

Historical Perspective on how Christian Marriage was adopted by African Countries: Review

Monger, George Peter

Department of Religion and Theology, African University College of Communications, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

Marriage varies around the world, not only between cultures and between religions, but also throughout the history of any given culture and religion. Therefore Marriage, which is also called matrimony or wedlock, is a culturally recognised union between people, called spouses that establish rights and obligations between them, as well as between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws. History had shown that Africans did practice cultural/traditional way of marriage before the arrival of the British colonist in some part of Africa. Individuals may marry for several reasons, including legal, social, libidinal, emotional, financial, spiritual, and religious purposes. Whom they marry may be influenced by gender, socially determined rules of incest, prescriptive marriage rules, parental choice and individual desire. This review paper will detail on how most African adopted the Christian marriage which is widely recognised in the society today.

Keywords: Marriage, African tradition, Christians Practices.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage ceremonies within Africa vary greatly between countries due to the diversity of culture and religion throughout the continent. Africa has a population of over 1.2 billion people spread throughout 52 countries [1]. The large size and extreme diversity of the continent leads to enormous diversity among the marriage ceremonies and traditions that take place. Marriage ceremonies throughout Africa vary greatly depending on the faith of the individuals. The World Book Encyclopedia states that 40% of Africans identify as Christian while 45% are Muslim [2]. It is common practice in Africa to combine practices of major religions with local religious traditions [3]. This is evident in marriage ceremonies where both Islamic and Christian marriages will also follow traditional practices adopted from tribal communities or smaller religions. The wedding is an exceptionally respected tradition within Africa due to their deeply rooted appreciation for the notion of family. Many African communities believe marriage is primarily about procreation and providing for children as this is seen as the foundation of society. They are

often encouraged against marrying for love or sexual attraction [4].

The expression white or Christian marriage historically designates a marriage without consumption (absence of sexual relation), white being the color of purity, of virginity [5]. This situation generally authorizes a procedure for annulment of marriage or in recognition of the nullity of the sacrament of marriage. The expression "white marriage" can also be synonymous with marriage of convenience (in English sham marriage) and then designate a "marriage contracted without real matrimonial intention (example: absence of common life) for the sole purpose of benefiting one of the two spouses of the advantages which the law confers on the spouses, notably in matters of acquisition of nationality. It may therefore be declared null. The spouse is an accomplice, generally in exchange for financial compensation; otherwise it is a gray marriage.

Cultural Challenge to Faith and Marriage

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines culture as a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or

organization [6]. It is the total shared and learned behavior of a society or subgroup. [7] informs that, culture does not refer to man's spiritual interiority alone but a well-organized pattern of life that has been divided into a body of artifacts and a system of customs. "It is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms through which man communicate, perpetuate, and develop their skills and their knowledge about life and attitudes towards life". That is, culture is known to carry people along, communicate, and it is handed down to other generation through words, gestures, and actions. It expresses and communicates the identity of people [8]. Faith, on the other hand, means trust or belief in someone, something or ultimately in the divine. To have faith in Christianity means to believe in God. Christians make faith meaningful because "God is God" and culture exists because it is the way of life of a man or a group [9]. Humans (men) are seen in modern thought as the agents of their existence and that of others because what humans encounter or is given to them by nature or the divine is transformed by human subjects, and this is what produces culture. God and man would mean something different if both were not as they are. The two, God and man (faith and culture) are integral elements. They are all received, assimilated and handed down from generation to generation. The new and Christian meaning of culture and faith are different from the worldview of the ancient world. The new definition started in the 16th century when the culture was applied to the mind and human behavior, and that has become the foundation of the contest between culture and faith [10]. Culture and religion or faith are intertwined [11]. Since God and man are inseparable, religion and culture are also inseparable. Also, the fact that belief in God is best understood by man, religious practice gains meaning in Culture and therefore religion cannot be practiced in a meaningful way without a contextual understanding of it [12]. Conflicts are real between faith and culture and for that matter between

