

COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES IN MÒKPÈ BRIDE PRICE NEGOTIATIONS

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Abstract

This paper investigates the communicative and cultural practices involved in the process of bride price negotiation in **Mòkpè**. Data were collected through participant observation from five **Mòkpè** villages (Ewonda, Bova, Bokwaongo, Bonduma and Bonakanda). This process was aided by the fact that the researcher, who also doubles as a native speaker of the language, has lived as part of the **Mòkpè** community for more than 30 years, all the while attending such ceremonies and observing the communicative practices therein. Subsequently, a purposive sampling of the opinions of key participants involved in the bride price negotiation process from the various villages was done to aid in the comprehension of the traditional communicative strategies observed in the negotiation process. Through an interview guide, data were elicited from the purposively sampled culturally grounded participants in order to understand the bride price negotiation process. The data were then transcribed, glossed, and analyzed qualitatively within the perspectives of the Sharifian theory of Cultural Linguistics. Results obtained revealed that the process of bride price negotiation is guided by the use of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies that showcase the uniqueness of the **Mòkpè** culture. While songs characterize the main verbal strategy, plantain leaves symbolize the non-verbal bargaining tool used in the negotiation process. Unfortunately, due to globalization and the pressures of language and cultural contact, a gradual adulteration of key traditional bride price negotiation practices is underway. Considering the importance of such cultural knowledge to indigenous cultures, it is necessary for such a study to be done on other language communities in and out of Cameroon in order to preserve the rich cultural values therein.

Keywords: Bride Price, Negotiation, Culture, Communication, Mòkpè

litilá lá wòzró

Líni litilá lúmèlè dzówí nè mbózá Mòkpè wá gbèjànà wé bèjó. Lí tilá èné káti, nà lú è mbózá ó mbówí tã (wéwòndà, wówá, wòkpáñgè, wòndùmà nà wònákandà). Nà lú lí wówá è mbózári èwándzá nòngéli ó mbówá Mòkpè zrájw mé méná, ó ménè méná, nènì wèbèjó nà è mbózári jèbèjó. Lí wíjã wégbèlí wé Mòkpè lí Bómènè ébèjó, ní dzó wámáká wá Mòkpè émá wá wí wégbèlí wé mòtà Mòkpè lí Bómènè ébèjó. Wéngà nà gbèjàni káti jã kpízáni émá ènòngwání lí wówá líwíjè lébèjó. Líwíjè lébèjó lí wówáwí lí tiláwí lí Bómènè líwíjè lámá Sharifian lí Bómènè è mbózári. Líni litilá lúmèlè éléma è mbózári jèbèjó è gbèjànà wéjã wéjówáwí nà wéjã wé zrówàwè. Dzówí dzébéjó dzóbí mèzrókò nà wéjálí wé mèkò wá gbèjànà lówá è Bóndé-bèjó. Èné káti júmèlè éléma líwíjè lá zré nà íbèbé mbózári í má gbèjã wákpè wá zrà gbèjànà líwíjè lébèjó nómá wá mà gbèjè è Bóndá kówá. Wéngà lí Bómènè éléma líni líwíjè lá mbózári-bèjó lí lã, èné káti júmèlè éléma ó lã éléma káti dzúmèlè nómá è mbózári jèbèjó é wéli í tiláwè mbózári dzódzó èné-kómè já kàmèróon nà íbèbé kómè.

Mbózári líbèwàni: èbèjó, wégbèlí, mbózári, dzówí, Mòkpè

1. Introduction

There are some controversies on what a bride price really is and how it differs from a dowry. While some researchers perceive a dowry to be the amount paid or property transferred from the family of the bride to that of the groom (Gaulin & Boster 1990; Zhang & Chan 1999; Anderson 2007), others use the two terms interchangeably (Chelangat 2018). In this study, the term bride price is used to refer to the amount of money paid and/or property transferred from the groom's to the bride's family. In many African communities, bride price arrangements constitute formal negotiations between the families concerned, and such negotiations reflect unique cultural values. While this praxis is generally characterized by language, the forms of communication used in these negotiations differ from one cultural grouping to another (Kimani 2021). This is of course, not surprising given that marriage itself and by implication bride price negotiation practices, are perceived differently across societies as a result of cultural, religious and personal factors (Masele & Lakshmanan 2021; Posel, Rudwick, & Casale 2011; Ohta 2007; Evans-Pritchard 1931). In the case of **Mòkpè**, a coastal Bantu language spoken in the South West Region of Cameroon (Bantu A22) (Eberhard et al. 2025), the bride price negotiation process, generally referred to as **èbèjó**, is traditionally governed by the use of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Unfortunately, however, with the growing cosmopolitan nature of most **Mòkpè** villages, coupled with the influence of digital culture, contemporary bride price negotiation processes have been adulterated. In this regard, Sandikci and Ilhan (2004) note that tradition gradually loses its significance and role as a support mechanism as societies modernize, given that traditions are

seen as impediments to the development of a modern society (see also Lerner 1958; Rostow 1960). While the infringement of core cultural practices of bride price negotiation is unavoidable, the need to preserve them is unquestionable. In a bid to preserve the originality of the rich cultural values of **Mòkpè**, this paper presents a documentation and description of the communicative practices involved in the process of bride price negotiation.

Thus, the paper explores and analyzes the culturally embedded linguistic and nonverbal strategies employed during bride price negotiations within the **Mòkpè** community. It also uncovers how traditional communicative tools—particularly the use of the plantain leaf and culturally significant songs—function as symbolic and pragmatic instruments in facilitating dialogue, expressing emotion, resolving conflict, and reinforcing social norms during bride price negotiations. Ultimately, the paper highlights the importance of preserving indigenous communicative traditions involved in bride price negotiation in the face of globalization and cultural dilution, while also contributing to broader discussions on intercultural communication and African sociolinguistics.

