Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics

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Abstract

This article discusses the challenges which the institution of marriage faces within the African indigenous societies. Marriage is understood to be one of the most vital mechanisms in maintaining the consistency of all societies on earth. Scholars, such as John Mbiti, understand marriage to be a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. While this sounds truly ideal, the reality is that most Africans understand marriage to be an institution primarily knotted within African cultural norms and traditions with disparity roles between the couple. The article argues that such an imbalance unleashes toxic masculinity and manhood ideologies which are chiefly designed to deny women the rights to be fully actresses in the theatre of marriage. It also argues for the need of liberative frameworks within which to challenge the dominative traditional and cultural dogmas which are creating disparities between men and women in marriage. Musimbi Kanyoro's cultural hermeneutics model is employed to suggest a way forward to create an equal partnership between men and women in marriage.

Keywords: culture and tradition; cultural hermeneutics; indigenous people of Africa; marriage; masculinity; manhood

Introduction

The institution of marriage is as old as humanity itself and exists globally with several cultural diversities. While marriage exists globally, its meaning and significance are understood within people's cultural affiliations and these differ from one culture to another. However, at the heart of this, every society accepts marriage as a vital force in maintaining and sustaining that society. It is also a means through which humans are

able to create a chain of human existence throughout the world so that humanity continues to exist; yet the same institution exists within the parameters of African indigenous cultural value systems. In this regard, the cultural value systems entail a totality of traits which

> includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs. (Aziza 2001, 31)

These cultural value systems play an important role when two families come together for negotiating and legalising a marriage. While these cultural value systems are viewed as valuable to the process of establishing a family through marriage, there are, however, certain aspects of them that are toxic to the health of a marriage. Some of these aspects include: the domestication of women in marriage in the name of culture; the male-female hierarchical domination; and the patriarchy that goes with masculinity and manhood ideologies. Such toxic aspects of marriage are linked to masculinity and manhood ideologies which are promulgated behind the facade of African cultural norms. The display of such ideologies is always seen in terms of the authority that men impose over women in marriage and how that becomes justified as part of the African cultural norms. The problem with toxic masculinity is that it benefits men while disadvantaging women. In terms of this problem, men become authoritarian voices to which women must listen and obey in marriage.

In light of this, how does Mbiti's (1969, 133) definition of marriage as "a drama in which everyone in marriage becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator", become fulfilled and provide a space where both men and women can create a harmonious play in the theatre of marriage? Where sociological constructs of roles in marriage exist, freedom and rights become engulfed by those socio-constructs which do not permit freedom to exist.

While I acknowledge the intersection between marriage and African cultural value systems, it is vital to look at the balance of what Mbiti proposes as the ideal form of marriage and the realities of marriage itself on the ground. Though Mbiti's definition sounds excellent and ideal for the kind of marriage many hope to see, the balance between this definition and the understanding of African cultural norms has to be seen on the table. While I acknowledge that, in theory, marriage should allow individuals some freedom in their marital union, the idea of participating as "an actor or actress and not just a spectator" is far-fetched when reading this in a context of masculinity and manhood ideologies. To be fully active in the theatre of marriage where African cultural norms are employed as guiding tools for the marriage on stage, the players should be aware of the possibilities of masculinity and manhood ideologies interfering.

Masculinity and Manhood

The discussion on masculinity and manhood remains necessary and relevant in South Africa, particularly in communities where women are persistently facing patriarchal challenges in their marriages in the name of culture. The problems of domestic and gender-based violence, the mentality of men "owning" women in marriage, and the belief that the bride price gives men more authority over women in South Africa are linked to masculinity and manhood ideologies. "Domestic violence is a consequence of men's desire to exercise power and control over their female partners, a behaviour that has been legitimised and justified within the patriarchal system" (Mshweshwe 2020, 2). This justification is also pinned as part of African cultural norms in which men exercise power and control over women. This power goes beyond the control of domestication, to the point of controlling the reproductive process. This does not sound like two equal characters playing their parts in marriage. If a man defines a woman from a male point of view and views her roles as producing cooked meals and clothes for him, it borders on the lines of toxic masculinity.