Christian culture of marriage and traditional African culture of marriage [13]. In a society, the battle of faith and culture is not in themselves but often emerge out of the interaction between them on an issue. That is, where either undermines the other or is seen as a threat to the core values of the other in practice, reactions are bound to emerge. The challenge is intensified by their opposing demands and expectations in society. The contradicting value of Christianity and African tradition has been identified as the cause of the challenges in many life situations. In many parts of the world, Christianity is popularly known to be a western religion informed by western culture, and it has been resisted by or to other traditions or societies because of its fundamentals in Western culture [14]. However, some African scholars object to such an idea of Westernized Christianity and Christianity as foreign religion to Africans. Christianity is an indigenous African religion [15]. If Christianity has not been limited in orientation, what makes the controversy in the debate between African Religiocultural claims and Christianity regarding marriage practice? The underlining point is that diversity in marriage perception of people could be a reflection of cultural diversities. Some Africans have perceived Christianity in contemporary society as the cause of Africa's social and economic underdevelopment; hence, its accelerating opposition by some contemporary advocates for Africans tradition and values [16]. By considering the challenges to faith (Christianity) and its practices in a context, therefore, it would be essential to seek the contribution of Christianity to human culture first. The primary challenge of modern culture to Christian faith and practice is that the Christian faith profoundly influences modern culture. It has made the modern culture a complex one and without faith. That is, culture has been disconnected from the faith that gave life to it. What is observed now is a generalized loss of faith to pathology of individualism and ingratitude [17]. It would be difficult to

doubt the claim that there is a generalized loss of faith to pathology of individualism just as it is to believe it. However, being a generalized claim creates an opportunity for an individual opinion on such a claim. To be specific, the affirmation or rejection of the claim is highly dependent on the person or group of people in a context. Individualism may not be a challenge in the Western world but maybe for other societies. As talked about earlier, inherently collectivist cultures will have a problem with the modern disconnection of culture from faith. Pathology of individualism has not been a natural occurrence but has emerged from the influences of missionaries, colonialism, modernity, and globalization [18]. Many indigenous cultures have been hurt by these elements which have resulted in the loss of identity and self-understanding [19], hence the resurging search and adherence to tradition and identity by contemporary societies. Talking about African culture without highlight on spirituality makes the discussion on African culture incomplete. As Paul O'Callaghan has indicated, African culture includes a spiritual component of society. Therefore, Africans have a more profound sense of spirituality. As it is, they believe in both evil and good deeds of spirits in their lives. The idea of a spiritual connection to the African people is carried on them and influences their life decisions in a variety of ways [20]. At the various rites of passages to which marriage is no exemption, spirituality and the role of the spirits are referenced and acknowledged through the prayers offered at these ceremonies. That is, African societies believe in spiritual involvement and manipulation in real life events, and such a belief is transmitted as part of the cultural package. [21] has been critical about this idea and has explained that Africans have the notion of spirituality and is part of them. It is embedded in their heart and soul. Africans are not separated from the spiritual world but being integrated into the universe that is much larger than any of them, and yet it is centered around them [16]. [16] has therefore argued in

her work that, the crime of Christianity that cannot be underplayed is the desacralization of the African spiritual space because there is paramount relevance of spirituality and its influences in African life. The modern African culture and Christian faith are seen with a challenge in working. There are different fields of manifestation of the problem. An opened area of the contest is the marriage of Christians in Africa [17]. It is evident that marriage is contracted between two people; a commonly shared idea by African tradition and Christian tradition. The African marriage goes through a series of processes and endorsement including the significant role of the families of the people seeking to get married in the African society. In the end, the couple does not own obligations to only themselves. They have obligations to their families and the community or society at large. The loss of faith in the communitarian African traditional marriage to western Christian marriage and its probable incoherence with the demands and expectations of African societies could be the source of controversy in the marriage of African Christians [17].