2. Methodology

As Patten and Newhart (2018) note, the accumulation of knowledge through research in its own right is a collective activity. Thus, data for this study were obtained through participant observation, complemented by interview sessions which enabled the researcher obtain controlled information regarding the communicative patterns at work during bride price negotiation. This qualitative approach to data collection was necessitated by the exploratory nature of the research. While ethnographic information was obtained by observing real-life bride price negotiation events¹, complementary data were obtained by interviewing bona fide speakers of the language with the aid of an interview guide. Participants for interview sessions were purposively selected through recommendations from other natives of **Mòkpè** on the testament of their linguistic and cultural competences (the snowball approach). The participants were five in number, one from each village and their ages ranged between forty-five (45) to sixty (60) years and they were all men. Women were sidelined, as they are generally not permitted to participate in such events². Thus, their knowledge of what transpires during such cultural activities was deemed limited. To ensure ethicality in data collection, participants for the study were duly notified of the purpose of the study and their consent to record and take pictures was duly obtained. Once the data were collected, they were transcribed faithfully and glossed following insights from consultants. This was followed by a qualitative analysis guided by Sharifian's theory of Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian 2017). This theory was chosen for the study because it offers a compelling framework for understanding how language is shaped by and reflects cultural conceptualizations. At its core, the theory posits that language is not merely a system of arbitrary symbols, but a repository of shared cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs that are transmitted across generations.

The theory emphasizes the role of cultural schemas, metaphors, and categories in shaping how speakers of a language conceptualize their experiences and communicate meaning. This theory goes beyond structural or purely semantic analyses of language to explore how meaning is constructed through culturally grounded cognitive processes. In this theory, Sharifian argues that these conceptualizations are often encoded in linguistic expressions and communicative

¹ Note that as the researcher, I double as a native speaker of Mòkpè. As such, I have consistently lived in the Mòkpè community for more than thirty (30) years, during which I had the pleasure of experiencing and participating in more than twenty-five (25) different bride price negotiation events. Within the last four (4) years, I have consciously attended six (6) of such ceremonies during which I recorded the events as they unfolded and also interviewed competent native authorities on the bride price negotiation process and the communicative practices therein.

² Mòkpè is a patrilineal society and as such, the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge is left in the hands of the men of the community. Thus, men of all ages are permitted to be part of such events since they serve as avenues for cultural transfer, as men are the custodians of culture and tradition and are expected to pass it on to future generations (see Mokake, Nkwain and Chiatoh 2024).

practices, making language a powerful tool for expressing cultural identity and worldview. The theory, as demonstrated in some research (Musolff 2021; Peeters 2016; Sharifian & Palmer 2007; Xu & Sharifian 2018), has several underlying principles or models that explain its functionality. These models include cultural cognition, which emphasizes the role of culture in shaping cognitive processes and language use, cultural schemas, which examine how cultural knowledge and experiences are organized and influence language, cultural categories and metaphors, which deal with the way language reflects and constructs cultural meanings, and cultural conceptualizations, which involve the shared understandings and collective knowledge that underlie language use and communication within a cultural group. Two of these models guided the analysis and interpretation of data for this study: cultural conceptualizations, which aided in understanding non-verbal communicative practices during bride price negotiations involving plantain leaves, and conceptual metaphors, which enhanced clarity on the implications of songs sung during bride price negotiations.

In the context of the **Mòkpè** bride price negotiation process, Sharifian's theory therefore proves highly relevant for interpreting the data. The use of the plantain leaf (**èkǎ likò**) as a nonverbal bargaining tool, for instance (see section 3.2), cannot be fully understood through a literal or linguistic lens alone. Its communicative function is rooted in a cultural metaphor that transforms a mundane object into a symbol of negotiation, value, and respect. Similarly, the songs used throughout the negotiation process carry semantic implicatures that reflect deeply held cultural beliefs about marriage, family, ancestry, and social harmony (see section 3.3). These songs are not just for entertainment or emotional expression—they are vehicles for transmitting cultural knowledge and reinforcing communal values. Sharifian's framework, therefore, enhances the decoding of these practices, pointing out that **Mòkpè** people do not separate language from culture; instead, they use language as a conduit for cultural meaning. The theory also helps explain why ancestral recognition is central to the negotiation process, as the **Mòkpè** conceptualize identity through lineage and spiritual continuity. Thus, cultural linguistics provides the necessary interpretive lens to appreciate the symbolic depth and communicative richness of **Mòkpè** bride price negotiations, revealing how language and culture coalesce to shape social rituals. Having pointed this out, the following section describes the process of bride price negotiation taking into account the dressing patterns of participants and the communicative systems involved.

3. Results and discussion

A bride price is a marriage gift that creates the conditions for a marriage contract (Khanal & Sen 2020). In most contexts, this gift is a negotiated contract between the family of the bride and that of the groom. Such negotiations require competence and the knowledge required for a smooth interaction when negotiating dowries far outweighs a native's basic ability to speak the language. Communication in such contexts is rather heavily reliant on linguistic and cultural competence in appropriate norms of language use in various sociocultural contexts (see Kangutu 2014; Kellett & Cisna 2014; Chalwe 2016). Thus, as is the case with most customs, the process of bride price negotiation involves a complex interplay of linguistic and cultural strategies between contracting parties (Khanal & Sen 2020). Considering the case of **Mòkpè**, both verbal and nonverbal communicative patterns are inalienably productive in the negotiation process. On the nonverbal sphere, **Mòkpè** speakers utilize plantain leaves as a communicative tool in the negotiation process, while the verbal aspect involves the use of songs. Such songs help to defuse tension amongst participants, entertain, and signal agreement between negotiating parties. This section of the work discusses these communicative strategies in greater detail, beginning with the bride price negotiation process itself.

