


# Marriage beyond the grave – ‘Till Death Do Us Part’, marriage according to culture and Christianity



**Author:**  
Hundzukani P. Khosa-Nkatini<sup>1</sup> 

**Affiliation:**  
<sup>1</sup>Department of Human Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Venda, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**  
Hundzukani Khosa-Nkatini,  
hundzukani.khosa@univen.ac.za

**Dates:**  
Received: 13 Aug. 2025  
Accepted: 26 Nov. 2025  
Published: 12 Feb. 2026

**How to cite this article:**  
Khosa-Nkatini, H.P., 2026, ‘Marriage beyond the grave – ‘Till Death Do Us Part’, marriage according to culture and Christianity’, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a10992. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.10992>

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This article examines the concept of marriage in African culture by challenging the traditional Western understanding of marriage as defined by the vow ‘till death do us part’. The study explores how marriage, in many African cultures, extends beyond the physical death of a spouse and involves familial and communal obligations that continue after death. The primary objective of this research is to analyse how African marital traditions and Christian teachings interact and influence one another. A literature review methodology was used, drawing from various academic journals, books and biblical texts to critically assess how these cultural and religious perspectives shape marriage practices. The key findings reveal that while Christianity views marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman that ends upon death, African traditions emphasise the continuation of marital and familial duties through practices such as widow inheritance and community support. The review also highlights the adaptive nature of African Christianity, where biblical teachings are often interpreted in a way that aligns with cultural values. This analysis shows that while biblical principles emphasise the finality of marriage at death (Rm 7:2), African marriage practices maintain a sense of continuity even beyond death, reflecting a collective approach to life and family.

**Contribution:** The article concludes that the coexistence of these perspectives presents both challenges and opportunities for understanding marriage in African Christian contexts. Further research is recommended to explore the implications for marital counselling and pastoral care in African societies, where cultural and Christian beliefs intersect.

**Keywords:** marriage; death; Christianity; polygamy; community; covenant; resurrection.

## Introduction

Marriage<sup>1</sup> is an integral aspect of African culture, and it is deeply rooted in tradition and community<sup>2</sup> values. It is not only seen as a union between two individuals but also as a connection that unites entire families and communities, ensuring social stability and continuity (Mbiti 1969). In many African societies, marriage extends beyond the physical life of one spouse. When one partner dies, the bond remains intact through family obligations, such as caring for children or widow inheritance,<sup>3</sup> which continue after death (Oladipo 1995). Christianity, introduced through colonisation and missionary efforts, brought a different understanding of marriage to Africa. According to biblical teachings, marriage is a covenant<sup>4</sup> that ends with the death of one spouse, as stated in Matthew 22:30, where Jesus teaches that in heaven, marriage no longer exists. Despite this, African Christians have adapted the biblical principles to fit their cultural views on marriage, creating a unique blend of African tradition and Christian belief. This mixture allows the continuation of family ties and responsibilities even after death, which is still widely practised today. The blending of these two worldviews has created a distinct model of marriage that embraces both spiritual and cultural elements, making it a fascinating area for further study.

## Background

Marriage in African societies has always been more than just a relationship between two individuals. It involves social, spiritual and familial elements, where the union plays a significant role in the continuity of family lines and community stability. Marriages, particularly in traditional African settings, are seen as agreements between families rather than solely between the bride and

1. A social, spiritual and legal union between individuals that forms the foundation of family life (Mbiti 1969).
2. In African societies, marriage is seen as a communal bond that extends beyond the couple to the broader family (Gyekye 1996).
3. The passing of responsibilities or property, such as the practice of widow inheritance in African traditions (Okoro 2001).
4. A sacred, binding agreement, often viewed as lifelong in Christian contexts (Rm 7:2).

groom. It creates lifelong connections, and the responsibilities that come with marriage often extend far beyond the life of one of the partners. In many cultures, the practice of levirate marriage,<sup>5</sup> where a widow is married to her deceased husband's relative, ensures the continuity of family and community ties (Okoro 2001). The arrival of Christianity was when these cultural practices began to intersect with new religious ideologies. Christianity introduced the belief that marriage is a sacred bond intended to last for life, but it is terminated upon death, as described in Matthew 22:30. This perspective contrasts with the African understanding of marriage, where relationships and duties may persist after death. This is because the deceased's family often assumes responsibility for the widow or widower, ensuring their well-being and the continuation of family lines (Bediako 2004). African Christian marriages that are present today reflect a blend of these beliefs. African Christians have found ways to integrate the biblical understanding of marriage with their traditional values, resulting in a unique model that respects both cultural customs and religious teachings.

