

TENSIONS BETWEEN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE AND AFRICAN CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper explained what Christian marriage is as well as African marriage from a cultural context. It highlighted some strains encountered in African Christian marriages in contrast with Western notion of marriage from a qualitative standpoint using an analytic approach. It also posited some factors that have brought about the conflict in most African Christian understanding of marriage as: urbanization, modernization and their likes; especially when they play down on the myriads of good African cultural values. Conversely, polygamy was mentioned as one of the heated arguments among the early Christian missionaries who came to evangelize Africa. Their approach was not really engaging especially for the traditional Africans who saw it as a norm. The paper recommended a new social order that will harmonize the good values from both Christianity and African cultures for the sustainability of marriage in Africa among Christians.

Keywords: Marriage, Christian theology, African Culture, Evangelization, Missionaries.

Introduction

The spread of Christianity especially in Sub-Saharan Africa has generated a lot of controversies regarding marriage. It is basically the conflict between polygamy in Africa against the Western Christian idea of monogamy of marriage (Kim & Kim 2016, Falen 2008). According to Gyekye (1996), the changes brought about by the Christian mission in traditional African system of marriage affected the lives and cultures of most African communities receptive to the gospel message of Jesus Christ. However, the purpose of the mission was to impose the Christian values for the rearrangement of the existing social order of which marriage was inclusive.

Among the Ghanaians, there is a popular quote often recited when a man and a woman are getting married. It reads:

Marriage is a long journey! It goes beyond what is publicly observed at the ceremonies. There are other important actors in a marriage besides the couple. A good relationship with in-laws sustains marriage and make it a success. Woman, be 'opened' to your "new husband" and satisfy him with all his pleasure so that he does not go for external affairs. Also, take good care of the home as an ideal woman. If you get fortunes, bring them to your parents but if you get misfortunes, keep them to your husband. Man; take care of your wife and make her beautiful like other women. May God and our ancestors bless you with the fruit of her womb to make your marriage a success (Twene, 2019, pg. 1).

The quote signifies the nature of traditional African marriage and the belief people had. In traditional African setting, marriage is never just about the spouse and their individual gender roles alone; but a union of two large families living in unity.

Historically, the cultural impact of the Western Christianity on Africa and the rest of the world is conspicuous (Bediako 1980) such that almost every practice in Africa is made in reference to Western acceptance and approval. Mugambi (2002) observes that the missionary enterprise overlooked the fact that while Christianity is not a culture, it can only be expressed and communicated through cultural media and so any culture can be a medium for the expression and communication of Christianity and so dismissed their practices and regarded them as heathen and fetish. Consequently, one's conversion to Christianity was determined only through his/her abandoning of traditional African customs and an adoption of Western norms. This work seeks therefore to highlight some strains arising from excursus on marriage rites and ceremonies between western and African cultures with the hope of harmonizing a thought that will ensure and foster marital bond among Africans across every faith-divide; with love and family life as core values.

A Glance at African versus Christian Conception of Marriage

Ogoma (2014) notes that African conception of marriage occupies an important position in the affairs of Africans, especially in the past and it is only in marriage that legitimate family and child bearing is possible. To further elaborate on this fact, Ayisi (1997) writes:

The family is then the logical outcome of marriage. A family consists of a man, his wife, and child or children. By this definition, a childless marriage is not a family. An individual belongs to at least one family in his lifetime (pg. 15).

This therefore implies that child bearing is a necessary expectation of every marriage in the African context. Furthermore, Mbiti (1969) opines that most African people regard marriage as the focus of existence. In fact, he believes that it is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet unborn. Hence, it is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator.

Nonetheless, there are many different forms of marriage across the African continent, but the main principles of African marriage are similar. Unlike Western marriage, which is based on individualism and independence, African marriage is based on the principle of collectivity and interdependence (Siqwana-Ndulo, 1998) and procreation stands at the center of traditional African marriage since the union serves the purpose of preserving and extending the clan (Welch, 1933).

The general idea of Christian marriage is that it is a union between a man and a woman. Kirwen (1987) defines it as a personal matter between two people. As contained in scriptures, "a man must leave his father and mother and cling to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." (Gen. 2:24), Christian theology on marriage revolves around the idea of two persons of opposite sexes agreeing to be united before God as the witness to become husband and wife. According to the Christian belief also, marriage is a sacrament of a new covenant with Christ that gives grace to the couple(s) who receives it. This then implies that marriage is not an empty action, rather it is an action embodied with meanings. It is an action of Jesus Christ in his church (CCC. no.1603). More so, as a sacred union, marriage becomes a medium through which a wedded couple fully commit to each other in order to receive the grace of God (Nwaogaidu, 2020).

