Marriage and Migration: How Nuptial Traditions Shape the Migratory Experience

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This paper will explore the complex nature of the migratory experience of Africans to Spain by focusing on two texts written by the Equatorial Guinean author Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo. The fundamental question Ndongo-Bidyogo addresses is why so many young Africans try to immigrate to Europe, a place where they are considered outsiders. While in 1965, at the age of fifteen, Ndongo-Bidyogo migrated from Equatorial Guinea to Spain to continue his studies, many young Africans of today’s generation are fleeing for a variety of reasons. Instead of settling on simple economic factors to explain migration, the short story “El sueño” and the novel El metro focus on the cultural traditions and social pressures that contribute to the phenomenon. In this paper, I will argue the constant movement of so many Africans out of their homelands subverts their accepted understanding of the traditional world as a place of an ideal past. The traditional worldview must be redefined and repositioned alongside the modern paradigm in order to reflect the global and interconnected world system. Until this occurs, young Africans like those depicted in the texts, will continue to feel constrained and tempted to head elsewhere for better opportunities.

In the case of the protagonists of “El sueño,” and El metro, their realities become blurred because of the restrictive circumstances of the society. While they desire to remain a part of their community, they no longer feel a connection to the conventional traditions that surround them. They feel a constant push-pull to either conform to the traditions of their ancestors or reject them in favor of a more modern worldview. Donato Ndongo states in an interview with Dr. Michael Ugarte from the University of Missouri-Columbia how he views the question:

Many of the purists who demand that we only use our traditions do not acknowledge certain realities. We Africans are also familiar with modernity, we too use the metro, we travel by plane, we wear suits, etc. I cannot educate my child as if I were still living in the age of my grandfather. Am I going to ask my son to wear a loin cloth? That’s ingenuous, it’s simply folkloric. We must go beyond that. (230)

In the following pages, I will show how each text “goes beyond that,” by challenging the traditional practices of African culture. By focusing on literary representations of the migratory experience, my paper will bring to life issues that up until now have been restricted to qualitative and quantitative research. A literary representation of the dynamic nature of a migration allows the reader access into the subjective and ambivalent world of the migrant, one that was previously restricted to objective case studies and surveys. It is important to include these cultural productions into the current conversations about migrant literature because these works hold the potential to inspire social action. The message embedded in each text is one that challenges the traditional assumptions related to migration and offers important insight into the social contexts of the phenomenon.

“El sueño” is a story that describes the anonymous protagonist’s journey from his rural

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1 All quotes are from Michael Ugarte’s English translation of “El sueño,” entitled, “The Dream.”
homeland all the way to the perceived paradise of Europe. After being uprooted from his family, he begins to feel the social pressure placed on young Africans to assume the role of the adult male. Faced with low pay and miserable conditions he considers migrating because of the high price of the bride wealth that his future wife demands. “I was going to marry Black Traoré; she was prettier than the darkest night, but I didn’t have the twelve cows for the dowry: those twelve cows, the twelve cows of my downfall” (75). Having already lost his first future wife because of non-payment, he feels even more of an economic and social burden to meet the bride price of Dikate. Although he would prefer to stay at home and live a traditional life like his father, he is lured by what the other side has to offer. His words reveal a young man torn between two worlds. “I’d rather have married like my father did [but] how can a women respect you if you haven’t got anything? So once again I was all tied up in the cow problem” (76). His sense of urgency and desperation is palpable when he describes what it would mean to lose Dikate by not being able to pay the bride price. I didn’t want Dikate to leave me like Black (too black) Traoré had done. I had to get the twelve cows very soon. If I didn’t, everyone back home on the banks of the Casamance would think I wasn’t man enough to get married. Life isn’t worth living if a man can’t be a man” (76). These statements reveal just how instrumental the social customs and roles of his clan are in forcing him to continue his journey north.

The situation described in “El sueño” falls under the category of bridewealth, defined as transfers from the family of the groom to the bride. In his book Bridewealth and Dowry Jack Goody emphasizes the importance of cattle by stating: “The effect is to reinforce the authority of the father and emphasize the tie with the sister. The authority of the older generation is linked to the extent to which the young are dependent on them for marriage cattle or the equivalent” (5). This information is significant because it reveals how a literary portrait such as “El sueño” doesn’t always conform to the anthropological or sociological analysis. The protagonist doesn’t have the financial backing of his father nor the bridewealth of a sister to meet the demands of Traoré. According to research such as the 1987 Bridewealth, Age at Marriage, and Fertility (BAF) project conducted by Uche C. Isiugo-Abanihe, the protagonist represents a growing trend of wage-earning men in Africa who are now beginning to fund the bridewealth themselves. Of the close to 1,000 male respondents, 69% agreed that in their community the individual suitors must now finance the bridewealth without the assistance of their kin and only 20% reported relatives still help (81). The ensuing discussion will now seek to understand the size of the bridewealth that the protagonist of “El sueño” and others like him have to fund, in order to determine how instrumental it is in their departure.

