

“Money talks”: Entrenching a Classed Heterosexuality through the Practice of Ilobolo (Bridewealth) Payments in Contemporary South Africa - Memory Mphaphuli (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

"Ilobolo", the traditional practice of bride wealth payment, holds significant cultural and social currency in contemporary South Africa. While existing scholarship has delved into its cultural meanings and societal roles, and most recently its persistent authority in a post-apartheid South Africa. This study departs from this line of enquiry by examining its explicit impact on heterosexuality as both an institution and a lived experience. Drawing from qualitative focus group discussions with 10 young adults aged 22-27 from rural KwaZulu-Natal, where ilobolo is prevalent, this article argues that the practice of paying ilobolo marks the contours of black heterosexual identity, making class a distinguishing feature of heterosexuality and importantly thus reinscribing the intersections between class privilege and heterosexual privilege.

The phrase "money talks" encapsulates the essence of ilobolo, which transcends mere economic transactions to embody social status and gendered power dynamics. For men, the ability to pay ilobolo not only secures a wife and her possessions but also solidifies their status as 'real men', garnering respect from both their spouses and future in-laws. Similarly, and as noted in other studies, the insistence to pay ilobolo for marriage in a contemporary South Africa despite high and continuously rising unemployment rates especially amongst young adults, is seen as a defiant way and even a decolonial practice to reaffirm a truly African identity, fostering a sense of pride among black men. Conversely, for women, the potential ability to contribute financially to their own ilobolo is met with stigma and accusations of 'desperation', reinforcing gender norms where economic autonomy of this nature is frowned upon. I argue that this captures in important ways ilobolo's ability of social ordering of the genders within heterosexual relationships.

Through conversations with participants, a prevailing narrative emerges wherein money becomes synonymous with attaining social authority, particularly for men. It serves as a tool for asserting and affirming masculinity, thereby perpetuating hierarchical gender divisions where women are expected to be economically subordinate to men. Here ilobolo intersects

with gender and class dynamics and underscores its role in shaping and perpetuating black heterosexuality in contemporary South Africa.