## Research problem

Marriage is universally acknowledged as a fundamental social institution; however, its interpretation and implementation differ greatly across various cultural and religious frameworks. In Christianity, marriage is perceived as a sacred covenant instituted by God, defined by love, fidelity and companionship, yet distinctly confined to this earthly existence. Biblical references such as Romans 7:2 and Matthew 22:30 highlight that marriage concludes with the death of a spouse, redirecting the focus of believers towards eternal communion with Christ instead of persistent marital ties. This viewpoint frames marriage as a temporary but divinely sanctioned covenant that mirrors the relationship between Christ and the Church. In contrast, African cultural traditions frequently view marriage as a lasting institution that surpasses death. Customs such as widow inheritance, levirate marriage, and the veneration of ancestors<sup>6</sup> exemplify the cultural belief that marital and familial connections persist beyond physical demise. In this context, marriage is not merely a bond between two individuals; it embodies a communal and generational obligation that guarantees continuity, identity and stability within both the family and society (Fapohunda 2021).

The coexistence of these two distinct frameworks results in a complex environment for African Christians who must navigate both cultural and religious expectations. On one side, their Christian faith urges them to adhere to biblical teachings that define marriage as an earthly covenant that ends with death (Harris 2022). Cultural heritage upholds the belief that marriage continues into the afterlife, with surviving spouses, families and ancestors remaining involved in marital and familial responsibilities. This conflict

5. A type of marriage where a widow marries her late husband's brother to ensure family continuity (Gn 38:8-9; Okoro 2001).

6. Deceased family members who are revered and believed to remain spiritually present in African traditions (Mbiti 1969).

frequently gives rise to hybrid practices where Christian beliefs are reinterpreted within cultural frameworks. For instance, although Christianity may forbid remarriage to a deceased partner's relative, African customs like widow inheritance endure as a means of preserving lineage, offering economic support and fostering social unity. The adaptations underscore the resilience of African cultural traditions while also illuminating the challenges Christians encounter in reconciling their spiritual beliefs with cultural realities (Gethin 2020).

It is important to note that there is still a lack of scholarly research regarding how African Christians effectively navigate these conflicting demands in their everyday lives and communities (Okafor 2023). The literature that is available typically focuses on either the theological stance of Christianity or the anthropological viewpoint of African culture, and it rarely investigates the interaction between the two within the lived experiences of Christians. This results in ongoing questions about how these adaptations alter family dynamics, affect church teachings and mirror broader societal changes in identity and belonging. This gap highlights the necessity for a thorough study that not only examines the theoretical conflicts between African cultural practices and Christian doctrine but also the real-life experiences of African Christians who embody both traditions. The tackling of this issue is essential for fostering a more profound understanding of marriage within African Christian contexts and for guiding pastoral care, theological reflection and policymaking in both church and community settings (Adeyemo 2020).

## Main aim

The main aim of this study is to examine how the African concept of marriage, which extends beyond death, has been adapted within Christian marriages in African societies and to explore the implications of this cultural-religious blend.

## Research objectives

The study's objectives were:

- To analyse how African Christians incorporate traditional marital practices with Christian beliefs about marriage.
- To examine the role of family and community in maintaining marital bonds after death in African marriages.
- To investigate how biblical teachings on marriage are interpreted and applied in African Christian marriages.
- To explore the implications of these blended practices on marital counselling and church guidance.

## Research questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- *How do African Christians incorporate traditional marital practices with Christian beliefs about marriage?*
- *What role do family and community play in maintaining marital bonds after death in African marriages?*

- *How are biblical teachings on marriage interpreted and applied in African Christian marriages?*
- *What are the implications of these blended practices for marital counselling and church guidance?*

## Significance of the study

This study is significant because it addresses a gap in understanding how African Christians balance their cultural and religious beliefs regarding marriage. It sheds light on the ways in which African traditions and Christian teachings have been harmonised to create a unique form of marriage that respects both customs and faith. The research is relevant for religious leaders, marriage counsellors and African Christian families, as it provides insight into managing these dual commitments. It contributes to broader discussions about cultural adaptation within religious contexts and how these adaptations impact family dynamics and social structures.