With the majority of Sub-Saharan societies traditionally making marriage payments from the groom’s side to the bride’s, household incomes are inevitably affected. Because the bridewealth is so significant and represents such a large financial burden for poor households, many grooms are forced into decisions similar to the one the protagonist makes in “El sueño.” Migration has become a viable alternative for the man to engage in wage labor in order to ascertain the required capital demanded by the bride’s family. In the scenario described in “El sueño,” the protagonist must meet the price of twelve cattle established by Traoré’s family. The bridewealth of twelve cattle is fairly consistent with the price of other African peoples of the continent. Nobuhiro Nagashima’s research on the Iteso of Kenya reveal that from 1920-1980 the number of bridewealth cattle averaged 11.2. Still other tribes of Sub-Saharan Africa such as those in rural Zimbabwe average 8-9 cattle for a marriage payment from groom to bride (193).
Goody’s research concludes that the groups with a high bridewealth payment have the highest rates of labor migration. He references the Kasena people of Northern Ghana whose high marriage payments correspond to 21% of the population being categorized as migrants (9). The percentage of migrants drops significantly in some of the centralized groups of the country whose marriage payments are lower than those of the northern region. There also appears to be some variation in what the groom’s family offers to the bride’s family.

While the protagonist of “El sueño” is forced to pay the bridewealth of twelve cattle to his future wife, prior to the adoption of Islam, the Diola people of Southwestern Senegal transacted palm wine. Because “El sueño” takes place in this region of the Casamance River Valley, one would anticipate that palm wine would have been part of the exchange. Alice Joyce Hamer explains in her study of the Diola women why this no longer occurs:

In those days a man sent palm wine to his bride-to-be’s relatives on two major occasions. One was for engagement, the day when he and a girl’s father agreed upon a mutually satisfactory time for the wedding. On this day he gave his bride’s father enough wine to be distributed among all the brothers. Religious conversion ushered in an abrupt departure from this tradition insofar as currency became the surrogate for palm wine. (208)

In the following pages, I will discuss how the monetization of the bridewealth in West Africa manifests itself in El Metro.

Unlike the short story where the protagonist is anonymous, Lambert Obama Ondo is introduced to the reader at an early point in the novel. Lambert rejects all things modern in favor of a more simple and traditional way of living. It is only when he realizes this traditional lifestyle impedes him from marrying Anne Mengue that he decides to migrate to the urban center of Yaoundé and eventually onto Europe. The marriage customs described in the text are instrumental in sparking his decision to leave. Although the central protagonist of the novel is Lambert, Ndongo selects another character to introduce the topic of marriage: Lambert’s sister Rosalie. When Rosalie suddenly disappears one day, the entire village is left without answers as to her whereabouts. Lambert realizes that a group of young men from the bridegroom’s clan kidnapped her. Nobuhiro Nagashima comments on how this tradition has evolved over time.

Formerly, a girl had to be properly betrothed with the agreement of her father. Later, she was taken, or rather kidnapped, by a group of young men from the bridegroom’s group. At the time of this ‘marriage by capture’, the negotiation of bridewealth is said to have already been settled and the whole, or main part, of it may also have been handed over to the wife-giver. Nowadays, the opposite is generally true. A girl begins to live with her lover usually without the consent of her father. In short, it is no longer normally the case that the settlement of bridewealth negotiations precedes cohabitation. (183)

Due in large part to the rural setting of the story, the changes Nagashima describes are not followed by the two families. Donato Ndongo chooses to depict the custom along traditional lines with Rosalie remaining sequestered from her family. It is only when the parents of the bridegroom appear to discuss their son’s potential marriage with Guy Ondo Ebang, does the
reader witness the evolution of the tradition:

El marido miró entonces a su esposa, que había permanecido quieta y callada, limitándose a subrayar con breves cabezazos de asentimiento las palabras reposadas del hombre; ésta abrió su bolso y extrajo un abultado paquete en el que asomaba un fajo de billetes, que entregó al marido, el cual, a su vez, extendió su mano hacia Guy Ondo Ebang. (140)