Masculinity and manhood ideologies exist in almost all institutions where men are found. These ideologies seek to empower men and make them feel a sense of pride while exercising hegemonic authority over others (women in particular). Masculinity has been defined as a "set of values that serves to organize society in gender unequal ways … unequal access to power, as well as the interplay between men's identity, ideals, and power" (Mshweshwe 2020, 2).

In masculinity, one sees the idea of manliness and that of the household or hierarchical code instilled to boys while training them to be tough. Allen (in Mhlahlo 2009, 85) defines manhood as "the state of being a man rather than a woman or child". It is also understood as "a social status that is difficult to attain yet easily lost and requires continual public demonstrations" (Vandello and Bosson 2013, 101). This is understood as one status that takes time to acquire through training for boosting men's ego, that is, proving that they are men enough. This is confirmed by Vandello and Bosson (2013, 102) in their observation that,

> by adulthood, men are expected to demonstrate their "real man" status by eschewing femininity from their behavioral, linguistic, and emotional repertoires whereas no comparable "antimasculinity" mandate dictates women's experiences.

This attitude grows deeper and develops into a culture from which men graduate to take control of society and all its institutions. This culture, of course, starts from the family and/or marriage, then extends beyond to society at large. It becomes part of the characteristics that many societies use as part of their cultural identities and norms.

In many African societies, boys undergo initiation stages where education about manhood is imparted by elderly men, some of whom are regarded as custodians of culture in society. Both masculinity and manhood are accepted by most African men as

part of cultural values which men should have. Therefore, a man who shows his emotions is usually regarded as weak and not part of the larger group of real African men. This adds to the idea that toughness is equated with maleness while emotions and align with femaleness. This becomes a way of seeing aggression in a sense of masculinity traits where other people, particularly women, no longer feel safe (Harrington 2021).

Barker and Ricardo (2005, 5) give a different angle of what makes an ideal Africa man, apart from the training he receives from the initiation schools, and they point out that:

> The chief mandate or social requirement for achieving manhood in Africa – for being a man – is achieving some level of financial independence, employment or income, and subsequently starting a family. In much of Africa – where bride-price is commonplace – marriage and family formation are thus directly tied to having income and/or property.

Indeed, in a context where a man does not have an income to support his family, his masculinity and manhood are threatened not only in his home but also among his peers in society. Barker and Ricardo (2005) show that masculinity and manhood are injected by many factors that make a man feel strong and in control. In these sociological constructs of masculinity and manhood ideologies, there exists a culture infused into African believers that it is right for men to be aggressive. These are ideologies which have influenced and shaped society for centuries and are still in existence.

To understand the modus operandi of masculinity and manhood within African societies, it is important to understand how African culture is made to connect with everything that is regarded as a norm. Some of the interconnectedness becomes a method within which patriarchy manifests behind African cultural norms. This is also encouraged by the fact that an ideal man has to be physically strong and aggressive as opposed to weak and emotional. An ideal man is one who protects and defends the integrity of his family and peers. He should be known for defending them strongly and sticking to his opinions no matter what; taking part in masculine activities such as sports and social drinking; being sexually virulent; and being successful in everything that he attempts. This form of masculinity embraces notions of manhood that emphasise dominant men who view violence and aggression as legitimate ways of expressing themselves, asserting their power, and resolving conflict.

While masculinity and manhood are notions with different meanings, the two are intertwined and the results of manhood translate into masculinity in many ways and deal with what it means to be a man. In most cases, masculinity does not only dominate femininity, but is seen as the major cause of gender-based violence in society. Masculinity as an unnatural occurrence is socially constructed as opposed to being biological inherent. Boys are introduced to masculinity as part of the qualities or characteristics males should possess from their early developmental stages. Many African men receive mentoring from places – such as initiation schools during their circumcision rite – where only men gather for conversation about men's issues.

