

# A Reflection on the African Traditional Values of Marriage and Sexuality

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## Abstract

It is the 'opinion consensus of a few scholars that the institution of marriage has continued to dwindle because of a lot of social economic and cultural factors. With the passing of time, certain ills have befallen marriage that it has dealt a devastating blow to society. This has produced along its trails a myriad of social problems as a result; single parenthood, divorce, separations, rape, homosexuality, lesbianism and prostitution, the list continues. These cases are rapidly on the increase.

This reflection will adopt a social cultural analysis of the problem as it is viewed today, especially regarding various scholars who have contributed to this issue and have tried to tackle it in various aspects. It hopes to be critical not just analytic of some of the options and opinions adopted. The reflection also seeks to interpret within the context of the African traditional marriage and sexuality, the values attached especially to marriage.

The objective of the reflection is to establish that though marriage suffers handicaps in the society, there exists within the African traditional marriage system resources available, which if discerned and learned properly can help checkmate or even stalemate some of the ills it suffers today.

The underline contribution is that there is value especially in the traditional marriage system this value is underscored in life. Marriage was geared towards the procreation and promotion of life. Seen within this context, there exist the 'kernel' essential properties that held traditional marriage systems, even though there existed also the 'husk' material elements that fade with the passage of time in marriage. Underlining all this was the life of the community.

The reflections assume and expect that at the end of the day reverting to the basic essential value of marriage will go a long way in the prevention of some of these ills that are associated with marriage. It expects that society including Christianity will be able to learn from the traditional system, that indeed not for nostalgic reasons, the core of marriage is to be preserved in life.

**Keywords:** Reflection, African Traditional, Marriage, Sexuality.

## Introduction

The institution of marriage is faced with many daunting challenges. As people made up of cultures and traditions and with the influx of Christianity and civilizations that have continued

to change the lives of so many people, how is it that still we can't overcome the problems that are associated with marriages in contemporary times.

The challenges seemed enormous and daunting but it will be wrong to give in completely. What seemed right is if we could resort to certain resources that are available to us and to see whether we can address marriage issues and sexuality in our society. We would investigate why marriage has undergone such intense hardships and burdens to the extent that people no longer feel comfortable discussing positively about marriages and marrying in general. Furthermore, a lot of illicit unions are on the increase, to what extent this will continue and how it can be dealt with in the society and the church is still anyone's guess.

The interest of this reflection is to try and present the reality of marriage and sexuality as it is understood today, highlighting the various strands that continue to rock the institutions of marriage. Basically we would try to separate the proverbial 'Kernel from the Husk'. 'The Kernel' for me has to do with the properties of marriage and its unique validity. While 'The Husk' will mean the externals that sometimes cloud the actual essentials of marriages, and tends to gain considerable weight on marriages, and appears to be the first victims to disappear after the ceremonies of marriage are over.

It is my contention that traditional marriage system offers us values that will help reposition our outlook on marriage and sexuality today. The thrust of the work will be to try and understand marriage and sexuality in the African context, but more so to see if there are lessons that can be learned and can present a way out for an already embattled institution with breakages, single parenthood and many more issues on the increase.

### **The Question of Marriage Today**

A more healthy understanding of marriage today can be appreciated if we carefully consider what I have referred to as 'the kernel' of marriage, which are the properties of marriage and what makes it valid. To my mind African marriages are not short of such ingredients that constitute marriages. Hendrix in a discussion of African marriage systems opines that marriage as we know it, is multifaceted and its definitions reflect this in their diversity. Several normative behavior patterns are counted among its traits in most societies, while ceremonies or transactions commonly mark its inception. In most societies there is an expectation of relative permanence, co residence, a division of labor, sharing of resources, a sexual relationship, procreation and cooperation in child bearing and training (Hendrix, 1996: 173). Ayisi (1997) collaborates this in his work when he also observed that the means by which a man and woman come together to form a union for the purpose of procreation is marriage. He stressed further that African marriages are affected for just this purpose and therefore a childless marriage ceases to be meaningful in this context. For every marriage to be legal, certain requirements have to be fulfilled, and it should be preceded by certain customary observances (Ayisi, 1997:7).

However, Megasa adds that "the communities involved share their very existence in that reality and they become one people, one thing, as Africans themselves would put it that through their marriage, their families and clans are also united so that what is done to one of their members is done to all. By this gesture marriage also means that the partners' responsibilities are not limited to them alone but have a much wider application. Their own personal identity and identification are equally extended (Megasa, 1998:110).