By offering Guy Ondo cash in exchange for his daughter’s hand, the couple demonstrates how common cash bridewealth has become amongst West African clans. Uche Isiugo-Abanihe outlines three reasons why cash bridewealth increased in West Africa:

1. The increasing importance of Western education, a high demand for educated wives, and parents’ desires to recover the cost of a daughter’s education through her bridewealth
2. Increased commercial activities stemming, directly or indirectly, from the Second World War. At the same time, there have been enormous increases in employment opportunities in the flourishing private and public sectors, and in commercial activities stemming from the War, colonial development efforts, and later post-independent economic activities—especially the oil boom of the 1970’s.
3. Higher employment opportunities in the flourishing private and public sectors, and the increased availability of money from salaries and wages. (78)

The tradition of the bridewealth is now aligned with an economy dominated by the use of money to conduct all transactions. This lump sum of money will benefit the entire village and in particular will be used by Lambert as compensation to enter into marriage with Anne Mengue. Lambert is not worried about the high bridewealth that Anne Mengue’s family will request because of the money he will inherit from his sister’s marriage:

No veía en ello problema alguno: los presentes de los eseng serían transferidos a la familia de Anne Mengue si, como esperaba, los parientes de su novia seguían bien predispuestos hacia él y no se subían a la parra poniéndosele difícil y exigiendo lo imposible. Todo debía salir a pedir de boca, pues ni siquiera se había tenido que forzar ninguna situación, como hacía la mayoría de las familias, las cuales, ante la necesidad de casar a uno de sus varones, paseaban de pueblo en pueblo a sus hijas como si fuesen ganado, o las ofrecían al mejor postor, imponiendo así unos matrimonios de conveniencia que a menudo perjudicaba a la chica. Ellos no habían actuado con un criterio tan anticuado. (150)

Because Lambert and his father refused to allow Rosalie to be treated as an object, they granted her the freedom to pick her mate. This deviation from the archaic tradition that Lambert described earlier proves that marriage rituals have evolved in their rural town. It is ironic then that the traditions of his clan will prevent him from marrying his true love: Anne Mengue. Since this moment represents a pivotal point in Lambert’s life, a thorough discussion of the marriage practices of his clan is needed in order to reveal how they contribute to his departure.
In Fang tradition, the institution of marriage is not considered between bride and groom, rather it is a union between families and clans. Lambert reveals the multiple layers of the marriage custom in a particularly informative passage:

Obama Ondo recordó lo que sabía desde siempre: un matrimonio no es una unión caprichosa entre dos jóvenes inexpertos. La decisión primera había pasado a la exclusiva responsabilidad de los novios, principales protagonistas de sus propias nupcias. Pero de ahí a dejarlos solos, sin el consejo y la asistencia moral de sus mayores, de sus familiares, de los miembros de sus respectivas tribus, va un abismo. El matrimonio es también una alianza entre dos tribus, la consagración de un vínculo perenne entre dos clanes, la fusión duradera de dos familias que, a partir de la ceremonia nupcial, tendrán una sola sangre. Por eso no caben bromas, ni rigidez, ni descuidos, ni decisiones precipitadas. Un matrimonio que no reúna estas condiciones no puede ser válido, no puede prosperar, no puede cumplir su función, no puede durar. (143)

What becomes apparent after reading this passage is the importance that marriage has for the reputation of the entire clan. Any union between two individuals that would jeopardize the image of the entire clan will be rejected. By controlling the marriages of younger generations, they create a system of dependence that is difficult for the youth to break. One needs only to analyze Lambert Obama Ondo’s relationship with Anne Mengue to see how dominant the elders can be in controlling marriages.

After revealing to Anne his desire to marry her, she unexpectedly flees from his embrace. She knows what Lambert will eventually discover: his father’s involvement with her mother will prevent their marriage. It is only when Anne reveals to her mother, Sylvie, that she is pregnant with Lambert’s child, that she and Guy Ondo Ebang realize the gravity of their illicit relationship. Guy maintains that “para hacer las cosas bien ante Dios y ante el mundo, expondría el caso al padre Martín Essomba y a los ancianos de la tribu, para que les aconsejaran tanto a él mismo como a su hijo” (169). The advice the elders offer Lambert ruins his dream of marrying Anne and raising their unborn child together.

