

The Bride Price

Plot Summary

Life and Death in Lagos

The Bride Price begins in Lagos, a port city in Nigeria, Africa. The opening scenes move quickly through the events that are about to drastically alter the lives of the Ochia family: Ezekiel, the father; Ma Blackie, the mother; Nna-nndo, the son; and Aku-nna, the daughter and protagonist of this story. The setting of the story, a somewhat industrialized urban center, will later contrast with the family's move back to the traditional, agrarian society of their ancestral village.

Unbeknownst to the mother and children of the Ochia family, Ezekiel, the father, is dying. It is his farewell to his children (the mother, at this time, is visiting the country village of Ibuza) that sets the rest of the events in motion. In their culture, a woman without a husband is unable, the reader is told, to take care of herself or her children. The translation of Aku-nna's brother's name reminds Aku-nna of this fact. His name means, "father is the shelter." In Nigerian culture, "the mother is only a woman boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head a non-existing family."

It is in the first three chapters of the novel that Emecheta covers the transition from Ezekiel's death and funeral to the eventual departure of his widow and children from the city. In the course of presenting this transition, Emecheta informs the reader of some of the major conflicts that she will explore in the remaining chapters of the book. She brings up the concept of the bride price, the woman's role in Nigerian society, the influence of the Ibo customs upon its members, and the clash between these customs and the effects of British colonization.

The name of the protagonist, Aku-nna, literally means "father's wealth." Her name refers to the bride price that her father will receive upon her marriage. "To him," the narrator says, "this was something to look forward to." Aku-nna, at the age of thirteen, is well aware of the meaning of her name as well as her role in her society. She would not let her father down. She would marry well to a man who could afford an expensive bride price. This is Aku-nna's role, as it is the role of every woman in her society. She would bring in wealth to her family in the form of a good bride price. Then she would bring wealth to her husband's family in the form of children, preferably all males.

Unfortunately Aku-nna's father, although he tells her that he needs only to visit the hospital for a short time, is overcome by an infirmity and dies. Aku-nna senses that something dreadful has happened to her father, but she neither is told directly by her relatives, who suddenly appear at her doorstep, nor does she ask direct questions. "Good children don't ask too many questions." Instead, she follows the dictates of her uncles and aunts as they come together to prepare for the funeral rites. She will eventually be told about the death of her father through the traditional art of storytelling.

It is through Ezekiel's funeral and burial that Emecheta first exposes some of the clashes

between traditional society and the influences of British colonization. She tells the reader that Ezekiel was buried as he had lived "in a conflict of two cultures." She then relates the burial practices and beliefs of the traditional culture, which have been infiltrated by the belief in heaven and hell as preached by the Anglican ministers. Fearful of offending any of the gods, the Ibo people follow the ceremonial dictates of both cultures.

Return to Ibuza

Ma Blackie, Ezekiel's widow and Aku-nna's mother, returns to Lagos to discover that her husband has died. She had left Lagos to visit her homeland in hopes of regaining her fertility and giving Ezekiel another child. She knows that since she is without a husband, she cannot remain in Lagos and prepares her children for their return to Ibuza.

Ibuza is an agrarian village of Ibo people who "have a reputation for not minding what job they take on, so long as it brings money — a race who are particularly businessmad." It is in Ibuza that Ezekiel's older brother, Okonkwo, lives. Okonkwo already has several wives, but he, by virtue of his brother's death, inherits and eventually marries Ma Blackie. Okonkwo does this while looking forward to the bride price that Aku-nna will bring him. He is an ambitious man who covets the title of Obi, which he can claim if he has sufficient money.

It is in Ibuza, as she is walking toward the village on arrival, that Aku-nna meets Chike Ofulue, her future school teacher as well as her future husband. Chike is also a descendent of slaves, and, as such, friendship between Aku-nna and Chike, according to tribal custom, is strictly forbidden. Through a conversation between one of Okonkwo's wives and one of his children, the narrator states the serious nature of such a friendship. If it is true, as some of the villagers begin to suspect, that Aku-nna and Chike are developing a relationship, it was the greatest insult that could befall a family which had never been tainted with the blood of a foreigner, to say nothing of that of the descendants of slaves.

As the reader already knows by this point in the story, the rumors concerning the relationship between Aku-nna and Chike are definitely true.

"Chike would have outgrown Aku-nna," the narrator states, "and maybe she would come to regard anything there might be between them as mere childish infatuation, if the adults had just left them alone." But the adults do not leave them alone. They tell their children what they can and cannot do without giving them much explanation. Aku-nna eventually learns to disregard their admonitions, relegating them to a substandard of "everyday trivia." Having lost her father to death and her mother to a complete immersion into the Ibo culture, Aku-nna feels isolated, alone. Chike is the only one she can turn to. Chike, for his part, is almost willing to forget about Aku-nna. However, he finds himself drawn to her, and when he witnesses the signs of her first menstruation, he is compelled to protect her. When a young woman experiences her first menstruation, it is the signal that she is available for marriage. Chike knows that young men will begin to gather in Aku-nna's house and their fathers will offer her father their bids on Aku-nna's bride price.

