.

² Attribution of sense and causality to aleatory and uncertainty that make them be seen as cognisable, regulated, explainable or even dominated by human beings (Granjo, 2004).

³ Xipamanine is one of the locally called “*caniços*” (cane), although the houses are nowadays on wood or masonry covered with zinc. Its name evokes in outsiders’ minds the popular market nearby, the confusion of the “*chapas*” (9 seat vans reconditioned to transport 18 clients) turning back in the middle of the crowd, the intricate narrow alleys between endless counters and the fear of the thieves or the magic products for sale. Nevertheless, the residential area, a little further, is in fact very quiet.

⁴ I will also use the verb “to pahlhate,” from the Mozambicans’ Portuguese “*pahlhar*.” I use “lineage,” in spite of the critics who have addressed this concept as fictitious during the last decades, because it represents, indeed, a sociological and ontological reality to the social agents I meet in southern Mozambique and not some abstraction induced from the outside.

⁵ For instance, the couple’s parents (or, if deceased, their genealogic substitutes) do not take part in the *lobolo* delegations. Those may include family’s “counsellors”, as my case was considered.

⁶ Usually, complete sets of clothes and foot-wear of the bride (plus jewellery) and her parents, snuff and “*capulanas*” (drapes used as skirts or to carry babies at the loin) to her grandmothers, a scarf to envelop the money, packets of beers and sodas, a flagon of red wine and a bottle of white wine which the bride’s mother must carry, later on, as a baby. The money

depends on the previous bargain. In this case, it was 2.500.000 *meticais* (about 104 USD) – a value that was considered a bit high, but not exaggerated.

⁷ There is an appealing folk song about and for those occasions, with the refrain “Don’t cry my daughter, don’t. It was you who choose the flower of your heart.”

⁸ Since her parents know him already and most of the grooms performed before the “presentation” (a ceremonial visit to the bride’s parents which makes public his intention to marry her and their acceptance of the marriage), this new presentation, where no member of his family takes part, marks clearly his new status and independence; it is the closing rite of his *passage* (see Van Gennep, 1978 [1908]).

⁹ Besides current variations, a special one occurs when the bride is considered possessed by spirits. In this case, the groom must magically protect his house entrances and prepare shrines to his wife’s spirits in the bedroom. At her arrival, he must perform outdoors an elaborated *kuphalha* on their honour, inviting the “good ones” to “come into their new house” and asking the “bad ones” to go away. Then he carries her to the bedroom and presents to each spirit the shrine that will become his shelter. This ritual is very rare, because putative possessions (although frequent) are normally hidden from potential grooms in order to avoid rejection of the bride. This could happen for three reasons: the indefinite fear of possessed people’s eventual powers, the fear that the woman chooses to become a sorcerer and seeks more power through the death of her husband and children, and the fear that her spirits aren’t “good ones,” but some wandering spirit to whom the girl’s father offered her in marriage, in order to get magical benefits.

¹⁰ That is because descent is patrilineal, but membership in the lineage is only recognised through *lobolo*. Although statistical data is unreliable due to criteria (see note 29), most people state that a large percentage of Maputo women never marry,

or do it very late. Notice that the groom was the first man of his acquaintance and generation (35 up to 40 years-old) to lobolate the consort. The fact that the bride's family was presented by her mother's mother's brother also shows that her uterine grandmother wasn't lobolated either; so, that situation occurred at least during two successive generations.

¹¹ The conciliation between the beliefs in monotheism and in ancestors' spirits is facilitated by the fact that the latter are not considered, to be precise, neither gods or extra-human entities belonging to other worlds, but the surviving and limited part of late human beings, living amongst their descendants. Some monotheist people see them as souls, others as the family's guardian angels, mediators to God or Allah. Independently of those interpretations, they must be respected, informed and asked for advice, as the living senior kin - and the rituals or worship actions are mostly necessary in order to call and contact them, due to their inability to directly communicate with the living. So, for almost everybody, practices such as *kuphalha* are not really a matter of religion, but a matter of family businesses, duties and respect.

¹² See Penvenne, 1995. Besides general prestige, that person would get free of the Indigenous Tax and the *chibalo* compulsive work which might follow its debt, would fall under "general" law (instead of the never really defined consuetudinary right), could get better job opportunities and the access, for him and his children, to a less rudimentary teaching than in the "indigenous schools."

¹³ The only practice explicitly forbidden was polygamy, but the interpretation of "usages and customs of the black race", which would rescind this status, eventually included such different things as *lobolo* and to walk barefoot in public.

¹⁴ See Gluckman, 1982 (1950). We have patrilineal descent when the name, the belonging to a vertical familiar group and the rights that came from it are inherited exclusively from the

father, as far as his paternity had been legitimated. In this case, one belongs to a different group than one's mother and the people who were born from the marriage of women belonging to one's group. "Descent" isn't, then, primarily a matter of genealogical ties, but of social place and status.

¹⁵ Except in the case of families with very big herds, to spare enough cattle to marry a man implied the previous reception of *lobolos* from his sisters or cousins – not only for wealth availability, but mostly because cattle wasn't a merchandise which might be exchanged through any other way.

¹⁶ This role is systematically confirmed by people questioning the issue and was the object of an inspiring approach of Brigitte Bagnol (2002), who analyses it according to a grammar of social control and violence of the deceased over the living.

¹⁷ Besides other comments and conversations, it's eloquent that, noticing the resemblance between my daughter and me, the bride commented to my wife that she surely loved me when we conceived the child. This reproduction of a local belief clearly expresses the acceptance that love (which might well have a different meaning to her than to the reader) doesn't necessarily exist amongst a couple.