3.1. The bride price negotiation process

In most African communities, bride prices serve as key pillars of unifying a man and a woman in marriage as well as the bonding of the groom's and bride's family (Chelangat 2018). While a bride price constitutes a traditionally negotiated and agreed-upon gift that is paid to the bride's family

as a token of appreciation for the bride, the negotiation process differs from one cultural grouping to another. Based on the **Mòkpè** experience, the bride price signifies a settlement in terms of livestock and a well-negotiated and agreed-upon amount of money to be paid to the family of the bride. The bride price in **Mòkpè** is quite demanding, and its dictates are governed by cultural norms. As such, the bride price negotiation process takes place after the traditional wedding at the request of the bridegroom. This is such that the groom takes time to prepare for the process, and he only requests for audience from the bride's family on this issue when he believes he is ready for it. Thus, the bride price can be negotiated months or even years after marriage. The setting for this negotiation is usually the groom's family compound and the entire process begins at dawn, with the key participants being the elderly men of both families to the exclusion of all women. The traditional regalia for this event is a clean shirt (preferably white), worn over a neatly tied loin (**èzràndzà**) with a sandal, slippers or low shoes. This outfit is crowned by a hat and a walking stick as the following Figure demonstrates.



Figure 1. Traditional regalia worn in a bride price negotiation ceremony in **Mòkpè**

To commence the bride price negotiation process, two pigs are presented to the bride's family as part of the bride price. Once that is done, the value of the pigs is estimated taking into cognizance their sizes. Given that the bride price is only negotiated at the request of the groom, no excuses are entertained in case of provisional shortcomings as far as the pigs or any items required are concerned. It is assumed that the groom's family only calls for the dialogue when they have the means to provide the items required. Thus, they retain the right to determine the sizes of the pigs provided. From a strictly cultural perspective, the sizes of the pigs have a communicative effect. They generally signal the degree of love, affection and value the groom place on his bride. As such, while a small pig (based on cultural norms) inalienably communicates less value for the bride, a larger pig implies that the bride is so invaluable to the groom that he can sacrifice anything for her. This also makes the bride's family confident that their daughter is in good hands and will be well cared for.

After presenting the pigs to the family of the bride, one of them is slaughtered and prepared for consumption by all those in attendance, while the other is taken home by the bride's family. The dish prepared on such an occasion is the traditional meal, **èkpákòkò nà ngòjà mòzràká**, commonly known as 'kwakoko and banga soup'. Once the meal is ready, it is presented to the family of the bride for inspection and confirmation that no part of the pork was left out. In case a part is declared missing, the groom's family is charged with a fine as punishment for presenting an incomplete dish. Such a fine is specified either in terms of cash or livestock, in which case the groom may be asked to purchase another pig entirely. On the contrary, if the inspection proves to be satisfactory, the dish is declared open for consumption. At this point, all participants in attendance dine and wine to their satisfaction before moving on to the second part, the determination of the amount to be paid as bride price, as detailed in the following subsections.

3.2 Negotiating the bride price amount

When all onlookers, including the bride and groom families have wined and dined to their satisfaction, the second part of the bride price negotiation process is initiated. This involves determining the amount of money to be paid as compensation for the bride. This process involves the use of strategic communication. Thus, negotiating parties are expected to display rich cultural knowledge on the conduct of such an activity, especially as the context it provides serves as an avenue for the transfer of cultural knowledge to the younger generations in attendance. Communication in this negotiation process widely deviates from everyday communicative practices. It involves nonverbal strategies through the use of the *èkǎ likò* 'plantain leaf' as well as verbal strategies through the use of songs. These communicative strategies are discussed in greater detail in the following subsections.

3.2.1 The use of the *èkǎ likò* 'plantain leaf' as a bride price negotiation tool

As Gachara (2012) notes, the discourse event is the most important part of the bride price negotiation process, and nonverbal communicative practices generally have an edge over verbal communicative practices. Communication in the process of bride price negotiation in **Mòkpè** is practically done with the aid of the *èkǎ likò* 'plantain leaf', which is culturally conceptualized as the bargaining tool upon which the negotiation is based. Following Sharifian's view, the *èkǎ likò* serves as a cultural metaphor, since its cultural conceptualization as a communicative tool deviates from its linguistic interpretation as a *leaf*. As a matter of fact, the crucial negotiation is done exclusively using the *èkǎ likò*, which serves as a bargaining chip and is used to relate its message to the families involved. In the negotiation process, a member from the bride's family is chosen to serve as a mediator to avoid any misconception. During the negotiation process, the *èkǎ likò* is torn into strands, and each strand is given a financial value. Traditionally, the fixed value of a strand is 100,000 FCFA, and the total number of strands made available varies from one family to another, sometimes based on the financial status of the families involved. Based on cultural norms, the plantain leaf is prepared by elderly men of the bride's family. As Chelangat (2018 p. 18) notes, "it is all about the groom's family expressing the desire to buy and the bride's family expressing the intention to sell." Figure 2 shows the plantain leaf as a crucial communicative tool used in a typical bride price negotiation session.



Figure 2. *èkǎ likò* 'plantain leaf' as a tool for bride price negotiation

Once the *èkǎ likò* is ready, a mediator or messenger is chosen from the bride's family. The role of the mediator is to carry the *èkǎ likò* to and from the groom's family while also interpreting the message it conveys to avoid any ambiguity in the course of the negotiation process. Given that the value of a strand is 100,000 CFA, the strands in Figure 2 amount to 600,000 FCFA as the bride price amount requested by the bride's family. If the stated amount is too much for the groom's family, they communicate this by bending some of the strands either fully or halfway, depending

on the amount they are willing to pay. A strand that is bent halfway signifies a willingness to pay half the price value of that strand, i.e. 50,000 FCFA. On the other hand, a fully bent strand indicates a total unwillingness to pay the value of the strand. So, in a typical negotiation process, after the **èkǎ likò** shown above is presented to the groom's family, they can make a proposal of, say, two strands, indicating that they are willing to pay 200,000 FCFA as bride price instead of the proposed 600,000 FCFA. This is done by bending four strands completely before sending the messenger back to the bride's family. This is shown in the following Figure.



