

The Challenges of Christian Marriages in Contemporary Africa

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the need for dialogue between Christianity and African cultures in addressing contemporary marital problems. It highlights the historical problems that arose from the attempts to impose Christian marriage in Kenya void of African values by the early Christian missionaries. It also shows how the problems of marriage have persisted in African Christianity right from the missionary period and have degenerated with the wave of social change that is witnessed in the modern society. The paper summarizes pillars of both African and Christian marriages, thereby creating a ground for dialogue between the two faiths. On one side, African marriage is portrayed as a compulsory rite of passage, communal covenant, and a sacred institution with the value to create and recreate life. On the other, Christian marriage is presented as a monogamous union that binds together two individuals into a holy status of matrimony. The historical process is explained leading towards the pursuit of an African Christian marriage, and finally recommends some areas where the church could borrow from African cultural values to strengthen contemporary marriages.

Keywords: *African Christian marriage, husband, marriage, rites of passage, wife*

1. Introduction

Marriage problems in the African church have remained issues of discussion right from the time that European missionaries introduced Christianity in Africa. According to Baur (1994), implementing Christian marriage in Africa has posed two extreme contrasts. On the one hand,

marriage in the African context is widely communal and affects nearly every person whether it is conducted within the church or not. On the other, issues of marriage have remained unresolved hence contrasting the African and Christian thought on marriage. Bujo (2009) further notes that African and Christian marriages have at times seemed to reject each other especially, when missionaries declined to acknowledge polygamous African marriages. At first, many African converts did not embrace the Western missionaries' view on marriage because the missionaries sought to dissolve polygamous unions, yet some Christian churches teach that marriage is indissoluble. Fiedler (1996) observes that missionaries did not find any legality in using concepts such as marriage, husband, and wife concerning African customary marriages. For them, these concepts could only be defined in the light of Christian faith as interpreted by their Eurocentric theologies which ignored African customs and values (Fiedler, 1996).

The missionaries later on established that this view was flawed and unfair to African converts because, before the introduction of Christianity in Africa, African families were largely functional, stable, and sustainable in their cultural contexts. The future and stability of marriage in African Christianity must adopt certain African values in the light of the Christian faith (Fiedler 1996). This notion has, however, remained the pillar of an African Christian marriage. To understand this discourse, it is paramount to examine the general meaning of marriage, the African and Christian views on marriage, and thereby appreciate the positive interactions between Christianity and African cultures.

2. Marriage

The concept of marriage could be well understood depending on the religious, legal, and cultural framework of the scholar. There are, however, some tenets that are widely applicable in most human cultures. Marriage, for instance, has been perceived as a union between a man and a woman who voluntarily come together to live as husband and wife (Crane, 2006). This definition reveals the voluntary nature of the union and also points out the uniqueness of a relationship that brings a couple together to live as husband and wife. The terms 'husband' and 'wife' have not been used to define any other kind of human relationship other than marriage. This notion, however, limits the representation of marriage to a religious conservative theology which contradicts other liberal viewpoints about marriage. For instance, the term 'wife' exemplifies that Crane's definition does not incorporate polygamy which is a popular form of marriage in Africa.

Wardle (2004) suggests that heterosexual monogamous unions should be accepted as part, but not the only form, of marriage. Although the view is tolerant to both old and new world orders, the inclusion of same-sex marriages is contrary to both African and Christian beliefs (Bongmba, 2016). To maintain the orthodoxy of the Christian faith and remain true to the African spirit, same-sex unions should be treated as imperfect and irregular human inventions of the divinely given gift of marriage.

Marriage is a universal institution that is permitted in all human cultures. It is not only divinely instituted by the creator irrespective of one's religion, but is also developed by human beings for the satisfaction of some irreplaceable needs (Ronilick, 2004; Genesis 2:24). This view holds the sacred source of marriage but rejects the existence of a religious marriage. The terms 'Christian marriage' or 'Islamic marriage' or 'Hindu marriage' according to Ronilick (2004) are nonexistent. It is the individuals who belong to the faiths, but not their marriages. Marriage is a universal phenomenon but does not have a universal format. Ronilick (2004) further suggests

that a working definition of marriage could only be drawn from one's cultural and legal frameworks. But, the Kenya Marriage Act (2014) defines marriage as a voluntary union of a man and a woman, polygamous or monogamous, and is registered according to the law.