Y a través de un largo circunloquio, de parábolas sazonadas de máximas, proverbios y sentencias, al modo del habla antigua, fue haciéndole entender que los ancianos de la tribu no daban su consentimiento a su proyectado casamiento con Anne Mengue, a pesar de su estado prematernal, porque su propio padre andaba en amores con Jeanne Bikíe, a la que se disponía a tomar como esposa, y no era bueno para la estabilidad del clan que se confundieran los papeles, que sus padres fueran sus suegros al mismo tiempo. Sabes que no puede ser: los padres son los padres y los suegros deben ser los suegros, pues cada uno tiene su función, y ha llegado el momento de desenredar tanto embrollo, porque a partir de este momento te prohibimos todo trato carnal con la hija de la viuda, puesto que ha pasado a ser tu hermana. (170)

This passage reinforces the power of the elders to determine the fate of the clan’s youth while also demonstrating how much the prestige of the entire clan supersedes the happiness of one couple. His response is particularly crushing to Lambert because of his unending faith in the traditional customs of his ancestors. Having attempted to reject Western norms and thoughts, he
immersed himself in the lifestyle of his antecedents. Cruelly, it was now those same traditions that prevented him from being with the woman he loved. Lambert ponders how:

La tradición había hecho trizas todo cuanto había ido tejiendo poquito a poco y con paciencia a lo largo de los años para construir su vida, embellecerla y elevarla. Unas normas incomprensibles, la férrea exogamia en que se fundamentaban las costumbres de su pueblo, había estilado su propia seguridad en la que se asentaba su universo. Zozobraban los asideros con los que navegaba en el proceloso mar de la existencia, costumbres antiquísimas se habían impuesto al amor. (171)

He realizes there is no hope for him to live like his ancestors and that it was time for him to live in the present and forget about the past.

While each text allows the reader to view the topic of migration through a different lens, the underlying message is the same: the younger generation is disillusioned with the current norms of society that remain rooted in the past. To one side of the protagonists lie the older generation who seek to maintain the traditions of their ancestors. This group rejects the message of those who advocate for modernization and progress. The young protagonists straddle both sides, desperately trying to reconcile the two in order to live in happiness. They quickly sense this is an insurmountable task because the traditional customs that permeate their society remain firm. All of their hopes and ambitions are lost because they are unable to adapt to a society stuck in the past. How can the unnamed protagonist expect to find a wife when he must meet a bridewealth that exceeds his means? How can Lambert forget not being able to marry his true love Anne Mengue because of an antiquated tradition? Each of the protagonists asked these very questions, and decided migration was the answer to their problem of living in a rigid world ruled by tradition. While at first glance, they appear to take place in societies resistant to change and dominated by rigid traditions, a closer reading reveals ongoing changes.

One need not look any further than how Donato Ndongo portrays the custom of the bridewealth in “El sueño” and El metro. Traditionally, the bridewealth involved the transaction of palm olive wine but when religious conversion occurred, this tradition evolved. Instead of exchanging palm olive wine and pigs, as is the tradition in the Casamance Valley, the protagonist was forced to provide cattle to kin of his future bride. This demonstrates the evolution of the bridewealth custom and proves the mutable nature of this tradition. The modification of this custom is taken even further in El metro, when the groom’s family offers Guy Ondo Ebang a packet of cash in exchange for his daughter’s hand. Using cash for the purpose of the transaction is modern development that proves the evolution of the tradition. The tradition has never been static and needs to continue to evolve so that young people are not lured into migrating in order to finance its high cost. It is important that Africans are the ones who recognize the importance of regulating the price of the bridewealth and not outsiders. During the colonial era European powers such as Spain and France were ineffective in limiting the total amount of bridewealth. Donato Ndongo references: “La Orden del 10 de agosto de 1943, del gobernador Mariano Alonso, pretendía dar solución a las elevadas dotes, pues, según asegura, mucho jóvenes indígenas no encontraban esposa por haber subido excesivamente “el precio de la mujer” de las 300 pesetas a las 3.000” (157). The Jacquinot Decree of September 14, 1951 established the
same type of reduction of the amount of bridewealth in the French colonies. These efforts to check the level of bridewealth proved to be unsuccessful and recent literature on the tradition suggests a desire on the part of the many Africans to maintain it. The status associated with the high bridewealth continues to perpetuate the problem, with both women and men boasting of the price. There must be effort to reconcile these past traditions with present concerns or more youth will continue to migrate. While the bridewealth has adapted in many ways, its principles fail to reflect the conditions of modern-day life. When a young man like the protagonist of “El sueño” must migrate in order to finance its cost, the tradition is anachronistic and must be revised in order to prevent the flow of young Africans elsewhere.