Figure 3. Indicating four fully bent plantain leaves

If the bride's family receives the **èkǎ likò** and perceives the proposed amount to be insufficient, they will straighten a few of the bent strands to indicate the amount they are now willing to accept. In this case, they might straighten three of the bent strands, resulting in five straight strands (Figure 4), which are then sent back to the groom's family.



Figure 4. Proposal of five straight strands of the plantain leaf

As the Figure above indicates, the bride's family insists that the groom's family pay 500,000 FCFA as bride price instead of their proposed 200,000 FCFA. If the groom's family receives this and also thinks the amount demanded is too much, they will bend some of the strands and send them back to the bride's family. As this to-and-fro movement persists, tensions tend to rise amongst negotiators. As a result, arguments may arise amongst negotiators and on the part of the bride's family; they may go as far as accusing the groom of being unwilling or unable to conclude the

bride price, while the groom's family may accuse the bride's family of being too avaricious. At this point, participants can use songs as a way of mitigating or relieving tensions. Such songs carry powerful messages which help to remind participants that they are happily gathered to unite families and not to set them apart. These songs help to encourage participants to look beyond their present financial circumstances and not let money stop them from achieving their goal. Once tensions have been neutralized, the groom's family can again make a proposal. They may, for instance, propose four and a half strands as in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Proposal of four and a half strands

The four and a half strands indicate that the groom's family is willing to pay 450,000 FCFA to the bride's family as bride price. After considering the persuasive messages and pleas from the groom's family and also considering that the bride price marks the beginning of a long-lasting relationship between the two families involved, the bride's family may choose to accept this proposal from the groom's family. With the intense nature of this interactive process, the proposal of the groom's family is only final if the bride's family agrees. Once an agreement is reached, the *èkǎ likò* is sent back to the groom's family without any change and at this point, a general announcement is made in order to communicate the amount of money agreed upon as bride price to the audience.

This negotiation process is easy and straightforward in cases of monocultural marriages, since both families are presumably familiar with the cultural practices involved. However, in cases of mixed marriages, where the bride is a Bakwerian (a native of *Mòkpè*) and the groom is from a different cultural background, the process becomes complicated as misunderstandings may easily arise due to cross-cultural differences. In such situations, the role of a mediator, as stated above, is invaluable in the negotiation process, since cultural conceptualizations provide the basis for constructing, interpreting and negotiating intercultural messages (Sharifian, 2017). This assertion is supported by Wolf and Polzenhagen (2009, p. 6) who attest that "cross-cultural variation at the conceptual level calls for a strong meaning-oriented and interpretive approach to the study of intercultural communication." The use of the plantain leaf (*èkǎ likò*) as a nonverbal bargaining tool reflects a high-context communicative culture that mirrors practices in Bali Nyonga (Cameroon), where symbolic items like livestock and palm wine are used to convey respect and intent during bride price negotiations (Njenu et al. 2025). Odeunmi (2007) reports a similar situation in Yoruba (Nigeria) where items such as kola nuts, yam tubers, and money are presented in a structured ritual that communicates familial respect and social bonding. The following section constitutes a detailed presentation and discussion of songs as a communicative strategy in the bride price negotiation process.

3.2.2 Songs as a communicative strategy during bride price negotiation

As noted in earlier sections, songs constitute an integral part of the bride price negotiation process in **Mòkpè**. Although they are not the main bargaining tool used in the negotiation process, they complement the key negotiation strategy outlined above by making the process more entertaining, since they help to neutralize tension amongst negotiators. In so doing, songs sung during bride price negotiation are used to request for assistance, express love and happiness, and communicate a host of other semantic implicatures that further enhance the negotiation process. This is echoed in Akan (Ghanaian) traditions, where songs and drumming are used during marriage rites to express joy, resolve tension, and honor ancestors (Yankah 1995). Nwoye (2006) also reported a similar situation in the Igbo culture of Nigeria where songs during bride price ceremonies often reflect communal values and reinforce the seriousness of the marital union. While some of the songs in **Mòkpè** are initiated by the bride's family, others are introduced by the groom's family and they are all motivated by the need to communicate specific messages. Once a song is introduced by the members of one family, the members of the other family join in the singing, and they both dance as the singing escalates as a sign of agreement. Once the singing is done, they hug each other before returning to their respective seats. Since the bride price negotiation process is only attended by men, they constitute the sole audience. In the following subsections, traditional bride price negotiation songs are discussed, following the array of messages they communicate.

3.2.2.1 Request for assistance

One of the most prominent functions of songs in **Mòkpè** is their ability to signal a cry for help in the bride price negotiation process. When negotiators face difficulties reaching a compromise regarding the amount to be paid as **èḃèjọ́**, members of the groom's family sing songs as a way of soliciting assistance from any member of their family or for consideration from the bride's family. This is done joyfully and entertainingly without any shame or guilt, and the singing is accompanied by dancing. This singing and dancing helps soften the minds of the bride's family so they can consider the offer made by the groom's family. The following songs shed more light on this.