## Scope and limitations

The scope of this study will be limited to examining marriages in African Christian communities, focusing on how traditional African views on marriage have been integrated into Christian practices. The study will draw from academic literature, biblical texts and case studies from different African societies. The major limitation of this research is its reliance on secondary sources, which may not capture the full range of personal experiences in African Christian marriages. The study will also focus primarily on the African context and may not apply to other cultures where similar blends of religious and cultural practices exist. The findings will offer valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between culture and religion in shaping marriage practices.

## Literature review

### Introduction

The concept of marriage is deeply embedded in various cultural and religious traditions, shaping how unions between individuals are perceived and practised. In African cultures, marriage extends beyond physical life, involving spiritual and communal elements that persist after death. Christianity presents marriage as a finite covenant that ends with death. This literature review explores how African, European and Asian cultures approach marriage, examining key definitions and perspectives from Christianity and other religions. Additionally, it will also discuss the theoretical framework that underpins these views and critically analyse existing literature on marriage beyond the grave, with a focus on African contexts.

### Marriage beyond the grave

In African culture, marriage does not end with death. Widows are often expected to marry their deceased husband's brother, a practice known as levirate marriage (Okoro 2001). This ensures that the family line continues and that the

widow and children are protected, reinforcing the idea that marriage extends beyond physical life. The Bible also refers to this practice in Genesis 38:8–9, where Onan is instructed to marry his brother's widow. African societies view marriage as an enduring relationship that transcends death, with ancestors playing a crucial role in family life. Ancestors are believed to remain spiritually present, continuing to influence family decisions and ensuring the unity of the extended family (Mbiti 1969).

### Marriage setup in different cultures

Although marriage is a social institution that is present in all human communities, the methods used to form weddings vary greatly among cultures. Marriage is often associated with the joining of two people, but it also symbolises the joining of families, communities, customs, and religious beliefs. Thus, cultural values, historical settings, religious customs, and societal expectations all have a significant influence on the stages that lead to marriage.

Different cultures all across the world have different marriage customs. The next sections examine the different marriage customs in Africa, Europe, and Asia, emphasizing their distinctive characteristics as well as their commonalities that represent their views on kinship, gender roles, family, and societal duty:

- **African:** Marriage within African cultures is profoundly anchored in communal, spiritual and ancestral traditions, rendering it more than merely a union between two individuals; it establishes a binding relationship that links families, clans and even generations. In contrast to the more individualistic perspectives observed in certain Western societies, African marriages are perceived as communal events where families engage in negotiation, contribution and active participation throughout the process. The practice of lobola is a pivotal aspect in numerous African communities, symbolising respect, commitment and the establishment of connections between two families rather than merely a transaction for the bride. Marriage is frequently consecrated through rituals that invoke ancestors, underscoring the belief in the interconnectedness of the living and the deceased, and the necessity for ancestral blessings to legitimise the union (Bedi 2019).

Customs such as widow inheritance or levirate marriage illustrate the belief that marital bonds persist beyond death, ensuring the continuity of lineage and safeguarding the welfare of widows and children (Kalu 2020). Polygamy,<sup>7</sup> historically observed in various communities, further exemplifies the social and economic dimensions of African marriage, where family size, alliances and labour support were deemed essential for survival and prosperity. African marriage is regarded as a lifelong covenant, intended not only for companionship but also for procreation, the perpetuation of the family name and the maintenance of social stability. This communal and

<sup>7</sup>The practice of having more than one spouse, common in many African cultures (Bediako 2004).

ancestral focus implies that marriage in African cultures operates as both a personal commitment and a collective obligation, where love is intricately woven with duty, kinship and spiritual connection, reflecting a worldview that regards family as the foundation of identity and survival (Amanze 2019).

