

# Marrying on credit: the burden of bridewealth on refugee youth

Katarzyna Grabska

**Young Sudanese refugees may benefit from greater freedom and opportunities in camps but the need for bridewealth payments when they return to their homelands can impose severe restrictions on their choices and integration prospects.**

Having spent 15 years in Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya, Peter – by then in his late 20s – decided to return to Nyal, the village in southern Sudan<sup>1</sup> where he was born. While in Kakuma, Peter had met Angelina, also from South Sudan. When they decided to get married, Peter started bridewealth negotiations with her family members both in Kakuma and in South Sudan. When Peter returned to Nyal, however, he discovered that during the years of conflict his family had lost most of their cattle and the remaining few were being used for the marriage of Peter's elder brother:

*"What will I do now? I am in big trouble with Angelina's family. In Kakuma, they agreed to give me Angelina on credit because I convinced them that I would give them the cows when I return to Sudan. I gave them some small money, as a down payment for the bridewealth, but now I am expected to pay the cows. Angelina is educated [she finished four years of schooling in Kakuma] so she is expensive. They asked for 60 cows but my family [in Sudan] does not have anything."*

Peter's story reflects some of the challenges that war and displacement pose for young men and women in terms of prospects, negotiation and conclusion of marriages.

## Life in Kakuma

The Nuer and the Dinka, the two largest ethnic groups in South Sudan, comprised the dominant populations in Kakuma at the time of my fieldwork in 2006-07. Predominantly agro-pastoralists, prior to displacement they relied on cattle herding, land cultivation and fishing and, to some extent, trade. The life of Nuer and Dinka men and women was closely associated with the care, protection and exchange of cattle, with cattle used in bridewealth payments.

The marriage process for Nuer women and men represents a rite of passage into adulthood, access to rights and a status within the household and community. Marriage is a lengthy process of negotiations and exchanges of bridewealth, becoming more secure with each transfer of payments and each ceremony.<sup>2</sup> It is a pivotal point in inter-generational relations as a mechanism of handing over resources from fathers to sons, building alliances between families and exchanging cattle for both productive and reproductive labour.

During displacement, significant changes took place in social relations, especially for young people. With educational services available and a particular focus on access to education for girls in the camp, life in Kakuma opened up opportunities for boys and girls, young women and men to (re)negotiate social and gender norms. In Kakuma, the issue of marriage

dominated conversations. Due to poverty and gender imbalances in the camp, marriage was unattainable for most residents. The majority of marriages taking place were of 'lost boys' resettled to Western countries to girls who had stayed behind. For the young men who had stayed in the camp, marriage was only a distant possibility, for several reasons.

Firstly, the agro-pastoralist Nuer and Dinka were not allowed to keep cattle or cultivate land and instead had to rely predominantly on food aid and remittances sent by relatives from abroad and, for some, money earned from trading or working for NGOs. As a result of this and of economic changes more generally, the cattle-based bridewealth system was partially monetised. Although money was the dominant medium of payment in Kakuma, marriage could not be completed without some transfer of cattle, which usually took place between the remaining clan members in Sudan. Money, although important, has 'no blood' for the Nuer and Dinka and hence is not seen as guaranteeing the solidity of marriage. "Marriage with money is not a real marriage. When the 'lost boys' come back to Sudan, they will have to pay in cows again," commented one of the local chiefs in Western Upper Nile region.

Secondly, due to the scarcity of girls of marriageable age in the camp, the competition among suitors was fierce. In addition, with raised levels of education attained by girls in the camp, bridewealth was significantly increased; for the Western Nuer, for example, the usual 20-30 head of cattle might rise to some 60-75 depending on the level of education of the girl and her family's social standing. Young men in the camp were unable to compete with those who were resettled in Western countries who had greater financial resources. Cattle-less refugee young men – away from their family and kin-members – would use friends to represent them in bridewealth negotiations with the family of their girlfriends. These negotiations would then continue through radio connections and mobile phone calls with the bride and groom's family members in Sudan. Like Peter's, 'marriages on credit' with the promise of repayment after return to Sudan dominated Kakuma life.