Table 1: Songs showing requests for assistance

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|----------------|----------|----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| a. | ě ě ě | li-wá | è | (ěè) | wé-túmbá | wé | má | lità |
| | chant | CL5 - marriage | chant | yes | CL14 -wood | CON | have | heavy |
| | ěè, | wé | àzr-ê | m-búẓrà | wé-túmbá | (x3) | | |
| | chant | CON | need-DET | CL4-back | CL14 -wood | | | |
| | 'The woods have become heavy; they are now in need of a strong back to carry them.' | | | | | | | |
| | (There is trouble and therefore the need for assistance). | | | | | | | |
| b. | ě ě ě | li-wá | è | (ěè) | mámé | dz-úndèjá | ŋ-géngè | mámé |
| | chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | why | 1PL-fall | CL4-chest | why |
| | dz-úndèjá | ŋ-géngè | èkpà | à | wéli | è | mámé | dz-úndèjá |
| | 1PL-fall | CL4-chest | Ekwa | CON | available | chant | why | 1PL-fall |
| | ŋgéngè | | | | | | | |
| | chest | | | | | | | |
| | 'Why are we worried when Ekwa is around?' | | | | | | | |

While the song in 1a is a general solicitation for assistance, 1b draws specific attention to one of the members of the groom's family who is perceived to be wealthy enough to carter for the financial demands of the bride's family. As seen in 1a, the singer uses the term **wétúmbá** 'woods' as seen in the expression **wétúmbá wé má lità** 'the woods are heavy' as a cultural metaphor to express the toughness of the bargaining situation. Based on its cultural conceptualization, the speaker is saying that there is trouble. This conception is complemented by the second

conceptual metaphor **mbúzrà** as seen in the expression **wéjàzrê mbúzrà** ‘they are looking for a (strong) back’. This metaphor is culturally conceived as a cry for help, a request for assistance from anyone who has the ability to cater for the demands of the bride’s family. This request also extends to the family of the bride as a way of asking them to consider the offer made by the groom’s family if possible. As regards the song in 1b, members of the groom’s family specifically sing it as a way of saying their worries are over since they have an able family member (in this case, Ekwa), who is wealthy enough to handle the financial demands of the bride’s family. Such a song serves as a show of confidence that the groom’s family can handle all the demands of the bride’s family, and it shows the determination of the groom’s family to obtain their bride. Apart from the need to solicit assistance, songs are also used as a means of expressing love and happiness, as the following section demonstrates.

3.2.2.2 Expression of love and happiness

Negotiators use songs to express love and happiness for each other. As Masele and Lakshmanan (2021) explain, marriage in Africa generally goes beyond the desire for companionship, as it also helps to build strong social relationships. In this regard, once the union of two families is sealed by an amicable understanding on the bride price sum, the two families involved use songs to express their happiness and love for each other, as in the following songs.

Table 2: Expressing love and happiness

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|-----------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------|-----------|
| a. | ě ě ě | li-wá | è | (ěè) | mò-jèngì | nà | mò-jèngì | nà | wó |
| | chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | CL3-happiness | CONJ | CL3-happiness | till | it |
| | jélé | n-dzù má | nà | wángà | è | (x3) | | | |
| | dawn | CL9-fight | 1SG | run | chant | | | | |
| | ‘Happiness till dawn, in case of a fight, I’ll run away.’ | | | | | | | | |
| b. | ěě | li-wá | è | (ěè) | n-ò | lìngà nà | é ě è | n-ò | |
| | chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | 1SG-2SG | love | chant | 1SG -2SG | |
| | lìngà nà | é ě è | nóm-í | twá | mé-ndèngà | n-ò | túwà | | |
| | love | chant | as-1PL | burst | CL4-discussion | 1SG-2SG | mention | | |
| | lí-nà | è | ájó | ájó | n-ò | túwà | lí-nà | è | |
| | CL5-name | chant | yes | yes | 1PL-1SG | mention | CL5-name | chant | |
| | ájó | ájó | n-ò | túwà | lí-nà | è | (x2) | | |
| | yes | yes | 1SG -2SG | mention | CL5-name | chant | | | |
| | ‘I will love you and as such each time we discuss I will call your name.’ | | | | | | | | |

The example in 2a signals the joy of sealing an agreement in the bride price negotiation process. Through this song, negotiators promise to celebrate happily till dawn while avoiding any problems in the process. Thus, while they wine and dine together, the participants are aware of the negative ramifications of excessive drinking. Thus, they sing this song in joy as a promise to each other that, as they celebrate, they will be on guard against any act that may result in any form of discomfort. In the same light, the song in (2b) is used by participants to express their desire to live together happily in love and harmony. Given that the settlement of a bride price signifies the unity of two families in love, negotiators use this song to affirm and promise each other that their unity will be peaceful. The song also serves as a promise both families make to each other to live in harmony and speak positively of each other, be it in their presence or absence.

3.2.2.3 Mutual agreement

As already established, the bride price in **Mòkpè** constitutes a settlement in terms of livestock and money. It is only considered settled if it is accepted by members of the bride and groom’s families. Looking at the financial aspect of the bride price, some people, depending on their social

values, tend to make excessive demands which contradict the original purpose of a bride price³. In a situation where a reasonable amount is demanded, and no feeling of extortion is evoked in the participants, the following song is initiated by the bride's family as a way of notifying everyone present that the groom's family has not been extorted.

Table 3: Song of agreement

| | | | | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| ě ě ě | li-wá | è | (ěè) | ᵐ-ǎj | óó | ᵐ-ǎj | óó, íjájá (x3) |
| chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | CL3-friend | oh | CL3-friend | oh yes |
| ì | zrá | wùnì | j-ómà | íjájá | í-má | | nóm-í |
| 1PL | NEG | fight | CL7-thing | yes | 1SG-say | | as-1PL |
| líjájá | nánù | íjájá | nómá | j-éní | nánù | íjájá | nóm-í |
| sit | so | yes | as | 2PL-see | so | yes | as-1PL |
| kúlé | nánù | íjájá | ì | zrá | wùnì | j-ómà | íjájá |
| finish | so | yes | 1PL | NEG | fight | CL7-thing | yes |

'My friends my friends, as we are seated like this, as we have seen, as we have concluded, we have not tussled, we have neither borne grudges nor any feeling of discord, but we have rather wholeheartedly accepted what you have to offer, so we are together.'