- **European:** In European cultures, marriage has historically been influenced by a blend of religious, legal and social structures, highlighting individual choice, romantic love and formal legal acknowledgement (Gethin 2020). Traditionally, the Christian church had a significant impact on marriage, presenting it as a sacred covenant established by God, often marked by religious ceremonies such as church weddings, vows and sacramental blessings. Families have historically been involved in arranging marriages, especially among the aristocracy and nobility, where alliances, inheritance and social standing were crucial factors. As time progressed, particularly in modern Western Europe, the emphasis shifted towards individual autonomy, with partners choosing one another based on love, compatibility and personal preference rather than familial duty or economic necessity. Legal systems adapted to these cultural changes, transforming marriage into a civil contract that grants rights and responsibilities concerning property, taxation and child-rearing, while also permitting divorce as a socially and legally accepted method of dissolving the union (Harris 2022).

According to Fapohunda (2021), modern European marriage customs frequently emphasise egalitarian relationships and shared emotional satisfaction, mirroring wider societal values such as personal liberty, gender equality and self-expression. Ceremonies today exhibit a broad range from formal religious rites to civil unions or symbolic festivities highlighting customisation and the couple's story rather than communal or ancestral duties. Family participation continues to be significant for social support, but it is less prescriptive compared to more collectivist societies; choices regarding the timing of marriage, selection of partners and domestic arrangements are predominantly entrusted to the individuals involved. Moreover, contemporary European societies are increasingly acknowledging various types of partnerships, including cohabitation, civil unions and same-sex marriages, which reflect changing social norms and legal inclusivity (Adeyemo 2020).

- **Asian:** Marriage in numerous Asian cultures is a highly organised institution that integrates family, religion, social hierarchy and tradition, mirroring the collective orientation of these societies (Gethin 2020). Historically, marriages were seldom founded solely on romantic love; instead, they were strategic alliances orchestrated by families to consolidate wealth, social status or political power. Elements such as caste, religion, ethnic identity, economic standing and family reputation played pivotal roles in the selection of partners. Ceremonial practices are frequently elaborate and rich in symbolism, spanning several days and incorporating rituals that pay homage to ancestors, deities and elders.

In many Asian societies, marriage transcends being merely a private union between two individuals; it signifies a covenant between families and often embodies a spiritual duty to uphold ancestral harmony, family continuity and social unity. Practices such as arranged marriages, dowry exchanges and elaborate rituals highlight the belief that the success and legitimacy of marriage rely on collective approval, ancestral favour and adherence to societal norms (Okafor 2023).

In modern Asian societies, traditional frameworks persist alongside evolving contemporary ideals, resulting in a dynamic and at times intricate landscape for marriage (Bedi 2019). Although globalisation, urbanisation and higher education have enhanced individual autonomy, granting younger generations greater freedom in selecting partners, family involvement and approval continue to hold considerable importance, especially in rural or conservative areas. Legal structures are in place to formalise marriages through civil registration; however, ceremonial rites and cultural protocols maintain deep social and spiritual significance. Marriage in Asia is intricately connected to reproductive expectations, filial obligations and the perpetuation of the family lineage, with substantial social pressure to meet responsibilities such as raising children, caring for elders and ensuring household stability (Amanze 2019). This is also evident in societies that embrace modernity; cultural values such as respect for hierarchy, communal harmony and reverence for ancestors influence marital roles, decision-making processes and conflict resolution. Consequently, the institution of marriage operates as a personal commitment, a social contract and a spiritual obligation, embodying the fusion of historical traditions, religious beliefs and contemporary societal influences that together shape Asian marital practices (Ndlovu 2022).

### Christianity perspective

Christianity views marriage as a covenant that binds a man and woman in a sacred union, but this bond is broken upon the death of one spouse. According to Romans 7:2, 'A married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage'. This passage underscores the belief that marriage is a temporary institution for this earthly life. Christians believe that marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and the Church, a union that serves a purpose in life but is not necessary in the afterlife. This interpretation is widely accepted in Christian theology, where death marks the end of marital obligations (Schneider 2019). A real-life example is the case of widows in predominantly Christian countries, such as Italy, where remarriage after the death of a spouse is not only accepted but also encouraged, showing a practical application of this theological principle.