## Return: repaying the debts

For young refugee men returning to South Sudan, return involved moving from the multinational setting of Kakuma refugee camp – where most of them had spent their entire lives – to a village or town that was supposed to be home yet which they did not remember or know. Separated for years from their family and clan members, upon return to South Sudan they found themselves sharing a household with people whom they

barely remembered. Young returnee men who had led a more independent life in Kakuma, relatively free from any social obligations, found themselves with household responsibilities within their communities in South Sudan, often feeling overwhelmed by these expectations, exploited and misunderstood. Although family networks can act as a buffer against socio-economic uncertainty, they can also exercise pressure to conform to gender and generational household obligations.

One of their goals of returning to Sudan was to find family and kin members in order to repay their marriage bridewealth debts but the expectations of those who had stayed behind and those who were displaced often clashed when it came to the family's remaining limited resources. This scramble for bridewealth created rifts in the family and the community, with conflicts often being brought to local courts. Some young men complained that their families were "trying to cheat them" by having used their promised cattle to marry off other siblings or to finance investments.

There were also conflicts between siblings who were displaced and those who had stayed behind, with the latter arguing that due to their greater suffering during the wars, they had a greater right to the cattle. Returnee young men were often seen as less deserving. Diverse experiences during the wars shaped young men's identities differently, which in turn fuels conflict and hostility in post-war South Sudan.

Moreover, in Kakuma young people had often transgressed the rule of marrying within the same community. Upon return to South Sudan, some family members did not accept their choices and put pressure on the young men to divorce their Kakuma wives without any payment to the family.

The particular challenges that marriage involving bridewealth payments has for displaced and returnee communities tend to have been overlooked both in the literature and in reintegration programmes. Yet they affect both the willingness of refugees to return and their prospects of settling in on return. Bridewealth debts have severe consequences for young men wishing to establish themselves upon return, to build a new household, and to maintain relations with family members who had stayed behind or who were displaced elsewhere (for example to Khartoum). Young men are often not able to repay their debts – and some may have to abandon their wives or prospective wives. These women are consequently seen as 'used', often shamed and thus less worthy of a good (second) marriage. And those who are unmarried experience further stigmatisation. If the young men are able to secure cattle payments for their children (even if not for their wives), the children will stay with the fathers. Alternatively, children born out of the 'marriages on credit' may be taken over by the family of the wife. Either way, this leads to forced family separation. The high bride price has also affected other young men: those who had stayed behind. Frustrated with their inability to marry and thus to access full adulthood, some join cattle raids, enlist in militias or elope with young women. The recent increase in cattle raiding in some of the regions of South Sudan can partially be explained by this phenomenon.



UNHCR / G Bealis

Francis and Elizabeth are married and live in Kakuma refugee camp. Formerly childhood friends, they met again in Kakuma when forced to flee conflict in South Sudan. During the three years that they dated, her family threatened him. He came from a poor family and had no cows or money to pay the 300-cow dowry her family demanded. They married secretly but violence against them by her family meant they had to seek UNHCR special protection. After South Sudan declared its independence in 2011, Francis and his wife had the opportunity to go home – but to do so would invariably lead to violence. "My parents will fight against her family. There will be destruction and people will die," Francis said. "I do not want that for any of us. I refuse." Now he teaches English and mathematics to children in the camp, and his family has applied for resettlement in a third county.

While it is often argued that displacement creates opportunities for greater autonomy for young people and their ability to negotiate their choices (including marriage partners), post-war return and the duty to complete marriage payments in this case often result in limiting their autonomy and freedoms. The findings above indicate a need for the government of South Sudan, the international community and the local communities to:

- work with local chiefs who are involved in solving marriage problems
- control raising bride price by working together with young women and men, their parents and community elders
- create education, job opportunities and income-generating opportunities for young men in South Sudan
- provide protection and income-generating services for young women as well as counselling for families experiencing separation.

Katarzyna Grabska [kgrabska@yahoo.com](mailto:kgrabska@yahoo.com) is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Migration and Mobility Project at the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North South [www.north-south.unibe.ch](http://www.north-south.unibe.ch) in Basel, Switzerland. See also the author's article in *Gender and Development* [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552074.2011.554026](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552074.2011.554026)

1. At the time being discussed the new state of South Sudan had not yet come into being but was still known as southern Sudan; hereafter in this article we refer to 'South Sudan'.
2. Hutchinson, S (1996) *Nuer dilemmas: coping with money, war and the State*, University of California Press: Berkeley.