In **Mòkpè**, just like in many other cultures, the liberation of children into matrimonial relationships is considered the pride of every parent. While marriage typically brings harmony between families, the bride price negotiation ceremony, as is the case with **Mòkpè**, serves as a culturally significant event that officially unites two families. In this regard, efforts are made to ensure that the amount demanded as bride price is reasonable and affordable to the groom's family, which is why it is a negotiation between both families. Thus, when the bride price is proposed, negotiated and accepted by both families, the song is initiated by the bride's family as a way of informing the audience that a cordial understanding has been reached by both families. At this point, the groom's family joins in the singing, and they both dance as they continue the singing. The song particularly focuses on the fact that the agreement reached is not a result of a tussle or any form of pressure from any of the negotiators, but an amicable understanding between two families that have decided to unite as one. Basically, the **Mòkpè** man believes that the settlement of a bride price is a continuous process that characterizes the relationship between both families as they continue living together. Thus, the support that both families render to each other as they live on is considered a show of the commitment they made when the bride price was accepted. This mutuality and friendliness is demonstrated by the use of the expression **ᵐǎj** 'friend' as seen in (3). So, when the singer from the bride's family says **ᵐǎj óó** 'friend oh (x3)', the groom's family responds **íjájá (x3)** 'yes' as an acknowledgement of their friendship.

However, a lack of response from the groom's family signifies discontent regarding the amount of money agreed upon as bride price. In such circumstances, the groom's family tends to think the amount of money to be paid is too much, although they have agreed to it. It is worth mentioning that the **èḃèjò** is traditionally done when the traditional marriage itself has already taken place. So, the bride price negotiation ceremony is a cultural show that cannot end in disagreement. It rather serves as a "cultural jamboree" that marks the beginning of a new relationship between both families.

³ The people generally believe the bride price is just a token of appreciation to the bride's family. It is a cultural requirement and not a business opportunity as some people make it seem. As a result, exuberant demands from the bride's family are generally frowned at, although sometimes the groom's family tends to have no choice than to comply.

3.2.2.4 Achievement

Songs in the bride price negotiation process also express the joy of gaining an additional family member (who, in this case, is the bride or the groom) or a new family altogether. In this regard, the **Mòkpè** generally perceive marriage as a way of forging new relationships or building social networks. Judging from this perspective, the **Mòkpè** believe that the larger one's family is, the more respect and power they tend to command from the community. As such, successfully securing marriage for children (especially the girl child) is one of the greatest achievements of parents. So, in singing the following song in a bride price negotiation ceremony, the **Mòkpè** man basically expresses the joy of finding a suitable bride as well as a good family, and does not desire to let go no matter what. Given the context, the song is culturally conceptualized as a general willingness to ensure that the bride and groom are successfully united in marriage, regardless of the bride price demands.

Table 4: Songs of achievement

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|--|--------------|-----------|---------|---------|-----------|-----------|--------|-------|
| a. | ě ě ě | lì-wá | è | (ěè) | è | ŋ-gòkòwí | ná | má | lèmbè |
| | chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | DET | CL9-chain | 1SG | Have | catch |
| | zrà | wèmé | ŋ-gòkòwí | (x3) | | | | | |
| | NEG | leave | CL9-chain | | | | | | |
| | 'I have caught the handcuff and I will not leave it.' | | | | | | | | |
| b. | ě ě ě | lì-wá | è | (ěè) | é-zrúwé | kàmbì | é-zrúwé | kàmbì | j |
| | chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | wrestle | finish | wrestle | finish | 2PL |
| | àní | nà | l-àná | é-zrúwé | kàmbì, | óó | j-àní | nà | |
| | fight | CONJ | INF-fight | wrestle | finish | oh | 2PL-fight | CONJ | |
| | l-àná | | | | | | | | |
| | INF-fight | | | | | | | | |
| | 'Congratulations, you finally fought the tough battle till the end.' | | | | | | | | |

Generally, the song above, like any other, begins with a chant to stir up the audience. As seen in 4a, **ŋgòkòwí** 'handcuff' or 'chain' in the general sense of the word is used as a conceptual metaphor to signal a great achievement to the groom's family. Thus, considering the importance of the bride to the groom's family, the song serves as an acknowledgement of the invaluable addition to their family, which will not be abandoned for any reason. The song expresses the value the **Mòkpè** man places on the notion of marriage, a bias-free perspective that welcomes and accommodates a bride so long as she has been accepted into the family. This core cultural perspective can best be expressed through the use of songs. It is sad that in the contemporary **Mòkpè** community, most natives know little or nothing about this core cultural perspective, which is one of the best strategies of intergenerational transmission of the culture.

As in (4a), the song in (4b) expresses a similar message, except for the fact that it is initiated by the bride's family as a way of congratulating the groom's family for succeeding in performing all the rights and rituals expected of them as well as meeting all the demands made by the bride's family. This song is thus, sung as a mark of respect for the groom's family for their determination and relentless efforts to achieve their hearts' desire. From an ideological perspective, at this point, the bride's family considers the groom's family to be responsible and respectful. Thus, they believe they can entrust them with their daughter, knowing she is in good hands and will be well catered for.

3.2.2.5 Possession

Songs are also used as a means of expressing possession in the process of bride price negotiation. Such songs are used to communicate to all those present that the couple being celebrated is no longer available for courtship or any form of frivolity.

Table 5: Song of possession

| | | | | | | | | | |
|------------|--------------|------------|------|--------|--------|----------|----------|----|-------|
| ě ě ě | li-wá | è | (ěè) | é | tíngém | ó | wj-òlí | é | wémè |
| chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | it | stuck | PREP | CL8-wood | 2P | leave |
| wó-lò | wóngó | wó-lò | wó | tíngém | -ó | wj-òlí | (x3) | | |
| CL14-honey | DEM | CL14-honey | CON | stuck | PREP | CL8-wood | | | |

'Leave the honey that is stuck in the wood.' (Forget about the woman/man who is married, they are taken.)

