



Research Article

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A Critical Reflection on the Church's View of Marriage: Towards the Repositioning of African Traditional Marriages

Peter Bisong*¹, & Sunny Nzie Agu²¹Ph.D, Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Nigeria²Ph.D, Centre Of General Studies, University of Cross River State, Calabar – Nigeria

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Abstract: The early Christian missionaries gave a knock to most traditional African values and traditions. Most of the traditions were straightforwardly condemned and butted away, while some were reluctantly allowed but accorded little or no recognition. One of African traditions, so unfairly treated, is the traditional marriage rite. A Christian is not considered married by the church, if he/she is merely married traditionally. This research considers the effects of this teaching on individuals and society and calls for a rethink on such a dysfunctional teaching. It argues that attempts at repositioning Africa, must be holistic. While examining other sources of Africa's predicament, the church should not be exempted. The church must reflect on herself to ensure that her doctrines do not put Africa at a disadvantage.

Keywords: African traditional marriage, Christianity, church, poverty.

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INTRODUCTION

The questions that inspired me to undertake this research are: what is inherently wrong with African traditional marriage? Why are Africans made to duplicate their weddings? What is the necessity of having a church wedding after the traditional wedding? Is it that the traditional marriage is not valid? And if it is not valid, why is it not valid? Is there duplicity of marriage in the West? Why are people silent about it? What is the rationale and justification for not recognizing traditional marriage by the church? Must a couple be married in church before they are considered married? At what point exactly can one be said to be married?

This research attempts answers to these questions. It also shows the far reaching effects of the church's teachings on marriage on Africans as well as African societies. It advocates for a change of doctrine that would allow only one marriage to stand, instead of two (traditional and church).

Nature of African traditional marriages

Before the advent of Christianity, marriage in Africa was simple, easy and cheap. All it took to marry in my culture (Boki of Nigeria) was a keg of palm wine, few kola nuts and few shillings. The celebration involved only members of the two families and thus was not costly. Marriage then, was something even the poorest of the poor could easily afford. Thus, there was no issue of not marrying as a result of lack of finance as it is today.

There was no elaborate celebration. A large crowd of witnesses was not expected. All it took to announce a complete marriage was a gun shot at the air. Such was the simplicity of traditional marriages, which unfortunately is gradually dying away, thanks to the influence of Christianity and modernity.

The advent of Christianity and with it, the institutionalisation of marriage has made it more difficult for people to get married. Aside from the increasing cost of traditional marriages, Africans are now made to marry twice – traditionally and churchly. This is an uphill task for an average African and it is one of the reasons most Africans have remained poor - most never recover, after borrowing to fund their weddings. This is why I think Christianity cannot escape the charge of contributing to the endemic poverty in Africa.

The Christian missionaries came to Africa with preconceived and prejudiced ideas about Africans. Samuel Baker summarizes the prejudiced idea about Africans in these words: "without exception, they are without a belief in Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened even by a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world" (1866, 16-17). For them nothing was good about Africa and it was their God given duty, they felt, to impose the right ideas, beliefs, culture, religion etc on Africans. Polygamy was driven away and monogamy imposed. Traditional marriage perhaps because it was

too strong a culture to dismiss so easily, was allowed to stay, but stayed unrecognized by the church. In almost all Christian churches, a couple that marry only traditionally is not considered as married. In the Catholic Church, for instance, a couple is not counted among married people and is not legible to join the Holy Family Association unless they are married in the church. Such a couple is not qualified to join in Holy Communion, which is believed to be a partaking in the body and blood of Christ. This has continued to be so, even though the only wedding recorded in the Bible (the one Jesus attended) was a traditional wedding. Jesus did not condemn the wedding but blessed it with his first miracle. If this traditional marriage at Cana was valid, why is African traditional marriages not similarly valid? Why is church wedding still imposed on Africans, when Jesus himself did not see any need to impose another wedding on the couple of Cana's wedding? Imposition of church wedding on Africans, is another way of reinstating the church's abhorrence for Africans traditions and cultures - everything African, remains repugnant, until perhaps blessed by the church. For them marriage begins in the church and ends when the church says so. Is this really so?

At what point does marriage begin

We are of the belief that the validity and non-validity of African traditional marriages can only be established, if we are able to strike at the point where marriage could be said to begin. Where does marriage begin and how does it begin? Is it conferred or acquired? Is it external or internal?

We have ruminated over these questions and have come to the conviction that marriage is not conferred on individuals. It is not an external thing but an internal structure that binds two individuals internally. It does not begin in traditional or church marriage. It transcends both the traditional and church rites. I believe a couple could be legitimately married without undergoing either traditional or church wedding. Marriage exists before the ceremonies which could be traditional or churchly. The traditional and church weddings are merely ceremonies that are meant to formalize marriage but the real marriage begins at the point of agreement between the man and the woman. It is the agreement of the hearts that make them one body. It is not copulation that makes marriage as some people are wont to argue. If copulation ushers in marriage, it means even forceful copulation or copulation for mere pleasures will count the couple as married. Marriage does not start at the point of sexual intercourse, neither does it start at the point of wedding ceremonies. It starts when the couple mutually consent to become husband and wife. Whether or not they go ahead to copulate or formalize it through wedding ceremonies, adds or subtracts nothing from the fact that marriage has occurred.