3. Traditional African Views on Marriage

Ronilick (2004) rejected the notion of a religious marriage, but the role of religion in permeating, instituting, and governing marriage is indisputable. As a divine tradition given to mankind by God, marriage is celebrated and lived within a definite religious framework. An African traditional marriage for example refers to a marriage that is celebrated and lived according to African customs and values as practiced by a particular ethnic community. The plurality of African religions cannot be exhausted in this discussion, although it is acknowledged that African communities have some shared values that govern marriage relationships.

Unlike the Christian marriage that brings together a husband and wife, traditional African marriage was viewed as a covenant between two communities (Mbiti, 1991). The individuals only acted on behalf of their communities. Among the Luo of Kenya, for example, a woman was acknowledged by members of the community to which she was married and was referred to as 'our wife' as opposed to 'my wife'. This did not, however, mean that she had multiple sexual relationships, but rather, the whole clan had the responsibility to take care of her (Pritchard, 1950). The husband only performed this task on behalf of the community. This communal network went beyond the living and incorporated the living dead and the ancestors. Any aspect of spousal mishandling or mistreatment in a marriage could invoke a curse, misfortune, or any other form of punishment from the spirit world. Conversely, careful management of marriage relationships could warrant blessings from the spirits. Issues of choice of a marriage partner and payment of bridewealth were negotiated with the help of the community (Ibid.).

Africans have also viewed marriage as a rite of passage that marks a person's transition from one phase of life to another (Mugambi, 2004; Nwadiokwu et al., 2016). The birth of a baby marked the transition from the unborn to the living; initiation graduated one from childhood to adulthood; marriage promoted one from a mere adult to an elder; while in death one transitioned from the living to the living dead. Each stage in life was viewed with seniority and marked with higher responsibility (Nwadiokwu et al., 2016). This is the reason why no one was expected to evade marriage. It was a compulsory duty that every individual aimed to fulfill in life. To remain unmarried would portray stagnation and immaturity no matter how old one was.

Africans believe that marriage is a very sacred institution that holds the gift of procreation (Magesa, 1997). Childbearing was not just a duty in marriage but qualified and validated the union. An African marriage was never complete until a child is sired by the couple. The sacredness of marriage is exhibited through life's vital force which transmits and maintains the rhythm of life. The African eschatological beliefs never pointed to some sort of existence beyond this present world. Instead, it was believed that through marriage and procreation, the departed spirits are reincarnated and reborn. Marriage was seen as a strategy to conquer death and maintain the rhythmic cycle of life in this present world. Africans achieved rebirth, reincarnation, and eternity through marriage.

Members of the community, especially children, were taught about the importance of marriage which acted as the hut's center pillar. If a home fails, it all begins from marriage. If it

succeeds, it is accredited to a good marriage. As a result, marital lessons were taken seriously. Young girls were closely attached to their grandmothers who trained them to be successful future wives. Likewise, young men were trained by their grandfathers on how to be responsible future husbands. During initiation, more lessons were offered before the initiates were officially commissioned to marry or get married (Mbiti, 1991).

Like in any other human institution, Africans acknowledged that marriage is vulnerable to some sort of challenges and weaknesses. To curb these, some taboos regulated the process and practice of marriage. Mbiti (1973) and Kenyatta (2000) acknowledged that the duties and responsibilities of each member were well stipulated and offenders were punished to discourage others from engaging in similar offenses.

4. Christian Views on Marriage

Kyomo (2004) defines a Christian marriage as a divine gift given to mankind by the creator. It was given to man before the Fall and is part of God's perfect plan for humanity; hence it should be valued and respected to show man's faithfulness to God (Genesis. 2:18-25). This observation asserts the divine source of marriage. The author does not, however, distinguish between a Christian marriage from other forms of marriage. Most religions agree that marriage is sanctioned by God. Christianity holds that monogamy is God's ideal for marriage. Polygamy features several times in the scripture especially in the Old Testament. It is however considered as a human invention in his fallen status hence does not merit to be a model for Christian marriage (Kunhiyop, 2008). A Christian marriage is expected to be a monogamous union between Christian converts and is governed by biblical teachings and church traditions (Kisembo, 2010). Even though various churches have diverse views on the qualities of Christian marriage, Kisembo (2010) observes that certain thresholds are agreed on by most Christian churches. In the creation story, marriage is seen as God's creative act of responding to God's will and man's need. Man's unique psychosocial need could not be responded to in any other way except through marriage. The scripture states: The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18). The man had a need that he could not address by himself. All other creatures had companions, but none of them could make a suitable companion for man. It is through marriage that a man gets a suitable helper and mate. In marriage, the will of God is seen in the way God gives man the responsibility to procreate and take care of other creatures. The scripture states:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:28).