¹⁸ The similarity between this conception and Evans-Pritchard's interpretation of Azande witchcraft as a misfortune explanation grammar (1978 [1937]) shouldn't let us forget that the Mozambican case includes, amongst its essential vectors, the spirits' action on the livings' daily life.

¹⁹ By his death, his relatives might carry everything away from her house, according to the usage that, although illegal, is often practiced even amongst people of high social position – as, it is said, happened with some of the widows of high officers who died in the attempt that murdered Samora Machel.

²⁰ This is their family name.

²¹ This doesn't seem to be just an individual idiosyncrasy. I heard the story of an *assimilado* whom never accepted formal

lobolo, but always demanded a tie from the men who asked to marry one of his daughters – and, later on, presented it to his ancestors in *kuphalha*. This idiosyncratic solution becomes even more fascinating because it manipulates the main icon of an *assimilado*: the tie.

²² “*Régulo*” is a Portuguese expression that diminishes semantically the word “king” (“*rei*”), when it designates an African. It was used in very different ranks – from Gungunhana, the last Gaza emperor, to subaltern chiefs who administrate small parts of the territory led by their lineage chief. Later on, *régulos* were integrated in the colonial administration as “gentilic authorities,” which didn’t coincide necessarily with the men that people recognised as their chiefs. With the migration, to suburban Lourenço Marques *caniços*, of people from different areas of the territory, the colonial government searched for men who spoke their languages and might ensure the tax collection and intermediary administration that was demanded to *régulos* in the rural areas. The groom’s grandfather was detained during a knowledge trip through the places “where his people used to migrate,” and appointed to those functions. As he refused, he was incarcerated during two months in a ship at anchor in the harbour, under the threat of deportation to São Tomé farms. He eventually accepted under the supplication of his wife, whom the authorities transported together with their children, from Manhiça village to the ship.

²³ About this policy of royal lineages integration on N’guni state, and about the circumstances of its ascension and fall, see Pélissier (1994) and Vilhena (1996).

²⁴ For instance, it was literally said about me, during the families’ mutual presentation: “That white is mine; he’s Jaime’s friend and a councillor of the family.” So, to say “the bride is Zucula’s, now” doesn’t express a possession relationship, but an appertenance situation.

²⁵ As an example, if wife beating were usually tolerated without the allegation of grave motives (being sufficient any “feminine fault”, including complaining about male adultery), the husband’s family wouldn’t tolerate domestic violence that leads, for instance, to a broken jawbone or arm.

²⁶ Since, in Maputo, there doesn’t exist either the factors stressed by Ørnulf Gulbrandsen (1986) about Botswana, or exegesis for tardy marriages that arise from individual or group strategies, I would say that the situation is mostly due to economic limitations and priorities, in a context of high social tolerance towards informal cohabitation.

²⁷ An eloquent example comes from a lady of my acquaintance, who insists in taking part in the verbal contracts of her daughter and in being informed about the quality of her work, because she considers her a dependent “child” although she has two children and lives in her own house.

²⁸ In rural contexts, *lobolo* brings other important consequences, since it also regulates the land use rights of the widows and couples’ children, which can become essential to their survival due to the rule of residence of the husband’s father village, usual in the areas where *lobolo* exists (Casimiro, 1996; Negrão, 2003).

²⁹ The presentation starts at 12 years of age, distorting the percent of nubile bachelors, and many women classified as single surely keep stable concubinage relations with married men residing elsewhere.

³⁰ Meaning “down with!,” the start of the watchwords shouted by everyone present in public political meetings, against things like *régulos* and spirits-based beliefs and healing practices.

³¹ As an example, the social chronicle pages on the Mozambican cable TV magazine were occupied, at the end of 2003, by the *lobolo* of an ambassador who visited Maputo in order to perform it.

³² To the groom's great-grandfather, a political succession rule; to the groom's grandfather, a high status and a distance to the colonial decision centres which allowed a "normal" *lobolo*, even to an *assimilado*; to the groom's father, the *assimilado*'s constraints in Lourenço Marques, together with a job that allows him to have on spot the necessary money; to our couple, the manipulation of the "traditional" misfortune explanations, in a context of conjugal innovation and financial limitations.

³³ In short, he suggests and argues, about previous local customs, that they will tend to survive when the old or new forms of conflicts and cooperation can be expressed through them, and will tend to be emphasised when they reinforce individual or group interests.

³⁴ I use "hegemony" in both Gramsci's (1971) meaning of group dominance achieved through subalterns' convincement by ideological means, and subalterns' acceptance and partial integration of dominants' ideology.

³⁵ It's arguable that they are "cultural" in the maximalistic meaning of the word – including all the socially formatted practices, representations and emotions. But, then, it would be a vague concept, calling for an essentialist vision of culture and identity in order to acquire any operative pertinence in this debate.

³⁶ This political and antagonistic nature of human rights is very evident when we notice that, independently of the relative importance they confer to each one of them, almost everyone we may know at home or during fieldwork would like to usufruct all the rights conceived by whatever cultures, although hardly being disposed to abdicate from "cultural" rights restrictions on people they dominate.

³⁷ On one hand, the legitimisation of abuse doesn't arise from *lobolo*, and abuse also happens in other kinds of marriage and in informal conjugality. On the other hand, even if we speculate

that *lobolo* might have arisen from gender ideology, both legitimisation and reproduction are secondary to each other.

³⁸ I don't resist sharing a conversation with João Pina Cabral on Chinese feelings expression, which may (or not) have comparative value for further research on this issue: if you want to make a love statement to your father, you don't tell you love him (it would be redundant or a lie); you organise a big family dinner and you offer him the bigger packet of money you managed to save.

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