For many African societies, the role of the initiation schools, other than circumcision, is to teach, among others, "fearlessness and aggressiveness as qualities of manhood" (Siweya, Sodi and Douglas 2018, 1567). This is a ritual which begins at the early stage of puberty through to the traditional circumcision rite when they travel into the "mountain" as opposed to the western medical circumcision procedure performed on babies. The physical pain that the boys must go through, is understood to symbolise warriorhood, which has to play itself out in society after the initiation process. The central point here is the emphasis that the initiate should "be hard like an 'ant heap', so that he does not become a coward in future" (Mhlahlo 2009, 72). For Maluleke (2018, 38), "the idea that a man must pass difficult and dangerous challenges in order to prove his manhood is at the heart of this problem". While traditional circumcision is an acceptable rite in many African societies, part of its ideology injects men with a character that they believe elevates them above women. As Maluleke (2018, 38) puts it, "Circumcision school is but one context in which compulsive masculinity plays out". In other words, it becomes a point where men transcend to the idea of men they have always wanted, or that some had wanted them to be.

From all of these issues of masculinity and manhood, a clear picture is formed that describes why many African indigenous marriages experience an oppressive culture. While some men understand the need for partnership in marriage, where everything is done together in a complementary way, many others are still trapped in the masculinity ideology where a man decides and a woman acts on his decisions. The understanding of marriage as being connected to culture, is the reason why "a woman's position in her matrimonial home is often times determined by her ability to procreate" (Emelone 2020, 43) and "obey" the oppressive structure. There is a recursive of certain expectations within the institution of marriage which are argued to be cultural and traditional, yet that which is argued to be cultural is purely an endorsement of masculinity and manhood ideologies. The marital roles accorded men and women are based on the different expectations which societal groups have of individuals based on their biological makeup and on each society's values and beliefs about gender.

Marriage as an Equal Partnership between a Man and a Woman

Marriage remains a fundamental necessity in the sustainability of life in the world. Marriage, as defined by Hastings (1973, 27) is "the union … of a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation and the rearing of children and mutual assistance". It is "the approved social pattern whereby two or more persons establish a family" (Waruta 2013, 102). For Mwandayi (2017, 2), marriage

> is the cog around which life in an African society revolves, the absence of which there is no society to talk about, no reason to live for and no future to talk about.

Mwandayi's (2017) explanation of marriage captures the essence and weight attached to marriage and the extent of what it means for Africans. Creating a sustainable future

through marriage, as Mwandayi suggests, is an act of partnership with God in creation. It is a partnership which God through the participation of people who enters into a marriage union. A partnership which should be characterised by mutuality, respect and love. In other words, this should defeat any sign of negative cultural ideologies which may attempt to denigrate other person.

This brings me to Mbiti's (1969, 133) classical definition of marriage as the central point of focus in relations to marriage and African culture: he views marriage as "a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator". Mbiti uses a theatrical analogy to drive his point on how a marriage union should be approached and understood. The analogy best describes the notion of marriage in way that depicts two individuals complementing each other in the theatre of marriage. A key point in this analogy, is on the complementarity that marriage act brings or shows through the two characters. In the process, Mbiti's definition does not encourage spectatorship, but coordination in way that gives freedom to the individuals playing. Mbiti (1969, 130) regards marriage as "a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate". At the heart of Mbiti's definition lies an ideal of equality in marriage. However, this equality is not characterised by any forms of masculinity and manhood ideologies and African cultural norms in terms of sociological constructs of gender roles.

Mbiti's definition is more than an ideal vision of married life. If two people are to perform on stage without the disturbance and interference of outside forces, both performers must be able create inner harmony and complementary balance that promotes healthy relations. The problem here is that marriage does not happen outside the bounds of culture, which also includes norms. While norms vary between different ethnicities, they have the potential to influence how marriage should be viewed within a society. While the spectators should allow the performance to unfold without interference, it is possible for a performer to be an actor and a spectator at the same time. This is caused by the fact that norms come with social expectations which then dictate how a woman and a man should behave in their marital union. Some of the expectations border on toxic masculinity and the maintenance of male authoritarian headship in the house. Within the African cultural context, this attitude influences domestic violence, oppression, domination and exploitation of women (Mshweshwe 2020).