God created the universe and continued to sustain his creation. But, through marriage, man is graciously invited to be a partner with God in this divine assignment. Raymon (1992) argues that Christian marriage is both a reunion and a union. Marriage is a union in the sense that it brings together two separate individuals that had never been together before. It unites two different bodies, with different spirits, minds, and souls. On the other hand, it is a reunion since the duo is believed to have been predestined from creation to be partners. In the second creation

account, God made a woman out of a man's rib, an indication that the two were one in God's mind from creation (Genesis 2:21-25).

The indissolubility of marriage, the rule of love and submission, and authority of the husband are core values of Christian marriage. Jesus taught about the permanency of marriage when he stated that: "what God has joined together, let no man separate" (Mark 10:9). Divorce is therefore never intended in a Christian marriage. The scripture only states two exceptions when divorce could be granted. These refer to cases of adultery (Matthew 19:9) or conflict of faith (1 Corinthians 7:15). St. Paul taught that husbands should love their wives and wives should likewise submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22). While a husband remains the head of the marital home, a wife has to submit to his authority and remain loyal to this divine order (Ephesians 5:23).

A Christian marriage can be viewed metaphorically, as it portrays the relationship between God and his people. Jeremiah 2:2 reveals how Israel loved and followed God passionately as a bride would do to her husband. The scripture also states how the situation had changed and Israel turned unfaithful (Jeremiah 3: 6-8). In the fallen state, God compares them to an adulterous woman who commits adultery in view of her husband. The unfailing love of God and revelation on how he graciously welcomes them if they repented and returned to him is explained in Hosea 2:23. In the New Testament, the marriage metaphor symbolizes the relationship between Christ and the Church. In Revelation 19:7, the Church is referred to as the bride who is constantly preparing to be eternally joined to the groom (Christ) in a wedding ceremony in the afterlife.

In teaching about the concept of Holy Marriage which is alternatively referred to as Holy Matrimony, the Roman Catholic Church maintains that the union must be between a man and one woman who have been baptized according to the Roman Catholic Church tradition, and solemnized in a matrimonial union (Catechism of Roman Catholic Church, 1994). This belief has provoked debates regarding what makes a Christian marriage holy. The approach of the Roman Catholic Church, which limits Holy Matrimony to Catholicism alone, denies the fact that Christian marriage can be celebrated and lived by other non-Catholic Christians. Their denial to join Catholics and non-Catholics in marriage also denies the very existence of the Church as the body of Christ whose frontiers exceed Catholicism. Shorter and Kisembo (1977) argue that a Holy Matrimony must be celebrated in a holy event (church wedding), presided by a Holy Father (priest) and in a holy place (church building), an event and sacrament that was established in 1164 (Catechism of Roman Catholic Church, 1994). This argument cannot hold in the contemporary society where many marriages in the church have not gone through church weddings, a practise which was first adopted in the Middle Ages. Whether these are holy people in unholy marriages is a question that has remained unaddressed. Many contemporary Catholics, furthermore, go through church weddings but prefer to host a separate and elaborate ceremony in an open garden rather than a church building. This also poses a question on whether these are holy marriages celebrated in unholy places.

Oduyoye and Kanyoro (2005) disagreed with Shorter and Kisembo (1977) on equating holy matrimony to a church wedding. The authors warned against the danger of limiting a holy marriage to mere participation in a church wedding. Emphasis should be laid on the couple's commitment to the Christian faith, which should motivate them to go through the Christian

wedding. A holy marriage could thus be defined as monogamous marriage, between two Christians, instituted through a Christian wedding, after which the hosts vow to live by Christian teachings regarding marriage and all other spheres of life.

5. The Quest for an African Christian Marriage

The discussion on African Christian marriage is not only theological but also anthropological, historical, and contemporary (Kisembo et.al., 1998). Its theological essence is rooted in the fact that nothing can be Christian unless it anchors on the teachings of the Bible and the practice of the church tradition (Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 2005). Its anthropological nature is entrenched in the fact that marriage in Africa is communal and cultural (Mbiti, 1973). Unlike western societies that have a dichotomy between sacred and profane, the African worldview is essentially sacred. Hence, marriage cannot be understood in isolation, but in consideration of other socio-cultural forces within the society (Ibid.).