Like the bridewealth, the institution of marriage has also undergone some significant revisions. While El metro describes a situation in which Lambert’s elders prohibit his union with Anne Mengue in order to uphold a sacred tradition, marriage laws have been updated over the years. In his text Survey of African Marriage and Family Life, Phillips identifies the main characteristics of customary African marriage:

Marriage is potentially polygynous; procreation is the foundation of marriage; making ‘dowry’ (i.e. bridewealth) payments and counter-payments on the occasion of ceremonies is the basis for the principle of legitimacy; it is potentially possible to dissolve marriage; marriage involves two family groups; marriage brings together two people generally within the framework of ethnic endogamy and of clan or lineage exogamy, which produces sexual prohibitions between certain members of a family as well as an often expressed preference for cross-cousin marriage; the woman is generally very young at the time of her first marriage; the woman does not have the same power/rights as the man.

(9)

During the colonial period, the European empires sought measures to regulate these traditional marriages. In Equatorial Guinea, the Spanish undertook a series of reforms. Donato Ndongo states: “Se prohibía el matrimonio entre personas que no hubieran llegado a la pubertad, que tuvieran taras fisiológicas o la mujer estuviese aún ligada por un vínculo matrimonial anterior no disuelto oficialmente. La poligamia, que no se podía abolir por decreto, pasó a ser penalizada” (158). According to Iman Ngondo A Pitshandenge’s article “Marriage Law in Sub-Saharan Africa,” the French also implemented legal action that affected marriages: the Mandel Decree of 1939 specified the minimum age at marriage, mandated the consent of both spouses, and affirmed the right and the liberty of a widow to remarry. Following independence many nations began revising the legal code concerning marriage. Ngondo outlines six characteristics of marriage legislation in sub-Saharan Africa which sought to reconcile modernity with tradition through:

The secularization of marriage; the freedom of partner choice combined with the need for the consent of the spouses and parents; regulating engagement and bridewealth; prohibiting or regulating polygamy; clarifying the relationship of a child to its parents and recognizing a child born outside marriage; regulating the fate of the surviving spouse if the partner dies. (121)

While it remains uncertain how many of these laws will actually be accepted, they reflect an
interest to update marriage laws to changing conditions. Although the elders resist these changes in *El metro*, Rosalie’s marriage is evidence that the customs are evolving. By refusing to engage her father and brother in the marriage process, she is an agent of change. Even though both Lambert and his father are perturbed by the autonomy she possesses, they eventually acquiesce and defer to the elders. Despite violating the sacred rule of exogamy by selecting a groom who is of the same ethnic clan as her, the elders are still willing to accept her marriage because of the size of the monetary offering and the history between the two tribes. The reader learns:

Pese a férrea e inquebrantable exogamia, pilar fundamental de las costumbres de los fang, la mayor garantía de estabilidad para un matrimonio es la existencia de algún lejano parentesco entre los contrayentes, que asegurará la comprensión entre los esposos y facilitará la armonía, ya que los familiares de ambos linajes siempre podrán reunirse para resolver cualquier diferencia. (145)

In an egregious contradiction, it is this very violation of exogamy that the elders cite as the reason that Lambert cannot marry Anne Mengue. They are not as willing to accept Lambert’s marriage because of the scandal they anticipate it will create. The juxtaposition of these two marriages reveals the discretionary nature of their laws. It is unreasonable to deprive a young couple an opportunity to pursue happiness because of the sentiments of a small minority. Unless the older generations acknowledge the disillusionment these marriage laws create, the youth will continue to rebel by migrating.

Occupying a middle ground between tradition and modernity defines not only the three protagonists’ position but that of many young Africans in today’s society. The simultaneous attraction and alienation they feel towards their traditional customs force them to pursue a modern lifestyle. By depicting protagonists who challenge the validity of a traditional society unchanged through the years, these authors demand a revision of customs, ethics, and rites of passage. Additionally, these texts embody how migration is part of the much larger human experience. The hopes and dreams of the protagonists are not that different from what so many of us desire. Just like the protagonists of “El sueño” and *El metro*, many of us seek to find a marriage partner with whom to share our love and happiness. For these reasons, the narratives cannot be dismissed as merely fictional accounts of migration. Rather, the authors distill the stories to their most fundamental parts to show how they reflect the human condition. They emphasize how migration can no longer be analyzed through a simplistic lens that is focused on economic push and pull factors, but must be repositioned to include the role of traditional customs in the phenomenon.

**Works Cited**


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