A further understanding of marriages amongst Africans suggests that there are at least three defining aspects of these marriages; first marriage is a transfer of legal rights to a woman from her kin to her husband. Not only does the husband gain rights to the wife's labor, sexuality and offspring's, but also the rights to receive compensation for the harm done to her by others. In some societies the husband receives rights to offspring if he pays the full bride price but can receive more limited rights if he makes a small payment. Second marriage modifies and to some degree ruptures, the relations between the bride and her immediate kin. In many societies the wife moves out of her parents' home and they lose a family member. Where the husband joins the wife's parent's household there is less disruption. Third marriage is an affiance, an agreement or contract between two families or groups of kin's, because our African societies see marriage not only as a relationship between two individuals people but also as a structural link between groups (Hendrix, 1998:734).

As a result of the absolute connectedness of African marriages to the community which is not in any way an affair between the individual and the marrying parties alone, it is essential to highlight some values that are rooted in these marriages in our societies, their identification will benefit us in abetting the continuous wreckages that marriages suffer especially these modern times. The reason is to preserve all about 'the kernel' as highlighted in marriage and to expose its value in traditional marriage systems, furthermore an understanding of the values we are seeking for in marriage must be clearly identified, exposed and expounded on.

### **Traditional Values Associated with African Marriages**

When we talk of values we refer to interest, pleasure, likes, preference, duties, moral, obligations, desires, wants, needs, aversions and attractions and many other modalities of selective orientation (William, 1968:283).

However the limits of value maybe conceived very broadly or quite narrowly, but the limits should never be arbitrarily set and their location ought to be justified in any particular case. A broad comprehensive conception of values has the advantage of calling attention to possible value elements in all behavior save the most rigidly instinctive or automatic. While a narrow definition may have the virtues of specificity and definiteness but may lead to errors if the excluded phenomena are not taken into account through concepts closely related to the idea of value (William, 1968:283)

In such an expanse of allowance therefore we would like to identify some values in the traditional African nature of marriage and see whether they can be of help in strengthening the lapses that are noticeable in marriages today. What is clear, before us is that we find the essentials of marriage in all cultures, namely a lifelong union of husband and wife for mutual support and progeny to continue the ancestral line and to promote the welfare of the tribe or clan (Moler, 1982:3).

That is why anything that deliberately goes towards the destruction or obstruction of human life is regarded as wicked and evil. Therefore anybody who under normal conditions refuses to get married is committing a major offense in the eyes of the society and people will be against him. In all African societies everything possible is done to prepare people for marriage and to make them think in terms of marriage (Mbiti, 1969:104).

In some parts of Africa parents choose marriage partners for their children even before they are born. This is to make it absolutely sure that they do get someone to marry. Other parts the choice is made for the young people by their relatives, while another custom is to let the young people themselves find the person they wish to marry and then inform their parents or other relatives. The opportunities for them to do this are provided by social gatherings, dance and communal work and by their knowing other people in the neighborhood (Mbiti, 1969:107).

The obligation to get married is therefore the only means of human survival as far as the views of African peoples are concerned. For that reason it is a religious obligation. It is as old as human society, through marriage and childbearing, human is preserved, propagated and perpetuated. Through them life is also deepened vertically and spread horizontally. Therefore marriage and childbearing are the focus of life they are at the very center of human existence, just as man is at the very center of the universe (Mbiti, 1969:106) "The abundance of life is the reason behind all forms of marriage and unions and this is why African religion sanctions many variations of unions. Even when these forms are situated within certain social economic context that is social prestige or the assurance of hands to work the fields (which motivations are always present, given the unity of life) they all serve to preserve and prolong life, to provide for ritual fecundity and physical procreation (Magesa, 1998:128).

Another attracting value, which is upheld most in African marriages, is creatively, depicted in kgatla proverb 'a pretty girl either steals or wets her bed'. They mean by this that physical beauty alone is not the most important thing to look for in a wife. Industry in physical work, a respectful demeanor towards elders and a generally good reputation as defined by the ethnic group are the most significant characteristics for both partners. These characteristics are assessed by the qualities of the parent themselves. Wealth on the part of the boy's parent is of course a factor in his favor but that is less important than personal character." (Magesa, 1998:114). However with easy access to resources, families would not be expected to try to limit the number of children. Daughters did not share in the property of their father and were not differentially endowed at marriage. In fact they attracted the bride wealth necessary for the marriages of their brothers. Girls were as important as boys and there is no evidence of any fertility 'stopping rule' or indeed of any tendency to prefer children of one sex (Goody, 1997:457).