In Matthew 22:30, Jesus expands on the idea of marriage in the afterlife, stating, 'At the resurrection,<sup>8</sup> people will neither

8.A Christian belief that after death, individuals are raised to eternal life, where marriage no longer exists (Mt 22:30).

marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven'. This teaching reinforces the idea that marriage is confined to earthly life and does not persist in the afterlife. In Christian eschatology, the focus after death shifts to one's relationship with God rather than maintaining earthly relationships. The heavenly realm is portrayed as one where spiritual fulfilment transcends earthly bonds, including marriage (Morgan 2020). This belief significantly influences Christian funeral practices, where the focus is on the deceased's journey to eternal life rather than their continued role in family or marital relationships. For example, in Western Christian funerals, the spouse's role often becomes secondary to the communal worship of God and the hope of resurrection.

However, many African Christian communities have developed syncretic practices, blending traditional African beliefs with Christian doctrines. In some rural African regions, particularly among groups practising levirate marriage, the deceased spouse continues to be honoured within the family (Njoh 2018). Widow inheritance, for instance, is seen as a way to maintain familial and communal ties, even though it contradicts mainstream Christian teachings. This practice can be observed in countries like Kenya, where Christian converts from traditional backgrounds may still follow this custom as part of their culture. Despite the clear Christian teaching that marriage ends with death, these communities find ways to harmonise their ancestral practices with their Christian faith, highlighting the ongoing interaction between cultural traditions and religious beliefs (Ogunyemi 2019).

### Other religions' perspectives

In Islam, marriage is seen as a contract, or 'Nikah', between a man and a woman, designed to fulfil both spiritual and social responsibilities. While earthly marriage is important, Islamic teachings also emphasise the possibility of family reunification in the afterlife. In the Quran, Surah Ya-Sin (36–56) states, 'They and their spouses will be in groves of [cool] shade, reclining on thrones'. This verse implies that spouses can be reunited in paradise, where their bond continues eternally. The concept of Jannah (paradise) in Islam includes the idea that righteous individuals will be rewarded with their families in the afterlife, offering comfort to believers who value marital and familial relationships beyond the grave. This belief contrasts with the Christian notion that marriage does not persist in the afterlife, as the Islamic worldview integrates marriage into the eternal reward for believers (Al-Jayyousi 2021). A practical example is the emphasis on family burial plots in Muslim-majority countries, where the expectation of being reunited in paradise shapes burial practices and family unity.

In Hinduism, marriage is viewed as a sacred duty, known as 'dharma', that transcends earthly life. Hindus believe in reincarnation, and the marital bond is thought to extend across multiple lifetimes. The marriage ceremony itself, particularly in Vedic traditions, includes prayers and rituals

that symbolise the continuity of the soul's journey, even after death (Bedi 2019). The belief in reincarnation suggests that spouses may meet again in future lives, where they continue their relationship. This perspective on marriage highlights the spiritual aspect of the union, where the souls of the husband and wife are bound not just for this life, but for many lifetimes to come.

Buddhism generally views marriage as a secular and social contract rather than a spiritual obligation. In Buddhist teachings, marriage is seen as a worldly affair, primarily for the purpose of companionship and raising a family, but it is not linked to spiritual progress or the afterlife. The concept of impermanence (anicca) is central to Buddhist philosophy, and this extends to marriage. While Buddhists may marry and form loving bonds, they believe that all relationships are temporary and subject to change (Harris 2022). In contrast to Islam and Hinduism, Buddhism does not teach that marriage continues after death. The focus after death is on achieving Nirvana, the release from the cycle of rebirth, rather than maintaining earthly relationships. In Buddhist-majority countries like Thailand, marriage is seen as a societal institution, and while the emotional bond may be strong, the spiritual focus remains on individual enlightenment rather than reunion in an afterlife (Gethin 2020).

### Theoretical frameworks

#### Inculturation theory

Inculturation theory provides valuable insights into how Christianity adapts and merges with local cultural contexts. This theory posits that when Christianity is introduced to a new culture, it does not merely replace existing beliefs and practices. Instead, it engages with them, creating a new synthesis that respects and incorporates elements of the local culture (Bediako 2004). In the African context, this blending is particularly evident in marriage customs. For instance, Christian teachings about marriage's finality upon death are often reconciled with traditional beliefs in ancestor veneration and widow inheritance. Gyekye (1996) illustrates this integration by discussing how some African communities view marriage as a lifelong bond that persists beyond death, often leading to practices that honour deceased spouses through rituals and inheritance rights.