Since the advent of missionary Christianity in Africa, myriad studies have been conducted, policies have been formulated and legislations enacted which have together improved the status of Christian marriage in Africa. A genuine study on the subject must thus not be void of the historical path. The discussion is also contemporary in the sense that it seeks to be sensitive to postmodern social forces that are peculiar to the 21st century and expose numerous challenges which include; new economic structures, urbanization, new forms of religiosity, new technology, globalization, and other social factors which together affect marriage (Ndem, 2018). A functional African Christian marriage must thus remain sensitive to such contemporary issues.

As the great success in the Christianization of Africa is celebrated, the effects of Christianity on African families are regrettable. Kyomo and Selvana (2004) have accused Christianity of placing many African families into crisis arguing that missionary Christianity, colonialism, urbanization, westernization, and globalization have destabilized African family values almost to a total collapse. The reports of Magesa (2004) in his pastoral experience among the Bakwaya of Tanzania, affirms that Christianity has contributed widely to the current marital crisis in Africa. Christianity teaches that marriage is valuable but only optional. Roman Catholic tradition further exhorts the practice of celibacy for priests and nuns. This resonates with the belief upheld by some of the first followers of Jesus Christ that the kingdom of God was at hand and that this kingdom would usher in the new age where there would be no marriage, and all would be like angels (Mark 12:25; Matthew 22:30). As a result, many young Africans end up evading marriage without any valid reason, which in an African traditional context, was a compulsory duty and rite of passage.

The interaction between Christianity and African marriage can be traced back to the time that European missionaries introduced Christianity in Africa. At the advent of the 19th-century missionary, Christianity posed a crisis as missionaries attempted to drastically replace African family values and structures with western-oriented values. They even attempted to dissolve polygamous unions as a prelude to conversion and baptism. Polygamy was negated by Christianity as a means of binding African family institutions. Missionaries later realized that such an approach was unfair, unrealistic, and could only amount to failure. Welch posits that the future and stability of African marriage cannot be void of African values, especially principles that are compatible with the Christian faith (Welch, 1933).

Although the crisis was seen as real and needing an intervention, very few practical steps were taken to address the problem at early stages. Up to the 1970s, the efforts to acculturate African marriage into Christianity did not go beyond discussions in theological papers (Bujo, 2009). This was attributed to several factors. First, the leadership of the church was still dominated by Europeans who had little understanding or regard for the African cultures. Second, some missionaries believed that the conflict between African marriage and Christianity would decimate naturally as Christianity takes root in Africa (Kaplan, 1995). Third, church leaders were still caught up in the theological and philosophical dilemma between what was ideal and what was real. The ideal was to exhort the western interpretation of Christian marriage, but the reality was to re-theologize the Bible and rediscover a kind of Christian marriage that was compatible with the Africans (Ibid.).

In every crisis, there are more dilemmas or an opportunity to articulate and oversee groundbreaking work. The “Churches’ Research on Marriage in Africa” project was commissioned by the Association of Episcopal Conference of Eastern Africa in 1967 to investigate the status of Christian marriage in Africa and make recommendations on various issues. The ten years’ research was conducted between 1967 and 1977 which involved sixteen Christian churches across eight African nations. The churches included five Anglican provinces, seven Catholic Episcopal Conferences, Church of God, United Church of Zambia, Lutheran Church, Dutch Reformed Church, Mennonite Church, Methodist Church, Greek Orthodox Church, just to mention a few. The countries involved included Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and South Africa. In the study, at least 2500 people were interviewed, twelve research reports were written, 31 theological position papers were presented and finally, the findings were documented in a book “African Christian Marriage” (Kisembo et.al., 1998).

“Churches’ Research on Marriage in Africa” findings revealed that the church was steadily increasing in membership, but the number of Christian weddings remained low especially in rural areas. This was because the church had relentlessly, erroneously, and holistically remained hostile towards African customary marriage. The contrast between a church wedding and an African customary wedding was regrettable. To bridge the gap, the study recommended that the church must establish a new social order that would incorporate the African worldview in strengthening Christian marriages in Africa. Christian marriage in Africa should be between Christianity and African culture (Kisembo et.al., 1998).