Similarly, an aspect that is equally of significant value and rears its head continually in African marriages is the communal value of marriage. In marriage the family is the person's channel of integration into the clan and the wider society. Consequently, in marrying his wife. . .the man accepted the responsibilities towards another family and she likewise, this social and communitarian character of African marriage means that the two communities are bound so closely together through a marriage that certain condition such as a rift between the two communities can actually nullify a marriage between two person. Enmity between the clans notwithstanding any amount of cordiality and love between the two individual can not only nullify a marriage but also make it impossible in the first place. The value of marriage is communal and the couple's consent has validity only in this communal social context (Magesa, 1998:113).

It could be argued that in this context today such marriage has no relevance because it prys on peoples individuality but it should be remembered that the sacredness of the value attached to this union and the commitment which is made to one another deserves that the institution is protected and connected to the community. Marriage is not just an individual or the couple concerned business as noticed today it concerns all and is affected by all. For instance the traditional system in Africa required a high degree of cooperation between members of the same household (family) and lineage (or other wider grouping of kin or community) given the absence of specialized services and of centralized welfare institutions, there was considerable dependence upon kith and kin, orphan hood, widowhood and divorce, while always personal tragedies (despite the assumptions of some European family historians and demographers) were not faced alone, even if there were in general few sources of welfare other than kin (Goody, 1997:458).

As a value of marriage this bilateral orientations and kinship affiliations are really essentials in seeing to the sustenance of the African marriage. Even among the matrilineal and matrilocal peoples, as for example among the Akan speaking Ashanti of Ivory coast and Ghana, or bakwaya of Tanzania, bilateral orientations remain a strong feature. In the study among the Ashanti, Meyer Fortes found that the basis of all social relationship is the bond between the mother and her child, between the father and the child exist only a bond of love as a father has no legal rights whatsoever over his children. Instead this is the prerogative of the mother's brother. Thus the Ashanti say your mother is your family, your father is not. Yet he is recognized as playing an indispensable role even in the kinship structure. Generally, he names his children after his own ancestors in an important religious function as noted above. Furthermore, by the very fact of his paternity he is recognized to bequeath his personality or spirit to his children without whom they cannot thrive or succeed in life. He takes pride in bringing up his children and in supervising their moral and civic training (Goody, 1997:458).

All these ensured that the survival of the marriage and the kinship structure in Africa depended on marriage. Without going into great details about these kinship and clan structures, it is important to say something about the relationship between marriage and kinship. What establishes clan relationship to begin with is consanguinity, which is considered to be primary and most important relationship in the social structure. It is recognized, however that consanguine relationship (affected through birth) are not possible without a final relationship, that is relationship affected through marriage. In the long run, marriage always establishes very strong bonds between the individual belonging to different families and clans particularly when children are born (Magesa, 1998:112).

The truth is marriage in the African sense conferred status and dignity, Ayisi asserts that it conferred certain rights on the wife and corresponding duties on the husband and vice versa. The various rights that a man acquires after he has performed all the necessary customs (presentations) are divided into two classes. They are firstly, rights in *uxorem*, meaning rights in geneticism, which are the rights of a woman as a mother. This means that the man has to feed and protect the wife and children (Ayisi, 1997:8 – 9). These rights although they seemed obvious are supposed to be taken seriously for failure to perform this sacred function could lead to a loss of the marriage and leads eventually to family breakup and shame.

This responsibility becomes grave in the sense that there are no complete breakups in our African marriages. As an institution divorce is widespread in Africa though it appears to have been less common among some patrilineal groups that incorporate wives into the husband lineage. However, it is not clear that this term provides description, since wives (apart from slaves) always retain some ties with their natal families and lineages, which remains important for the children. These are the ties that Fortes refer to as complementary affiliation (Goody, 1997:459).

Indeed from what we have underscored, we could safely conclude there is within the African marital systems the adequate properties of value to justify a proper marriage that will not only be fruitful but long lasting. But there is more to marriage apart from its rights and duties, fidelity and sexuality carries with it a whole gamut of responsibilities and expectations.