In many African societies, marriage is viewed as a communal affair rather than just a personal union between individuals. The social fabric surrounding marriage includes extended family networks and community involvement, which influences how marriages are perceived and practised. This communal perspective aligns with the concept of inculturation, as it allows Christian doctrine to coexist with traditional customs. For example, in several African cultures, the practice of widow inheritance – where a deceased husband's brother marries the widow – reflects the integration of Christian and traditional values (Njoroge 2020). This adaptation illustrates how African Christians navigate the complexities of their faith while honouring their cultural heritage.

## Relational theology

Relational theology emphasises the significance of relationships, particularly the connection between individuals and God. This perspective is crucial for understanding marriage in African Christian communities, where relationships extend beyond the earthly realm and encompass spiritual dimensions. According to relational theology, marriage is not merely a legal contract but a profound spiritual bond that reflects the relationship between Christ and the Church (Parker 2019). This understanding resonates with African beliefs regarding ancestors and the ongoing connections between the living and the dead.

Mbiti (1969) highlights the African worldview, which perceives time as cyclical rather than linear. This view fosters a sense of continuity between the living and the deceased, reinforcing the belief that marital relationships transcend death. For African Christians, this means that the bonds formed in marriage do not cease upon a partner's death. Instead, they persist through spiritual connections, fostering ongoing relationships with deceased spouses and ancestors. This perspective influences family dynamics and community life, as rituals and practices often incorporate elements that honour the deceased and maintain these spiritual ties (Kalu 2020). Relational theology also shapes the understanding of community within African Christianity. The communal aspect of marriage is essential, as marriages are often seen as unifying events that strengthen ties among families and communities. The belief in the interconnectedness of all relationships encourages African Christians to view marriage as part of a larger spiritual framework. This framework influences not only individual lives but also community structures, providing a sense of belonging and continuity that is vital in African contexts (Nwosu 2021).

Relational theology is particularly relevant to African marital contexts because it emphasises ongoing relationality not only between individuals and God but also within human communities. This aligns with the African understanding that a spouse's relational presence continues through communal memory, ancestral reverence and extended family obligation. Such continuity resonates with the theological idea that relationships do not terminate abruptly but persist within a larger spiritual and communal framework (Nwosu 2021). Thus, although Christian doctrine emphasises the end of marital union at death, relational theology helps explain why African Christians may still perceive relational bonds as spiritually significant beyond physical death. Together, inculturation theory and relational theology offer a robust framework for understanding marriage in African Christian contexts. They illuminate the ways in which African Christians integrate biblical teachings with cultural beliefs about marriage and death. This dynamic interplay creates a unique expression of faith that respects tradition while embracing new spiritual dimensions.

## Existing literature

### Themes and sub-themes

The literature on African Christian marriages prominently features several key themes, including marriage beyond the grave, polygamy and the role of ancestors. A significant aspect of African marriage is the belief that the marital bond persists beyond death. Mbiti (1969) argues that marriage is not merely a union between two individuals. Instead, it is a connection that involves families and communities. This idea emphasises that, in many African cultures, the deceased spouse continues to play a role in family life, influencing decisions and interactions. This perspective starkly contrasts with traditional Christian views, where marriage is viewed as a covenant that ends with death, as highlighted in Romans 7:2 and Matthew 22:30.

Another recurring sub-theme is the integration of African customs with Christian teachings. Scholars like Bediako (2004) have documented how African Christians incorporate traditional practices, such as widow inheritance, into their faith. This blending reflects inculturation, where Christianity adapts to local cultures while retaining essential doctrines. Okoro (2001) further notes that practices like levirate marriage, although not prevalent in mainstream Christian teachings, continue in certain African Christian communities. This practice aligns with communal values, ensuring family continuity and responsibility.

### Gaps and limitations in current research

Despite these insights, several gaps and limitations exist in current research. Many studies primarily focus on specific regions or communities, leading to a lack of comprehensive understanding across diverse African cultures. Furthermore, there is often insufficient exploration of how younger generations perceive and adapt these marital practices in the context of modernity and globalisation. Literature tends to overlook the implications of socioeconomic factors on marriage practices, particularly in urban settings. While there is significant analysis of the interplay between Christianity and African traditions, there is limited discussion on the potential conflicts that may arise from this integration. For instance, how do African Christians reconcile differing views on marriage when engaging with broader Christian communities? Addressing these gaps could provide a more holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding African Christian marriages.