The traditional and church wedding ceremonies to my understanding attempt to do the same thing – making the marriage formal, in the sense of letting people know that these two people are married. The traditional or church wedding does not confer marriage on the people, they only serve as avenues to impress in the public consciousness, that these two people are married. There are merely forms of announcement to everybody of the marriage agreement by the couple. In other words, a couple could choose to ignore the two forms of marriage rites and still remain validly married. We are not saying here that the traditional or the church wedding are not important. They serve an important role – at least they make the inward agreement between the couple to be known to the public, which serves to deter them from making sexual advances to the couples. The point we make here is that, these weddings only formalizes the marriage, but do not in any way confer marriage on the couples. Marriage always comes before formalizing. The couples marry first privately by virtue of their agreement before celebrating it, either traditionally or churchly.

If the traditional marriage performs the same function as the church wedding (that of formalizing marriage), why are Africans made to undergo both? The church makes it clear that the priests/pastors and the congregation are merely witnesses to the wedding of the couple; the wedding is between the two people. If the pastors and congregation are merely witnesses to the wedding, then what function do the invitees to the traditional marriage do – is it not to witness? Why then should the witnessing in the traditional marriage not be enough to pass the couple as married. Why must it be done again in the church? If the church doubts the testimonies of the witnesses to the marriage of the people in the traditional setting, why does the pastor not go there to make sure that they actually married? Since marriage is not an external thing but internal to the couples and the ceremonies both traditional and white are merely to inform the people that these two people are married, it is illogical that it should be made to happen twice, considering the time and cost these entail.

Effects of double weddings on Africans

The difficulty and cost of having to undergo the same thing (wedding) twice is a big problem for most young men especially those of lean resources. This is more so, considering the fact that the church's wedding as introduced to Africa is very expensive. The wedding gown, suites, flower girls and bridal train attire, cake, and a robust reception which have come to mark church weddings today could render so many bankrupt and in actual fact, it has. Added to this, is the fact that traditional weddings these days, as if in competition with church weddings have increased in status and expenses, making the idea of marriage now terrifying to young men. The result has been an increase in the pool of unmarried people and with it an increase in societal ills. The more, we have unmarried people in the society, the more

promiscuity, rape, abortion and other social ills will surge in that society.

In order to meet up with the cost of the double wedding that have become normal in the Christian societies of Africa, most people have tended to indulge in fraudulent activities, arm robbery, kidnapping for ransom, ritual killing and other evils. Most people go into serious borrowing that end up affecting their lives. Some sell their properties that should have been used to maintain the family to execute weddings, plunging their families in penury. Most of these people never get to recover, making them to struggle in poverty all their lives. It could be said therefore, that Christianity directly or indirectly contributes to the corruption and poverty that has become, a mark of Nigeria and most other African countries. Today, Nigeria carries a bad stigma in the world, but only few are bold enough to point fingers at the church. For Nigeria and indeed other African countries to rid itself of corruption, all hands including that of the church must be on deck. There need to be a reorientation, re-socialization and a re-education of the Africans on their forgone ways of life.

According to Plato, the state is “man writ large”. This implies, that man is a miniature state. His activities determines the rate of growth of the society. If he malfunctions, the state malfunctions and if he excels the state excels. If this is true, it means the poverty of the citizens directly correlates with that of the society. Christian doctrine on marriage therefore, not only impacts negatively on the lives of individual Africans, it also impacts negatively on the society. It could therefore, be safely said that Christianity shares a chunk of the blame as regards the failing African societies. By indirectly inducing poverty and provoking anti-social acts amongst Africans, it contributes to making Africa the way it is.

IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION

Way forward for the church

We conclude by stating categorically that traditional and church marriage perform the same function. As Ockham will say, we do not need to multiply entities beyond necessity. There is really no need to invoke church wedding on individuals, when in reality it does not perform any essentially different function from traditional marriage. Logically, it is not sound.

Practically too, it has proven defective. As it is capable of putting couples under undue pressure; increases poverty and encourages anti-social activities as well as delayed marriages. Delayed marriages increase sexual promiscuity which invariably increases the rate of abortion with its attendant risks.

Logically and practically therefore, the church’s insistence on church wedding for all, is unfair and unjust and therefore need an overhaul. In the light of the above,

I advocate that wedding should be one and it should be traditional.

Full acceptance of the traditional marriage as valid marriages by the church will go a long way in restoring the pride of Africans on African traditions and values. This will be a nice step towards redressing the injustice and havoc inflicted on African cultures and belief-systems by the early missionaries. As Franken lamented, “it has always been a great mistake of the Western countries to consider Africa as a country which has to be worked upon ... Africa was there to be civilized and to be converted to the European religions and to their way of life ... the Western countries never really believed that they could learn anything from Africa.” (2017, 21). Samuel Imbo also laments: “it is as if Western scholars come heavily laden with *pret-a-porter* robes from Europe with the sole mission of finding Africans on whom to fit them. Just as high fashion makes explicit distinctions between the chic and the uninitiated” (2004, 366). This mistake could be corrected by a conscientious effort towards restoring, what they have taken off Africa. The church must do much to restore the Africanness, she took away from Africa, it is only then that posterity will forgive her.

The church has been part of the problem of Africa (Bisong & Paul 2015, 111) and must join in the struggle to find a cure. The present quests to lift Africa from the shackle of underdevelopment must be tackled from all angles.

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