When Aku-nna fails to hide her second menstruation cycle from her cousins, it becomes publicly known that she is of marriageable age. Chike becomes aggressive in his protection of Aku-nna from other suitors and assaults Okoboshi, a boy from a neighboring village. Shortly afterward, Okoboshi's family steals into Aku-nna's village and kidnaps her. It is considered fair

play for a man to kidnap a woman, thus forcing her to become his wife.

Escape

Using her wits, Aku-nna insults Okoboshi when he tries to rape her on their so-called wedding night. She tells him that she has already been "disvirgined" by Chike. Aku-nna is lying, but Okoboshi is so infuriated that he fails to test her story. Then, with the help of her brother and Chike, Aku-nna escapes from Okoboshi's family.

The last two chapters of the book find Aku-nna and Chike living outside of the village. They have a house, which they furnish, and then both of them secure rewarding jobs. In a short time, they are expecting a baby. This should signal a happy ending, but there is something wrong. Despite several generous attempts by Chike's father, Aku-nna's stepfather refuses to accept a bride price. Aku-nna is well aware of the tribal curse on young wives whose fathers do not accept a bride price: the expectant mother will die in childbirth. In the end, Aku-nna cannot completely step away from the traditions of her people. One of her last statements is that only in death will she win her freedom.

Characters

Okoboshi Obidi

Okoboshi is the young man with a limp who fights with Chike (Aku-nna's future husband) over Aku-nna. Later, Okoboshi's family kidnaps Aku-nna, an accepted village custom, in an attempt to make her Okoboshi's wife. After kidnapping her, Okoboshi tries to "devirgin" Aku-nna. When Aku-nna first sees him after she has been kidnapped, she notices that his smile "had a kind of crookedness about it; instead of gracing the centre [sic] of his face, the smile was drawn lopsidedly towards one of his ears. It was the smile of an embittered young man. He hated her, that much she could see."

Okoboshi attempts to force Aku-nna into having sex with him. He is stronger than she is, but she outsmarts him. She lashes out with verbal assaults to his pride. This scene between Okoboshi and Aku-nna is a pivotal point in the story. It is the first time that Aku-nna takes a very strong position in defending herself, using everything in her power to claim the life she desires, as opposed to the life that her culture has attempted to force on her. Okoboshi, in this respect, represents everything that Aku-nna finds repugnant about her traditionally male-dominated culture.

Aku-Nna Odia

Aku-nna, the protagonist in this novel, is thirteen years old and living in the Nigerian city Lagos when the story opens. She is an intelligent young woman who knows, without being told directly, that she is "too insignificant" in the eyes of her parents. She is, after all, only a girl. She is also thin and at times very susceptible to disease. Her parents refer to her as an "ogbanje" — a living dead. Her mother often chides her by asking Aku-nna to make up her mind if she is going to live or die. It often appears that the only thing her parents look forward to, in respect to Aku-nna, is the bride price, the price her future husband will pay for her.

Aku-nna, right from the beginning of the story, has many questions about her family, her culture, and her role in society. She thinks about these questions, but she never voices them because in her culture it is considered worse than bad manners to ask them, especially coming from a girl. But it is these questions that drive Aku-nna throughout this story. She is on a quest for answers.

As if life in Lagos, which was still somewhat determined by traditional Ibo culture, is not troublesome enough, upon her father's death Aku-nna is forced to face even stricter interpretations of those traditions when she is taken back to the family's ancestral village, Ibuza. There Aku-nna is often criticized because of her modesty. She does not like bathing in the nude in public. She is also criticized because she is allowed to continue her schooling. But it is her friendship with Chike, a descendent of a slave, that is her final undoing.

It is with Chike that Aku-nna feels the most comfortable in asking those questions that have haunted her. She identifies with Chike's role, which is both part of the Ibo culture and yet strangely removed from it at the same time. Chike is her teacher in more ways than just at the missionary school that Aku-nna attends, and she falls in love with him. But to say that her relationship with Chike is her final undoing may be too simple. There are more complex factors involved.

By the time Aku-nna turns fifteen, she has grown accustomed to things in the Ibuza village. She learns about the European ways at school and goes home and faces the "unchanging traditions of [her] own people." Yet she is never able to make herself feel comfortable in either culture. Both Aku-nna and her brother are like "helpless fishes caught in a net: they could not go back into the sea, for they were trapped yet they were still alive because the fisherman was busy debating within himself whether it was worth killing them." In the end, it is Aku-nna's inability to free herself from the tangled net of her culture that, at least on a symbolic level, causes her death.