Mbiti's vision of marriage – as a drama to be enacted by both individuals equally – may be faced with resistance as it will frustrate the agenda of masculinity. And because of this, it becomes difficult if not impossible for women to participate freely as equal partners with men in marriage. If a marriage is to be enacted as a drama on stage, two people must play in a delicate and complementary way that not only shows respect and love for each other but also respects the rights of individuals in totality. Masenya (2016, 364) raises a similar point that "a husband and a wife should exude a spirit of mutuality and complementarity rather than a competitive spirit". She goes on to state that: "If any

marriage or family is to flourish, both husband and wife should jointly work together for the welfare of such institutions" (Masenya 2016, 364).

This play would help in demolishing the dominant masculinity and manhood ideologies which should be defeated by the couple from inside and on the stage itself. While active spectators cheer from the gallery, they should be able to observe the oppressive ideologies and oppose such indefinitely. In this way, Mbiti's definition or vision of marriage would become meaningful and more real rather than remain a theoretical concept.

Nevertheless, within the African context, marriage has always been viewed as an inseparable institution from cultural and traditional value systems (Emelone 2020). While much of African society believes that the core foundations of marriage are primarily about procreation and nurturing children, it is also about the culture of two different families, their tradition and their religion. These are issues to be dealt with in a way that provides a fair balance between the couple. Marriage finds its meaning and relevance within the confines of different African indigenous cultural affiliations. In other words, how some African societies view marriage, may differ from how others elsewhere in Africa view it. But where these societies meet without differing, is on the view that marriage is a significant necessity for the sustenance of society. This makes the expectations and roles, particularly played by women, much broader than what would be expected in their family unit.

Such expectations are born from the fact that marriage is intertwined with cultural and traditional expectations for both men and women. Within the cultural and traditional lens through which marriage is understood, the question of manhood plays a pivotal role for many African men. Interpretations of what it means to be a married woman are always explained within the confines of sociological gender constructs. The roles in marital life are played in terms of what society defines as the place for women in marriage. Akurugu, Domapielle and Jatoe (2021, 1821), although writing from the perspectives of the Dagaaba people of northern Ghana, confirm that "roles, both within the domestic sphere of the home and in the community, are deeply divided along gender lines, with women and men playing distinct ones". An example of this is the status of being a mother that calls for the expected roles involving love, nurturing, self-sacrifice, home-making, and availability; while the status of being a father calls for the roles of disciplinarian, home technology expert, and ultimate decision maker in the household.

At the heart of these constructs lies a method which men employ to control the marital household, including taking control over women's reproductivity and freedom to contribute to household matters. Such a culture cannot give women full rights and freedom to participate in the drama of marriage. Participation would mean a couple interacting as equal partners despite their cultural or traditional affiliations. While culture is like a fabric which is woven with many shades of colours (Baloyi 2017), those shades should not be to the detriment of women. The custodians of culture should not

be decorating culture at the expense of the rights of women in marriage. Marriage is not a means within which women's voices are silenced based on the male-female hierarchical order debate (Ruether 2002), which denies women the rights and opportunity to speak freely without prejudice. The institution of marriage ought to provide space for the partners to have total freedom to act to the maximum of their abilities.

African Cultural Hermeneutics

Within the discourse of theology, there are several African women theologians across the continent who write intensely on the issue of women's emancipation and the need for a contextual hermeneutical approach to African situations. These women theologians, such as Mercy Oduyoye, Isabel Phiri, Musimbi Kanyoro, Madipoane Masenya, Teresa Okure and Esther Mombo, to mention a few, have done well in paving a path to a healthy discussion about the problem of patriarchy, manhood and masculinity within the limits of African cultural norms and value systems. They see the discussion on hermeneutics as necessary for the fulfilment of women's rights, freedom and dignity in all aspects of life. While it remains necessary for people to have culture, its ideologies should not be allowed to create hardship for women in marriage.

The bible is a document which many have been used to advance the agenda of males at the expense of women's freedom and rights in marriage. This is further complemented by the sociological constructs on gender roles which favour men over women. In most situations where women are oppressed, masculinity and manhood are found to be centre, however, using culture as a shield to hide behind when delivering toxicity. Kanyoro (1995, 18) states that "culture is something subconscious, so ingrained in us that we do not hear or see ourselves within our cultural skin". In other words, some men employ their toxic masculinity consciously, while others may find themselves doing so unconsciously.