In the song in (5), the word **wólò** 'honey' is used to allude to the bride and groom. Thus, the singer uses the song to warn those present that the bride and groom are, from that moment, recognized as one, not single individuals as before. This conception is an important virtue to the **Mòkpè** as they intuitively believe in establishing and maintaining boundaries in social relationships, as expressed by the following common proverb.

Table 6: Warning to stay of the properties of others

| | | | |
|------|------------|------|----------|
| já | mò-tò | jâ | ngání |
| PREP | CL1-person | PREP | stranger |

'What belongs to a person is his.'

This proverb is culturally conceived as a warning for people to avoid other people's spouses in their consideration of intimate relationships. In this light, the bride price negotiation process generally serves to communicate to the audience that the bride is officially taken by the groom, reason why an entire pig is slaughtered and consumed on that day. The pig itself is culturally conceived as a symbol of possession, as it basically communicates to the public that the bride is officially taken. The use of metaphors like "handcuff" (see 4a) and "honey stuck in wood" (see 5 above) to express achievement and possession in **Mòkpè** parallels the use of proverbs and metaphoric language in the Ewe cultures of Togo and Ghana to signify marital commitment and exclusivity (Dzameshie 2002). These expressions serve to publicly declare the couple's new status and discourage further courtship.

3.2.2.6 Ancestral recognition

In addition to signaling possession, bride price negotiation songs also signify the presence of ancestors. This is also the case in Wolof traditions, where libations and prayers to ancestors are integral to marriage ceremonies (Diop 1989) and in Mande of Mali and Guinea where ancestral spirits are invoked to ensure harmony and legitimacy in marital unions (Camara 2004). In **Mòkpè**, the bride price negotiation process cannot be completed without an official recognition of the ancestral presence through the pouring of libation. As a mark of respect for ancestors, the following song is used to inform the public that the ancestors are in one accord with the resolutions of the bride price negotiation process. In such circumstances, the **Mòkpè** man believes that once the bride and groom's families reach an agreement, the ancestors are also, by implication, automatically in recognition of the said outcomes.

Table 7: Song of ancestral recognition

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------|------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|-------------|---------|
| ěěě | li-wá | è | (ěè), | zrùwélélé | ééé | (x3) | wè-límò | wé |
| chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | congrats | chant | | CL8-spirits | CON |
| zrówî | má-álíwàà, | ś | zré-né | zrùwélélé | li-wà | zrùwélélé | ééé | (x3) |
| pour | CL6-water | 2SG | NEG-see | congrats | CL5-marriage | congrats | chant | |
| wè-límò | wé | zrówî | má-álíwàà, | tátà | (name) | óóó | ìzrò | d3- ò |
| CL8-spirits | CON | pour | CL6-water | father | (name) | oh | 1PL | 1PL-2SG |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|------------|-------------|---------------|------------|----------|--------------|-----------------|
| wélé | ééé | (x2) | ì- m-ó | dzè | ó | zrówè | má-líwàà |
| call | chant | | 1SG -say-2SG | come | 2SG | pour | CL6-water |
| 'Congratulations, the ancestors have poured the wine. Father we also call on you to come and pour the wine.' | | | | | | | |

The song in (7) illustrates that ancestors celebrate when a bride price negotiation process is concluded amicably. The expression **wèlímò wé zrówí máálíwàà** which lexically translates as 'the ancestors have poured water' in English, denotes a form of celebration in the spiritual realm. Following the Sharifian perspective of cultural linguistics, this cultural conceptualization about a person's ancestry has to do with the fact that the **Mòkpè** man does not just view a person as he appears before him (Sharifian 2017). Instead, the **Mòkpè** man believes that an individual originates from a bloodline (ancestry) which serves as a living invisible foundation of a person's identity (Mokake et al. 2024). This explains why a bride price negotiation does not involve the couple (the bride and groom) or any other relation apart from the families (parents and uncles) of the parties involved. While the living members of both families are given prior consideration in this process, they are used as a conduit to understand and appease the ancestors. Given this allegiance to one's ancestry, it is no surprise that songs are dedicated to ancestors in the bride price negotiation process. To the **Mòkpè** man, the ancestor is alive and well, though he exists in a different realm from which he watches over the living on earth. As such, the ancestor stands as an omnipresent witness who must be acknowledged as an important family member in the negotiation process.

3.2.2.7 Entertainment

Finally, songs are used in the process of bride price negotiation for entertainment purposes. This is also attested in Fulani where songs are used for humor and to teach social norms related to marital responsibilities (Dzameshie 2002). However, participants in **Mòkpè** bride price negotiation ceremonies use songs a little bit differently. In this case, the following two songs are sung to make jokes about life in order to keep the environment lively and entertaining.

Table 8: Songs of entertainment

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|--|--------------|-------------|---------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| a. | ě ě ě | lì-wá | è | (ěè), | lí-zró | lé | lòlò | lízró | lé | lòlò |
| | chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | CL5-eye | PREP | fish | eye | PREP | fish |
| | lí | zrà | límá | lí-zró | lé | lòlò | ěéé | lí | límá | (x3) |
| | it | NEG | close | CL5-eye | PREP | fish | oh | it | close | |
| | 'The eye of a fish doesn't close.' | | | | | | | | | |
| b. | ě ě ě | lì-wá | è | (ěè), | n-dzàng-à | zrí | wélí | mé-zré | mâ | |
| | chant | CL5-marriage | chant | yes | CL9-crayfish-CON | NEG | dead | CL3-day | CON | |
| | úngò | è | (x3) | | | | | | | |
| | look | chant | | | | | | | | |
| | 'The crayfish is not dead, the dawn is approaching.' | | | | | | | | | |

While some of such songs seem to lack significant messages, others reveal some aspects of the people's lifestyle and ideology. The song in (8a), for instance, states that the eye of a fish never closes. In so doing, it suggests that a married man should always be on guard in order to protect his wife from other men, cunning friends, and malice from society. At this point, the protection is necessitated by the fear of losing the wife to another man or any other unexpected circumstances. This projects the **Mòkpè** man as caring, loving, and generally protective.