African Traditional Marriage

First Europeans and missionaries on the African continent have generally described African customary practices and tradition as uncivilized and barbaric [18]. African traditional Marriage has been replaced with polygyny by most outsiders. Africa is considered "a home of polygyny" [18]. The description of traditional African marriage as polygynous has created a clear distinction between it and the Western Christian notion of marriage which according to some modern African scholars has not been a fair play for the African culture. Recognizing the misinterpretation of traditional African marriage, ideas from contemporary scholars, predominantly Africans have emerged to offer explanations to what is, and what is not about traditional African marriage and the term "polygyny." Also included in their work is an explanation of why the Marriage of some African elites was

polygynous. The term polygyny was coined to describe African marriage because practically and in African tradition and culture, men marry women [19]. It is uncommon for a woman to seek a man's hand in marriage which could have result in polyandry, a type of polygamy in which women can have multiple sexual partners. Drawing extensively on the work of Douglas Falen on "polygyny and Christian marriage in Africa, a study conducted in Benin, although polygyny is practiced in Africa, few people is in the practice. Most Africans are monogamously married. Further, those who practice polygyny had or have cultural and traditional explanations for it which many western scholars have failed to recognize [20]. To understand the phenomenon of marriage in Africa, the African culture must be the focus. As mentioned in the introduction, African societies are naturally communitarian. Africans are not individualistic, and most of their practices are collectively motivated. The general good of all members of the society is at the heart of Africans. That is, in the traditional African society individualism is least encouraged. As a result, many of the traditional practices are socially focused. Therefore, African culture has little recognition for individual values, and that is what could be manifesting in the life of Africans including their marriage [16]. Many of the people who married multiple wives had or have a passion for reducing the troubles of single women in society by legitimizing their sexual relationships. Among other reasons is the desire to care for widows who lost their husbands through war or accident. Again, political and strategic reasons for a successful empire building have called on many African elites to have multiple wives. Also, the importance of childbearing as a divine duty for humanity has accounted for polygynous practice in Africa [12]. Among the Akans of Ghana, a second wife due to infertility of the first wife has other implication for the childless wife. It is believed that the fertility of the second wife brings fortune to the childless wife to conceive and give

birth [21]. Beside Africans' justification for polygyny, some scholars have argued that the Bible which is the original text of Christians does not provide a firm foundation for limiting marriage to monogamy. Due to this, the converts and African scholars have occasionally pressed the issue to question whether monogamy is a demand of Christianity or is a cultural conversion [21]. Furthermore, criticisms have come against the inconsistencies found among Christian congregations across the world about marriage. More so, it has occasionally been censured to label the African Traditional marriage as polygynous. It is because many of the polygynous marriage is found in the African Islamic tradition. Islamized Africans started to have multiple wives when Islam was introduced on the African continent. It means that Islam derived polygyny is not culturally African [5]. The claim of polygyny as a problem-solving process for the trouble of single women in African society seems narrow and lack efficacy. If indeed such women are singles, and society wants them to get married to avoid problems, why married men? Marrying as a second or third wife may introduce other problems in society, for instance, conflicts between wives, children of different mothers with common inheritance rights [10]. Again, it sounds ridiculous to think of polygyny as a problem to infertility. It may be wrong to assume that, childlessness in marriage results from women all the time. In most cases, men could be the cause of the problem, but the African society mostly points wrong fingers at women. Polygyny could be a means of men to take advantage of women to satisfy their selfish and uncontrollable sexual desire. Further, the fact that there are different views among church denominations does not mean that there is no common ground on marriage. Diversities in the practice of marriage of Christians are not theologically based [18]. Instead, they are doctrinal. Just as the Bible does not condemn polygyny or give firm ground for Christian marriage, it does not endorse polygyny [1]. Similarly, there is

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no clear evidence of polygyny as a culture or traditional marital requirement for Africans. What seems to be at play is motivation among individuals, denominations, and societies. As Allan Maller indicated, most people and Christian denominations have specific reasons for their specific requirement and interpretation of their respective marital doctrine [9].