Conflict Areas between the Christian Theology of Marriage and African Culture

1) Absolute Christian Monogamy and African Polygamy

In most traditional African societies, polygamy is cultural. Many believe that a man's wealth depends on the number of wives and children he has. Okeke et al (2017) observe that the major

reason why men marry many wives and produce many offspring was basically to provide enough man power for farming. However, the idea of polygamy runs contrary to the Christian doctrine of monogamy, which believes in one man, one wife. Many Christians are in dilemma when they have marital problems such as childlessness or problem of gender mix in the children. If ever the man defies the church order and marries more than one wife, he is made a backslider. He is denied the Holy Communion and other church rights as evident today (Okeke et al, 2017)

2) Absolute Christian Indissolubility of Marriage and African Separation of Marriage

Like other cultures, African marriage was originally intended to be lifelong even though in principle dissoluble among a majority of African communities (Hastings, 1973). Hastings point out some reasons that could lead to the separation of a married couple in traditional African marriage. For him, these reasons are often connected to domestic violence, non-compatibility, disagreements between co-wives, or charges of witchcraft and adultery. In fact, in some cases, a husband could send his wife away on claims of laziness, witchcraft, adultery, or even infertility. Infertility particularly was often responded to through the taking of a second wife rather than divorce.

Albeit the Christian missionaries were committed to demanding a polygamist husband to abandon all wives except the first wife in order to attain Church membership, it proved abortive in many instances as the husbands still had some relationship with the separated wives. The indissolubility of Christian marriage is mainly founded on Jesus' comments in Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:11. Hence Christian marriage here is understood to be a life-long union. Divorce is seen as inconsistent with the original marriage as reflected in the creation order (Onwurah, 1982).

3) The Nature of Marriage Celebration

In African society, the payment of bride-wealth was a major criterion in determining the validity of every marriage which was later considered invalid and illegal with the advent of the missionaries who gave a different perspective of marriage in Christianity (Ngundu, 2011). Considering the effect of modernization and Christianity on traditional African customs, Junod (1941) submits that traditional African marriage rite soon was regarded as inferior for the reason that the payment of bride-wealth turns a noble union into a business transaction. Furthermore, Christian notion of marriage emphasizes a church wedding for a marriage to be recognized (Byaruhanga-Akiiki, 1978) and in that, wedded couples were indeed considered married and therefore legalized to consummate the marriage. Conversely, African culture considers a couple married after the fulfilment of traditional marriage rites (Onyima 2015). This divergence in opinions on marriage has since created a dilemma for African Christian couples who were/are expected by their relatives to go home together immediately after the traditional ceremony and consummate the marriage. When is an African Christian couple recognized as married? Regarding the cumbersome nature of wedding ceremony in most African settings, Onyima (2015) argues that it has made getting married very costly for African Christians as they technically had/have to get married twice, a task which bears daunting economic challenges.

4) The Centrality of Faith in God in Marriage

A research especially on prayers said during marriage ceremonies in Ghana discovered that although most Ghanaians desist from marrying in their church, Christian prayers are offered during customary marriage ceremonies in addition to the traditional prayers (libation) that are offered since ipso facto they are intrinsically religious in nature as common with other African people (Twene, 2019). More so, blessings are sought from God who is the center of both the Christian and customary or cultural traditions through prayers. It is believed among Ghanaian

Christians that when God is invoked in any situation, one either receives his blessings or punishment for acting according to or against his command respectively. Many Ghanaians also believe that God is everywhere and in every situation guiding, protecting and controlling everyone irrespective of one's religious affiliation. Hence, marriage ought to be respected and given the dignity it deserves since it brings about fulfilment in life.

5) Procreation versus Companionship

Generally, Africans believe that marriage is a very sacred institution that holds the gift of procreation (Magesa, 1997). In fact, childbearing was not just a duty in marriage but qualified and validated the union. An African marriage was never complete until a child is born. 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. Hence, 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. On the contrary, even though it is part of Christian's belief that children are gift from God and it is through marriage that they are given, the emphasis on marriage is on the companionship of both parties involves in the marriage just as Christ is to the Church. In fact, whether they eventually have children or not, they are bound by the oath which they have taken to remain together in fidelity until death (Gen. 2).

