

## A Re-imagining of African Customary Marriage and *iLobola* through Subaltern Perspectives

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### Abstract

Marriage traditions in Zulu culture have changed over time, they continued to shift during colonization and apartheid. Many of their core elements predate the rise of a distinct Zulu identity in the early 19th century. One of the most important traditions is *ilobola* (bride wealth). *Ilobola* has been mistranslated commonly as “bride price” or “bride wealth,” which is a phrasing that reduces the socio-cultural practice to a single ritual and emphasizes the transactional aspect of *ilobola* that commodifies the female gender, particularly as it relates to childbearing. The translation of *ilobola* as “bride price” also represents more than a simple misunderstanding in language. This paper traces the history of *ilobola* and offers a critical analysis through Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) framework on subaltern perspectives. Similarly to how the true meaning of *Sati* (widow immolation) was obscured and lost in translation through colonial interpretation, analyzing the tradition of *ilobola* to allow the subaltern to speak involves recognizing the often complex interplay of Zulu cultural values, such as *ukuhlonipha* (to give respect) and its intersection with the custom of *ilobola*. The parallel to the *sati* will allow us to highlight how colonial and post-colonial discourses may have obscured the spiritual and cultural dimensions of this practice. Imposing Western categories onto African practices obscures the very essence of those practices in an effort to make these practices obsolete. Through the application of Spivak’s framework, we can uncover the complexities associated with *ilobola* and its relevance within the broader discourse of cultural identity and resistance.

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