Christianity and Marriage; Biblical and Historical Foundation of Marriage

The creational order is the foundation of the biblical idea of marriage and family life. God established marriage as a heterosexual and monogamous with the primary aim of mutual help and guidance [16]. The marital relationship ought to be strict relationship both in spirit and reality. A man and woman become one flesh with dedicated and complete sharing responsibilities. Marriage grows out of love between husband and wife, and it is maintained by love and faithfulness. In the Christian thought, the man and the woman were created in the image of God, and this gives the fundamental equality between the man and woman in marriage. However, there is a functional distinction between man and woman in marriage. Man is charged with the headship position to be responsible for the upkeep of the family. Divorce in Christian marriage is against the will of God [5]. Notwithstanding, there are disparities on marriage practices across denominations. Raymond Collins reveals that the pluralism of ethics in the New Testament on marriage, sex and divorce mostly reflect a patriarchal culture and androcentric perspective [16]. That is, both Gospel and writings of Paul display a strong bias against women and divorce though exceptions are made for circumstances for divorce. To Collins, Sex and procreation are unfriendly to spiritual perfection. Marriage and virginity are the same and these concepts; sex and procreation, marriage and virginity have given birth to the identification of the tradition of sexual fidelity, offspring and permanent bond of a spouse as relevant for marriage [10]. The writings of early church leaders such as St. Augustine and

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Thomas Aquinas have also contributed to the positive marital theology in contemporary society although each of them and their writings has its interest on a specific issue [9]. Christian values of love and sexual fidelity in marriage are built on Roman ideals as portrayed by Augustine, Aquinas, and others. Clerical marriage remained unclear to Christians up till the 11th century. There was no apparent difference between the married and ordained states as well as specifying whether and how marriage can be ended [1]. In as far as the historical writings and documents are relevant in discussing marriage in the Christian tradition, the problem of marriage ought to be traced from the time of St. Augustine. St. Augustine emphasized consent of the couple through the 20th century when the dominant role of the families in marriage was replaced with the renewed focus on the couple. It is only by a gradual process that consent of the couple came to include indissolubility of marriage in real church practice [4]. The implication is that biblical and historical records make a presentation of compassionate marriage as intertwined with historical and social factors. Therefore, modern theology in Christian marriage ought to be looked at realistically in the same way. According to [13], marriage is a divinely established institution, a legal union and a sacrament that is only comparable with the relationship between Christ and the Church. The ideal Christian marriage is unique, eternal and indissoluble. The matrimony is a mysterious union with the eternal dimension in which the unity of the couple depicts and reveals the mystery of Christ. The institution of marriage has its ontological content besides the problems of ethics, sociology, and law and this makes the description of marriage a difficult task [7]. Early church members held the Eucharist in high esteem, and a most crucial component of Christian marriage is linked to the Eucharist. The growing challenges of the church and the need to legalize questionable marriage and divorce within the framework of the church law called for the Orthodox restoration of liturgical

practice [19]. [20] has stated that both Catholicism and Orthodoxy regard marriage as a holy institution. Marriage is thus seen as a sacrament of holy matrimony. Meanwhile, there are diversities in marriage rites of Roman Catholics and the Orthodox churches. [20] expands that, the Catholic church considers marriage as "contract" and a "covenant" between the couple. Unlike the

CONCLUSION

The challenge of culture to religion or Christianity in discourse is that culture has been disconnected from Christianity, therefore, African traditional marriage is considered by some Christian denominations as a practice without faith value. Africans seem to have figured the challenge to their culture, values, and identity hence, striving for reconciliation with their traditional past. It is worth noting; however, that marriage choices and family life could more reflect on the power struggles of financial and personal commitments. The claim that conflict in marriage practices is the result of

Monger Roman Catholic denomination, the Orthodoxy does not require the bride and the groom to commit themselves to religious vows since they are considered "King" and "Queen" of their new household. The Orthodoxy is therefore not strict on divorce and remarriage as compare to the Roman Catholic denomination [16].

incoherence between Western and African values could be valid but for a few people. It tends to mask individual motivations. Further, the claim that a person prefers monogamy could not be the reason for them to be Christian. Similarly, the fact that Africans are being Christianized does not mean that they obviously and completely embrace Western Christian practice in toto. Specific issues that are highly personal need to be unmasked to ensure successful collaboration and negotiation between African traditional marriage practice and Christian values of marriage.

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