6. Conclusion

Western missionaries desired to witness a moment when Christianity would become the most popular faith in Africa. They hoped that realizing this would fix the marriage problems in the African church (Welch, 1933). It is however notable that Christianity has become truly the African popular religion, but marriage problems have escalated. The sign of the cross in form of a crucifix is found in every African town and village. There are numerous posters displayed in the town streets advertising Christian events. Many portraits with Christian inscriptions hang on inner house walls, while rosaries and crucifixes adorn peoples’ necks and some are part of windscreen car hangings. But, on the contrary, marriage, which is the central pillar of the African hut, is drooping lower and is on the verge of collapse. For instance, issues such as domestic

violence, divorce, defilement of offspring and murder of spouses, which were rare in traditional African context are on the increase in the modern society.

Despite the church's ineffectiveness in addressing marital problems, contemporary socioeconomic forces such as urbanization, the money economy, new industrial developments, the influence of mass media, and globalization have also exposed marriage to multiple challenges. Urbanization and industrialization demand that many young couples are uprooted from their rural homes where they could have access to moral guidance and support from their elderly parents. Dynamics of money economy demand that both husbands and wives seek money-oriented jobs and business enterprises away from their homes hence delegating home care chores to hired maids. The thirst for quickly earned riches has exacerbated many parents to demand high bridewealth from young men who intend to marry their daughters hence, altering the traditional purpose of marriage into a commercial deal. The media has also availed uncontrolled information about marriage and sexuality, some of which are distorted.

A society, according to Spengler (1997), is likely to realize changes in morality if it increasingly becomes industrialized and technologically advanced. If this happens, the revisiting of traditional moral values becomes inevitable. This calls for the need to rediscover African traditional marriage values to strengthen contemporary marriages. The adoption of African values does not mean abandoning the Christian faith. But, it calls for minimization of dichotomies between the two faiths and letting the two faiths learn from each other. More emphasis should be laid on shared beliefs, but with an enhanced emphasis on their African interpretation to suit the African context. A critical survey of Christian and African traditional views reveals significant compatibility concerning marriage and family values. There exist common beliefs such as the divine source of marriage, the essence of community, sacredness of marriage, and value of wedding rites.

One of the areas where the church can learn from African traditional religion is on the spirit of communalism because, the strength of traditional African marriages was not on the individual couples, but on the community to which they belonged (Kisembo et.al., 1998). The church however has not successfully built a strong communal bond among its members. In contemporary society, many believers belong to Christian fellowships, where in most cases, their members live in solitude. Most African Christians have not felt at home in the Christian church because they have not found trusted and credible adult role models in whom they can confide their marital challenges. There is a need for the church to build a strong community with marriage models that could be relied on and consulted on marital issues. This role was evident in the African kinship system and must be enriched by the church.

The principle of a wedding ceremony in Christianity is similar to that of African traditional religion. It adds a spiritual dimension to a marriage where God and ancestors are sought for guidance and blessings. The vows uttered in public are expected to guide the couple as they stay and grow together. The procedures, rituals, or symbols may however be different. In most contemporary wedding ceremonies, the hosts still desire to have both the African and Christian versions of the wedding but held on different occasions. A Christian wedding is celebrated in the church, dominated by western idioms, songs, and dances, strict liturgy, and exchange of vows. An African marriage version is however held in the afternoon, at a reception party often hosted outside the church. The climax of the reception is marked by cutting the cake,

generous feasting and drinking, vigorous singing and dancing to African tunes, and lots of advice and well wishes from parents, relatives, and friends. Many Africans find pleasure in attending the reception party as opposed to the church service. A merger of the two ceremonies could perhaps serve both the African and the Christian purpose. The adorning with African art garments and bangles instead of western rings could make an African Christian wedding more affordable, creative, unique, and beautiful (Mpongo, 1968).

The idea of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) has been widely acknowledged as an African interpretation of Christian fellowship (Healey, 2009) which allows an African convert to view the church not just as a whole body, but as a community that extends its existence into smaller clans, sub-clans, and families. This is essential in enhancing pastoral and administrative duties in mega congregations. The need to put families into small groups could be enhanced by assigning elderly exemplary couples to disciple and mentor younger couples. This will lessen the burden of the clergy who are overwhelmed by pastoral responsibilities in large congregations. This however calls for appropriate training, induction, and empowerment of Small Christian Communities' leaders.

If marriage was truly the pillar of an African family, then it must remain the pillar of the Christian church. The current shakeup of marriages within the African church indicates that the church has not effectively responded to the African marital problems. This is attributed to the missionary legacy that ignored the value that African culture could add to enrich Christian marriages. The situation has been worsened by the contemporary forces of social change. A constructive dialogue between Christianity and African culture is urgently called for to counter the problem.

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