Evaluation

According to Kitembo et al. (1998), most African scholars discussing on marriage seem to focus on African Christian marriage from four perspectives namely: theological, anthropological, historical, and contemporary. From a theological spectrum, the essence of marriage is rooted in scriptures and the practice of Church traditions (Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 2005). Anthropologically, Mbiti (1973) opines that marriage in Africa is communal and cultural. More so, the African worldview is essentially sacred as opposed to the western idea of making dichotomy between sacred and profane. For most Africans, marriage is considered in relation to other socio-cultural forces within the society and not in isolation (Mbiti, 1973). Furthermore, Ndem (2018) mentions that every functional African Christian marriage is historical and must remain sensitive to contemporary issues ranging from economic challenges to urbanization and technology inter alia. Regrettably, some authors like Kyomo and Selvana (2004) accuses Christianity of placing many African families into crisis for the reasons of colonialism, urbanization, westernization, and globalization which they believe have subverted African family values almost to a total collapse. In addition, the experience of Magesa (2004) in his pastoral experience among the Bakwaya of Tanzania, accuses Christianity for the current marital crisis in Africa.

Apparently, Welch (1933) posits that at the advent of 19th-century mission, Christianity posed a crisis as missionaries attempted to drastically replace African family values and structures with western-oriented values. In fact, they even tried to dissolve polygamous unions as a prerequisite to conversion and baptism. Eventually, the missionaries realized that such an approach was unfair, unrealistic, and could only amount to failure. Hence, the future and stability of African marriage cannot be void of African values, especially principles that are compatible with the Christian faith. Unfortunately, very few practical steps were taken to address the problem relating to African marriages as at then and Bujo (2009) observes that the efforts to acculturate African marriage into Christianity did not go beyond discussions in theological papers.

Conclusion

Religion is one reality in African that has a lot of patronage. African generally enjoy expressing their beliefs and would also encourage others to. However, with the advent of Christianity; a supposed Western influence, there have been a lot of controversial issues on the traditional belief system of many African communities of which marriage generates a lot of concerns. While some communities welcome Christianity, there are others repelling against the inclusion of Western culture. This has created a lot of tensions especially for converted traditionalists into Christianity who seek to practice monogamy as against the conventional polygamy of their ancestors.

Given the fact that Africans are religiously engrossed in their culture, it, sometimes, makes it difficult for African Christians to practice their faith as Christians without some influence of some African traditional religious practices. On the other hand, some Christian teachings project traditional African religion as nothing but diabolic; which is not always true. Therefore, unless African religion is understood as a heritage that has humanistic principles which can be adapted into Christianity, the conflict between the African traditional religion and Christianity especially regarding marriage might continue.

Reiterating the words of Kitembo et al. (1998), there is a need to bridge the gap between Christian marriage and African culture. This could be made possible if churches establish a new social order that would incorporate the African worldview in strengthening Christian marriages in Africa. Hence, Christian marriage in Africa should be between Christianity and African values that are not in conflict to the Christian faith and sanctity of human life.

Recommendation

Marital problems are springing up in many African communities today especially in those where Christianity has made little or no impact in the lives of people. Hence, this study offers some recommendations to address issues confronting African Christians going into marriage. These recommendations are:

1. Further research be conducted that seeks to create a sync between good African values and Christian doctrines on marriage. It is therefore necessary that salient points be succinctly highlighted that would be easily understood.
2. For Christian denominations like the Catholic church where Holy communion is denied to married couples found to be practicing polygamy, more practical steps should be seen that resolutions arrived at included all party to return back to the sacrament with constant encouragement to abide by the rules provided in the Canon law.
3. Proper orientation on marriage should be given to both young men and women intending to go into marriage; especially as Christian so as to avoid eventualities of either of the partners seeking to practice polygamy.
4. In all discussions on marriage, divorce must be sternly discouraged among married couples experiencing marital challenges. Rather, approaches that will resolve any conflict must be highly utilized.
5. There should be a creation of a formal platform where both African traditional leaders and Church leaders would dialogue on how to address marital conflict and allow people to practice their faith especially as Christians without intimidation especially in situations where childbearing is a major challenge between Christian couples who are often advised to take up a second wife.

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