The interesting thing about the plantain leaf and songs is that they constitute a fossilized metaphoric cultural conceptualization that defines the bride price negotiation process. Any bride price negotiation in **Mòkpè** without the use of the plantain leaf and songs as communicative tools is devoid of the core cultural aura of the traditional bride price negotiation process. Such an event

would only serve to deprive future generations of the situational experience of the intergenerational transmission of the rich cultural knowledge they embody. While such cultural awareness is undoubtedly important for every native of **Mòkpè**, the contemporary **Mòkpè** child suffers from a gradual adulteration of this rich cultural experience as a result of globalization and pressure from language and cultural contact. This is evident in the fact that nowadays, as natives increasingly engage in intercultural marriages, there has been a gradual importation of foreign cultural practices in this key traditional event. Therefore, given that this problem is not unique to the **Mòkpè** experience, carrying out such a study in other language communities of Cameroon and Africa as a whole will be a huge step forward in the preservation of some of the rich cultural practices of the people.

4. Discussions

Following the findings above, it is clear that this cultural ritual of bride price negotiation is far more than a transactional exchange—it is a deeply symbolic and communicative event rooted in ancestral reverence, metaphorical language, and social bonding. As the findings demonstrate, the negotiation process is characterized by a rich interplay of verbal and nonverbal communicative strategies. Central to this is the use of the **èkǎ likò** 'plantain leaf', which serves as a nonverbal bargaining tool and cultural metaphor. Its strands represent monetary value and are manipulated to express financial proposals and counterproposals, reflecting a high-context communicative culture where meaning is often implicit and culturally encoded. Verbal communication, on the other hand, is enriched by the strategic use of songs which serve multiple functions throughout the negotiation process. As shown in the results, songs are used to solicit assistance when financial impasses arise, express love and happiness upon reaching an agreement, affirm mutual understanding and lack of coercion, celebrate achievement and family expansion, declare possession and marital exclusivity, recognize ancestral presence, and provide entertainment. Each song is contextually deployed and contributes to the emotional and symbolic flow of the negotiation, reinforcing the values and ideologies of the **Mòkpè** community.

The study also highlights the importance of ancestral recognition in the bride price negotiation process, indicating the people's spiritual recognition of the influence of the supernatural over the physical. The pouring of libation and songs dedicated to ancestors affirm that marriage is not only a social contract but also a spiritual covenant. Ancestors are viewed as active participants and witnesses, and their approval is symbolically expressed through phrases like "the ancestors have poured water." This belief underscores the intergenerational continuity and sacredness of marital unions in the **Mòkpè** culture. To spice up bride price negotiation events therefore, songs are used to entertain and maintain a lively and joyful atmosphere during negotiations. Humorous songs and metaphors, such as "the eye of a fish doesn't close (see section 3.3.7)," offer moral lessons and reflect the **Mòkpè** worldview, portraying the married man as vigilant and protective. These cultural expressions are not merely decorative; they are fossilized metaphors that preserve ancestral wisdom and define the bride price negotiation process. These practices mirror similar traditions across West African cultures—such as the use of symbolic items in Yorùbá and Akan ceremonies, ancestral libations in Wolof and Mande rituals, and metaphorical songs in Igbo, Ewe, and Fulani communities—highlighting a shared emphasis on high-context communication, spiritual continuity, and moral instruction.

However, the gradual erosion of these traditions due to globalization and intercultural marriages is worrisome. Younger generations are increasingly disconnecting from these practices, risking the loss of indigenous knowledge systems. Considering that such endangerment is not limited to the **Mòkpè** culture, it is clear that there is need for cross-cultural documentation and preservation efforts across Cameroon and Africa as a whole. This will help to revitalize endangered traditions and promote intergenerational cultural literacies. Ultimately, bride price negotiation in **Mòkpè** is a social ritual that reinforces family ties, demonstrates respect and responsibility, and validates cultural identity. Such events are ideologically framed to promote unity, mutual respect, and long-term familial cooperation. The study thus contributes significantly to the fields of cultural linguistics, anthropological pragmatics, intercultural

communication, and African sociolinguistics, offering a compelling case for viewing marriage rituals as sites of cultural performance where language, metaphor, and tradition converge to shape social reality.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the communicative practices embedded in the bride price negotiation process among the **Mòkpè** people of Cameroon, situating the analysis within Sharifian's theory of Cultural Linguistics. Drawing on qualitative data, the research reveals a dynamic interplay of verbal and nonverbal strategies that reflect deeply rooted cultural conceptualizations. Central to the negotiation is the use of the **èkǎ likò** 'plantain leaf', a nonverbal tool whose strands symbolically represent monetary values and facilitate implicit financial dialogue. Complementing this are ritual songs that serve multifaceted communicative functions—soliciting assistance, expressing joy, affirming mutual agreement, honoring ancestors, and providing entertainment. These practices resonate with similar traditions across West African cultures, such as the symbolic use of kola nuts in **Yorùbá** ceremonies, ancestral libations in Wolof and Mande rituals, and metaphorical songs in Igbo and Ewe communities. The findings underscore that bride price negotiation is not merely transactional but a culturally rich performance of identity, spirituality, and social cohesion. Documenting these practices is therefore vital for preserving indigenous knowledge systems and fostering intergenerational cultural literacy in the face of globalization and shifting marital norms.

Abbreviations

1PL= first person plural, 1SG= first person singular, 2P= second person pronoun, 2PL= second person plural, 2SG= second person singular, CL= noun class, CON= concord, CONJ= conjunction, DEM= demonstrative, DET= determiner, INF= infinitive, NEG= negative, PL= plural, PREP= preposition

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