Cultural hermeneutics helps in identifying certain aspects of culture that help to perpetuate toxic masculinity and other oppressive issues against women. This should help in the process of searching for a female face of God through analysing cultural practices which are oppressive and denigrative to the personhood of women. Kanyoro (1995, 22) further states that dealing with issues that oppress women in marriage requires collective solidarity. Cultural hermeneutics argues for a collective reflection to help build a just society. According to Kanyoro (1995, 23), "Building that … [society] does not begin by attacking men but by finding methods of bringing change together with them". Within the theological environment, it is necessary to make use of this hermeneutical model but then to take a praxis approach. Adamo (2016, 1) is in agreement with Kanyoro that,

when we discuss the hermeneutic(s) that can transform Africa we are discussing the biblical studies that are vital to the well-being of our society. This can be called African cultural hermeneutics.

This cultural hermeneutical method has the potential to enable dialogue and pave the way to a better future in which partnerships between men and women would be incorporated. Phiri (2007, 155) argues that the "process of reading the Bible that empowers women should begin by identifying the contextual challenges that oppress women-child marriage, exclusion from education and other forms". For Adamo (2016, 1), "African cultural hermeneutics or African Biblical Studies has three main characteristics: It is 'liberational, transformational and culturally sensitive'". Adamo raises an important point in his argument. When we engage in the process of exposing the toxicity that lies behind African culture, it is important to remember that the action should be purely liberative and transformative. The process should also be sensitive in that, dealing with culture that is intertwined with masculinity and manhood ideologies and thus can cause challenges, particularly for those who are custodians of culture.

While I acknowledge the significance of African culture in defining who people are in terms of their cultural affiliations, its prime existence cannot be made a tool to oppress others. It cannot be made a vehicle within which to drive others (women in particular) to hell while in their respective families and societies. It cannot be used as a method to reduce the essence of another person's value. Their human right and dignity cannot be violated and reduced on the basis of protecting and promoting the masculinity and manhood ideologies hidden behind culture. The beauty of this cultural hermeneutics is that it acknowledges that culture is not a static phenomenon but changeable over time. This is supported by Maluleke and Nadar (2002) in that the fact that culture is not static, signifies that parts of it can be removed. However, there is need for collective solidarity between men and women in the process of dismantling those aspects of culture which carry many toxic masculinity and manhood ideologies.

Kanyoro (1995, 22) argues that "cultural oppression cannot be addressed in singular. Since the custodians of indigenous cultures often have little contact with other cultures, a valid analysis must include their views". Thus, cultural hermeneutics must become a way of theologising justice to the unjust systems under masculinity and manhood. Whether it is in the institution of marriage or not, cultural hermeneutics should make the custodians of cultures realise that culture exist among people for identity purposes. Furthermore, for culture to exist, it must first be coined and defined by people who will use it as their tool of identity. It becomes people's way of life where future generations learn about their identity, norms and values. Cultural hermeneutics requires theologians and clergy to teach and unearth aspects that are hegemonic for the future generations of Africa.

If marriage and culture are to be taken as inseparable, then those negative aspects which make women fail to participate as equal partners with men in marriage should be

removed. It should promote the idea of partnership in marriage which will help fight the sociological gender constructs which subject women to cultural oppression.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges mentioned in the article, the institution of marriage and family remains the most valuable institution in the African context. While there is an intersection between the institution of marriage and African culture, all forms of masculinity employed to oppress women should not be given space to continue with the injustices they impose on women. Cultural hermeneutics aims at building a sound society which provide conducive environment for women in all spheres of their lives. Through the cultural dialogue, cultural hermeneutics should be able to provide African societies with a future where both women and men can be friends and enjoy the positive aspects afforded by African cultural values. However, building that future does not begin by attacking each other, but by reasoning together to find a suitable method in bringing about change.

Kanyoro (1995, 22), when speaking from a biblical point of view and in search of cultural hermeneutics, indicates that

> our concern with biblical text is not just to condemn the culture but to seek tools to analyse culture in order to reach out to women who are in bondage to it.

I am in agreement with Kanyoro that such tools must include awareness of those who continue to promote and protect the toxic aspects of culture. If any marriage or family is to flourish, both husband and wife should work together as equal partners for the well-being of their marriage.

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