Ma Blackie Odi

Ma Blackie is a tall, dark-skinned woman. As is typical for an African woman, she is held responsible for not having given her husband, Ezekiel, more than two children, only one of which is a son. The novel begins with Ma Blackie, the mother of Aku-nna and Nna-nndo, leaving her family. She has gone back to her native village, Ibuza, to strengthen her fertility.

After her husband's death, Ma Blackie is adopted by her deceased husband's older brother and must take her children back to Ibuza. Ma Blackie is not the only wife of this brother, but she gratefully takes her place in his family, eventually becoming pregnant with the brother's child.

With life in Ibuza grounded in traditional customs, Ma Blackie does her best to comply with what is expected of her. She also tries to discipline her children so they, too, will be accepted and not become an embarrassment. If her children do not comply, it will appear to the villagers, Ma Blackie's relatives, that she has spoiled her children. When one of her children breaks any of the norms of village life, Ma Blackie is quick to publicly humiliate them. Ma Blackie often uses a harsh tone of voice with her daughter, as Aku-nna attempts to free herself from the subjugation imposed by the Ibuza tribe.

At first, Ma Blackie considers herself lucky that her children have turned out so well. She is a clever businesswoman, and with some of the money her husband has left her, she is able to save herself from the more physical chores required of other village women. She is also considered one of the elite of the village because she can afford to send her children to school.

In the end, Ma Blackie tries her best to save her daughter. Despite the fact that her new husband divorces her because of the shame Aku-nna has brought on his family, Ma Blackie attempts to counter the curse that this husband has placed on her daughter's life. She exits the story in a mix of cultural confusion, paying a witch doctor to counter her second husband's curse and then praying to the God of the Christians to help her through the delivery of her new child.

Ezekiel Odia

Aku-nna's father, Ezekiel Odia, is physically present only in the first few pages of the story. He has suffered from an ailing foot since serving the British troops in World War II. His death is the catalyst for all the dramatic changes in Aku-nna's life. Emecheta uses the father's funeral to introduce the culture clash between the Anglican rituals of the Christian belief system and the native rituals of the Ibo tribe.

Although Ezekiel dies, his presence is felt throughout the story as Aku-nna constantly wonders how her life would have been different had her father lived. Had he lived, she would have grown up in Lagos, a city whose culture is more modern than the traditions of her country relatives. But Ezekiel, however civilized, still maintained many traditional ways. He was caught in the middle of his African traditions and the ways of the Europeans. While he had his marriage blessed in the Anglican Church and served in a local Christian organization, he still sent his wife to the traditional gods of his people in order to increase her fertility, so she could give him another son. Ezekiel, after all, had paid a high bride price for his wife, and he believed he had a right to more sons. Had he lived, Aku-nna's life may have not differed as much as she imagines.

Aku-nna accepts the knowledge that her father favored sons. She knows that "she was too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing to this unfortunate marriage." Ezekiel pitied Aku-nna because she was small in build and light in color. But her name, which meant "father's wealth," he gave to her, "knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price." Ezekiel's final words to his daughter are: "Always remember that you are mine." This statement is later repeated by Chike, Aku-nna's future husband, symbolizing that an African woman always belongs to a man: her father at birth, her husband upon marriage.

Nna-Nndo Odia

Nna-nndo Odia is Aku-nna's younger brother. His presence in this story serves as a reference point rather than as a character. Emecheta uses Nna-nndo in several instances to illustrate the differences between the roles of male and female children in traditional Ibo society. Once their father has died, one of Aku-nna's aunts points out that it is a pity that Aku-nna's relatives will marry her off as soon as possible in order to pay for Nna-nndo's schooling. As the relatives are burying the father, they turn to Nna-nndo, the "man" whom his father

(Ezekiel) has left behind, asking Nna-nndo to decide if Ezekiel is to go to heaven as a Christian or go down into the earth to the Ibuza god. Nna-nndo, younger than Aku-nna, seals his father's afterlife fate. In contrast, Aku-nna's only role at the funeral is to cry longer than her brother, because women were expected to show more emotion.

Later in the novel, Nna-nndo plays out the brief role of intermediary when Aku-nna is kidnapped. Nna-nndo brings a note to her from Chike (Aku-nna's future husband). Nna-nndo is the only person in the Ibuza village that understands and respects his sister's relationship with Chike. His loyalty is rewarded when Aku-nna and Chike, married and living away from the village, bring Nna-nndo to their home so that he might be better nourished, both physically and intellectually, than he would have been in the Ibuza village.