## Research methods and design

This research followed a systematic approach to gather information from peer-reviewed journals, books and biblical texts. The primary objective was to analyse how African cultural practices intersect with Christian teachings on marriage, focusing on the unique adaptations made by African Christians. The review employed a qualitative method, synthesising findings from various sources to explore the themes of marriage beyond death, the integration

of cultural practices with Christian teachings, and the role of ancestors in African Christian marriages. The qualitative nature of this review allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in these intersections. The research design was centred on a systematic literature review framework, which involved several key stages. Initially, relevant literature was identified, followed by a thorough analysis of the selected articles to distil significant themes and findings. This approach ensured that the review was both comprehensive and focused on the central research questions. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using key academic databases, specifically JSTOR and Google Scholar, selected for their extensive collections of scholarly articles and publications. Additionally, bibliographic references from selected studies were examined to identify further relevant literature.

### Data synthesis

The review employed a qualitative synthesis, integrating findings across sources to explore themes such as marriage beyond death, integration of cultural practices with Christian teachings and the role of ancestors in African Christian marriages. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the complexities at the intersection of culture and faith. The research design followed a systematic literature review framework, involving the identification of relevant literature, rigorous analysis of selected sources and distillation of key themes and findings. This approach ensured that the review remained comprehensive while directly addressing the central research questions.

### Data collection

The data collection process involved defining clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter the literature effectively. The inclusion criteria mandated that sources be:

- Published in English.
- Relevant to African cultural studies and biblical perspectives on marriage.
- Peer-reviewed articles, books or authoritative biblical texts.

The exclusion criteria eliminated sources that were:

- Not peer-reviewed.
- Not directly addressing the themes of African marriages and Christianity.
- Lacking empirical evidence or theoretical grounding.

### Search strategy and databases used

The search strategy involved using specific keywords related to African marriage practices, Christianity and cultural adaptations. Keywords such as 'African marriage', 'Christianity', 'inculturation', 'ancestor reverence' and 'widow inheritance' were utilised. The databases of JSTOR

and Google Scholar provided access to a wide range of relevant literature, ensuring that the search was both comprehensive and targeted.

### Quality assessment and evaluation

A quality assessment was conducted to evaluate the reliability of the sources included in the review. This involved examining the publication date to ensure relevance (focusing on sources from 2017 to 2024), the credibility of the authors, and the methodological rigour of the studies cited. Sources were further assessed based on their contribution to the understanding of African Christian marriages, ensuring that only high-quality literature informed the review's findings. This thorough methodology facilitated a robust analysis of the intersection between African cultural practices and Christian teachings on marriage.

### Results and discussion

This section presents a discussion of the main findings of the study, organised around key themes identified in the literature. It examines how African cultural practices shape the understanding of marriage among Christians, how these beliefs are integrated within Christian teachings, and the role of community and ancestors in sustaining marital relationships. Each theme is explored in detail to highlight the nuances of inculturation, the negotiation of dual frameworks and the interplay between cultural and theological perspectives.

#### Influence of African cultural practices on marriage understanding

##### Continued bond in marriage beyond death in African culture

The study highlighted that African cultural traditions significantly influence the comprehension and practice of marriage among Christians, particularly the belief that marital bonds possess a spiritual dimension extending beyond death. In numerous African communities, marriage goes beyond the union of two individuals and represents a wider network of kinship, lineage and spiritual connections (Adeyemo 2020). Customs such as widow inheritance, levirate marriage and veneration of ancestors exemplify a worldview in which marital bonds are sustained through familial and spiritual responsibilities, reflecting an ongoing relationship between the living and the deceased (Nwosu 2021).

##### Social and economic functioning of African cultural marriage practices

African marriages serve not only as spiritual and emotional bonds but also as mechanisms for social and economic stability. Practices like widow inheritance help maintain family structures, ensure lineage continuity, and provide for widows and children (Oladipo 1995). This perspective reinforces the idea that marriage is a communal institution encompassing responsibilities beyond the immediate couple, highlighting the interconnectedness of family, community and ancestral obligations.