### **The Understanding of Sexuality in The Context of The African Marriage**

We have tried to emphasize the sanctity of marriage as experienced in the traditional setting. But in marriage the place of sexuality is paramount because it is geared towards procreation, however "in African societies sex is not used for biological purposes alone. It has also religious and social uses. For procreation and pleasure, sex plays an important and obvious role in any normal marriage and in any society of the world. There are African people among whom rituals are solemnly opened or concluded with actual or symbolic sexual intercourse between husband and wife or other officiating persons. This is like a solemn seal or signature in which sex is used in and as a sacred action, as a 'sacrament' signifying inward spiritual values" (Mbiti, 1959:146).

This suggests that the purpose for sex and its use are clearly stated in African society and it is expected that sex will be limited to this arena. To ensure the sustenance of this 'deified arena' taboo are sounded and expressed out allowed. It does not give room to the situation we are faced with today where sexual licentiousness is promoted and adorned with pride. In traditional societies, sexual organs are considered pathway to life. Mbiti strengthens this fact that sexual organs are the gates of life, for many African people the genitals and buttocks are the parts of the body must carefully covered; their lack of covering constitutes 'nakedness' in the eyes of traditional Africans (Mbiti, 1969:146). A phenomenon that is worth preserving today considering the influx of media appeals to the discomfort of seeing our women and young girls almost go naked in the name of new wave fashion.

Moreover, there was the procreative emphasis of sex in marriage itself which the social structures of traditional society, especially the family, community adequately made provision for. So, sexual deviation was indeed a threat to these structures. It became apparent that youth be trained for reproductive life in conformity to the structure through social initiation rites. Sexual morality was safeguarded by the structures of society, more than by individual personal responsibility. Sexual activity was the subject of much ritual symbolism. It was frequently dramatized in dances and arts, and was surrounded by many taboos, a typical example which was avoidance (Shorter, 1999:94).

Fornication, incest rape, seduction, homosexual relations, sleeping with a forbidden 'relative' or domestic animals, intimacy between relatives, children watching the genitals of the parents (in the wide usage of the term) all constituted sexual offences in a given community.



Society deal variously with these offences and African people are very sensitive to any departure from the accepted norm concerning all aspects of sex. This is a fundamentally religious attitude, since any offence upsets the smooth relationships of the community. Which includes those who have already departed. For this reason the offences must be followed by a ritual cleansing whether or not the offenders are physically punished, otherwise misfortunes may ensue (Shorter, 1999:95).

Be that as it may, virginity is held to be a good thing insofar as it is a promise of a harmonious marriage. If a girl is chaste before her wedding she will probably be faithful after it. Adultery is vicious because it not only steal's the wife fertility, but kill the marriage. The bride price does not buy a woman, but rather compensate her family for her fertility. In general a man marries for life. Above all this applies to the first marriage; children cement the relationship, for their presence indicates that the contract has been fulfilled (Moler, 1982:4). I have continually contended that African traditional marriage system contained the proper ingredient to a healthy marriage. Africans understood marriage and sexuality and in their own rite, and had a way of upholding the richness of the value of marriage. But the 'husks' even though might not be 'foreign' to the African were not the prime motif for marriage, invariably one can conclude that the African marriage were stable.

The 'husks', which is the exteriors in marriage, have been referred to severally. This was not the objective of marriage, meaning wealth, beauty, and other attributes were not solely the reasons for marriages, even though it was considered. Most African marriage were hinged on the centrality of life, its preservation and propagation, such was their understanding and worldview, a heritage that need to be recovered if we have 'address the wave of destructions that abound in marriage and have affected society in recent time.

### **Conclusion**

What we have done is to place emphasis on the need for a recovery of our traditional values in marriages, especially marriage alliances in our societies. It is quite true as we have seen that there are problems with the institutions. However, there are still possibilities open to us from these reflections. The traditional values that were associated with marriages attract a lot of attention, for indeed they were meant to protect and preserve the institution. In other words, to educate and inculcate a sense of duty to intending couples while also producing a healthy and conducive society for all.

What we are experiencing today shows how the institution of marriage has degenerated because the many challenges it's facing. The challenges values are being jettisoned and corrupted only a healthy reverts to these values will provide a way out for the institution. We would have to take only 'the kernel' from the influx of ideas associated with marriages today from outside and gladly throw away 'the husk'. Indeed our culture and society has a lot for us to learn from and continues to teach us, it is never too late we can regain and restore the institution of marriage. There are, truly, relevant and useful values in African spirituality to enrich marriage today.

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