Nna-nndo is at Aku-nna's bedside as she is dying. She tells him not to worry. Her death has bought both of them freedom. And then, in a somewhat ironic twist, Chike tells Aku-nna that the infant she bore is a girl, and according to Ibuza lore, girls are "love babies." Aku-nna's last words are:

'Now, with our little girl, everybody will know. They will all know how passionately we love each other. Our love will never die.'

In some ways, this seems to negate the preference for male children, which Nna-nndo represented, that was held over Aku-nna's head for most of her life.

Okonkwo Odia

Okonkwo is the elder brother of Ezekiel Odia. Unlike his younger brother, Okonkwo has lived his entire life in the village of Ibuza. Okonkwo represents the embodiment of male domination and tradition in Emecheta's *The Bride Price*. It is Okonkwo who adopts Ma Blackie and her children when Ezekiel dies. But before his brother's death, Okonkwo displays his authority even over Ezekiel.

"If Ezekiel blames you for going back without finishing your treatment,' Okonkwo tells Ma Blackie, 'tell him I said you were to do so. Remind him, in case he has forgotten, that I am the eldest and first son of our father. It is for me to say the word, and for Ezekiel to obey.'

In the remaining story, Okonkwo does not change. He is the lord of his house and family, and he does not bend. Tradition and power are Okonkwo's masters.

The reader is told in the beginning of the story that the people of Ibuza have a "group mind." They come together to "help each other when in trouble or in need. They are a people who think alike, whose ways are alike, so much so that it would not occur to any one of them to behave and act differently." Okonkwo is the epitome of this way of thinking. Coming from this state of mind, this long-held tradition, it is very difficult for Okonkwo to adjust to Aku-nna's rebellion.

But Okonkwo is not a simple man. He is clever and ambitious. He has his eyes on the red cap, the symbol of having achieved the high position of Obi, a place of honor among the Ibo people. In order to achieve that position, Okonkwo needs money, and Aku-nna's bride price would come at just the right moment. This money, though, would have to come from one of

the well-to-do men in the village that Okonkwo chooses. With the title of Obi in sight, Okonkwo does make some small concessions. He does not force Ma Blackie into wearing rags for one year, the sign of a mourning widow. He allows Aku-nna to go to school, although it is Ma Blackie who pays Aku-nna's tuition. However, he is determined not to have Aku-nna go to college. He is also determined never to allow her to marry a descendent of a slave. In the end, he could not stop it.

When Aku-nna runs away and marries Chike, Okonkwo not only will not accept a bride price from Chike's father, he also divorces Ma Blackie by exposing his bare backside to her in public, a village custom. Still enraged by the disgrace that Aku-nna has caused, he forgets about the title of Obi and decides to vent his anger directly on Aku-nna. Okonkwo makes a small doll in the exact image of Aku-nna in an attempt to punish her through a slow and painful death. It is Okonkwo's power, or the power of her people's traditional beliefs, that Aku-nna feels pulling her toward her death.

Chike Ofulue

Chike Ofulue is the young man whom Aku-nna eventually marries. Chike is also the descendent of a slave. His grandmother, Obi Ofulue, had been a princess in one African tribe, then was kidnapped by another tribe and turned into a slave. When missionaries appeared in the village, slavery became illegal, and most slaves were turned over to the missionaries and educated. Thus, the former slaves, as well as their descendents, became the educated people of the village, taking on the roles of doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Despite their education and professional roles, the local villagers never accepted these descendents of slaves into their culture. And so it was for Chike and his family. They were tolerated, but there were strict taboos on how far relationships with these outsiders could go.

"You must be careful," one of Aku-nna's cousins tells her, referring to Chike, "that man he's not one of us. No decent girl from a good Ibuza family is allowed to associate with him. My father would rather see his daughter dead than allow such a friendship." And so Aku-nna is introduced to Chike. Chike's family does not fare much better. Chike's father warns him to stay away from Aku-nna, as his father does not want "a son of mine to bring shame on his [Aku-nna's step-father's] family."

"It is said," states the narrator, "that stolen water is sweet." This comment sums up the feelings inside Chike who defies both his father and the customs of his adopted village as he refuses to be told what to do in matters of the heart. Chike is drawn to Aku-nna's innocence and intelligence. He also is drawn to her dependence. He nurtures her through her school lessons, helps her understand her first menstruation, and protects her, as much as he can, from the traditional customs that offend her.

When Aku-nna is kidnapped, Chike realizes how much he loves her. He becomes determined to rescue her and, finally, make her his wife. Chike is a gentle man who provides Aku-nna with every comfort she needs. He is a gentle lover, who understands his wife's fears. He is an intelligent and sensitive young man who tries, in vain, to appease the customs of his former village by urging his father to pay the bride price. But he is helpless in his attempts to save his young, pregnant wife's life.

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