## Negotiating dual practices: Harmonising cultural and Christian teachings

Christian doctrine, in contrast, presents marriage as a sacred yet temporary covenant that concludes with death (Mt 22:30; Rm 7:2). African Christians navigate these divergent frameworks by harmonising cultural expectations with biblical teachings, a process known as inculturation. This negotiation allows believers to honour cultural continuity while remaining faithful to Christian principles (Bedi 2019; Harris 2022).

## Integration of cultural beliefs within Christian teachings

### Contextual adaptation through inculturation

African Christians often integrate local cultural beliefs into their understanding of marriage without discarding biblical teachings. For example, while Christian doctrine asserts that marital bonds end at death, African traditions affirm the ongoing presence and influence of deceased spouses (Bediako 2004; Gyekye 1996). This blending of beliefs illustrates a dynamic faith practice that accommodates both spiritual and cultural dimensions.

### Practical manifestations in rituals

Wedding and funeral ceremonies frequently incorporate both Christian liturgy and traditional rituals, such as libations or ancestral acknowledgements (Njoroge 2020). Such practices exemplify the creative theological negotiation inherent in African Christianity, balancing doctrinal fidelity with cultural expression.

## Implications of ancestral reverence for marital practices

### Spiritual and familial continuity

Ancestors play a pivotal role in shaping marital practices. African Christians often view deceased spouses as active participants in family life, providing guidance and protection (Gyekye 1996). This belief fosters a sense of responsibility towards deceased relatives and reinforces the communal nature of marriage, where obligations extend beyond the living to include ancestral relationships.

### Communal responsibility and obligations

Marriage in African cultures is a communal affair, involving families and broader social networks. Practices like widow inheritance underscore the role of the community in maintaining continuity and stability in marital relationships, highlighting the interdependence of individual, family and community in sustaining marriages.

## Role of community and family in sustaining marriages

Communities provide crucial emotional, social and spiritual support for marriages, ensuring that marital bonds endure beyond individual commitment. This communal support contrasts with more individualistic interpretations of marriage

in other contexts and reinforces the holistic understanding of marriage as both a personal and collective responsibility.

## Summary of major findings

The major findings of the study are:

- African cultural practices conceptualise marriage as enduring beyond death, intertwining spiritual, familial and communal dimensions.
- Christian teachings emphasise marriage as a sacred covenant that concludes at death, creating potential tension for African Christians.
- African Christians employ inculturation to harmonise cultural and biblical understandings of marriage, resulting in unique, contextually grounded practices.
- Ancestral reverence and communal obligations are central to marital continuity and social cohesion.
- Marriage practices are dynamic, reflecting a negotiated balance between tradition and faith.

## Conclusion

This study highlights significant disparities between African marriage practices and traditional Christian teachings regarding the permanence of marital bonds. The findings reveal that African cultural perspectives on marriage often transcend earthly limitations, asserting that marital relationships continue beyond death. Practices such as widow inheritance ensure that a widow remains connected to her deceased husband's family, promoting stability and continuity within the family unit. The integration of cultural beliefs within Christian teachings demonstrates the adaptability of faith in response to local traditions. African Christians effectively blend their cultural values with biblical doctrines, resulting in a unique understanding of marriage that respects both heritage and spirituality. This adaptability is evident in how many African Christians view deceased spouses as active participants in their lives, offering guidance and support, contrasting with the biblical separation of earthly relationships from spiritual realities. The study underscores the vital role of ancestral reverence in shaping marital practices, as many African Christians perceive their deceased spouses as guardians, influencing family dynamics and responsibilities. The communal nature of African marriages emphasises that these relationships are sustained not only by individual commitment but also through the collective support of families and communities, reinforcing the idea that marriage is a lifelong, communal obligation. The implications of these findings are far-reaching for both practice and policy within African Christian communities. It is crucial for church leaders and policymakers to recognise the complexities of marriage in African contexts. By embracing cultural perspectives, churches can develop more inclusive pastoral care strategies that honour traditional practices while promoting spiritual well-being. Future research should delve deeper into the implications of these cultural adaptations on broader social dynamics and family structures within African Christian communities, contributing to a richer understanding of the intersection between culture and faith in African societies.



## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### CRedit authorship contribution

Hundzukani P. Khosa-Nkatini: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors

### Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and its findings are available in the article and its references.

### Disclaimer

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