

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY
IN
AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

edited by

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- 27 Cf. Andrew A. Kyomo, *Ushauri wa Kichungaji*, p. 114.
28 Edward P. Wimberly, *Moving From Shame to Self-Worth*, p. 60.
29 Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), p. 293.
30 This vow is said by each one starting with the man then the woman
31 Paul A. Soukup, *Communication and Theology* (London: The World Association for Christian Communication, 1983), p. 59.
32 Raymond Sambuli Mosha, *The Heartbeat of Indigenous Africa: A Study of Chagga Educational System* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), pp. 87-88.
33 *ibid.*, p. 88.
34 Jane M. Kiura, p. 76.
35 Ronald W. Richardson, *Family Ties that Bind: A self-help guide to change through Family of Origin therapy* (Bellingham: Self-Counsel Press, 1997), p. 22.
36 Jane M. Kiura, p. 70.
37 *ibid.*, p. 77.
38 Jackson A. Malewo, *Pre-marital Counseling in the Parish: Preventing future marital problems in families* (Erlangen: Makumira Publication Eight, 2002), p. 237. Rev. Prof. J. Malewo died on 21st November 2001 at KCMC, Moshi and was buried at his home village in Marangu on 27th Nov. 2001. Tribute to late Prof. Malewo will appear in "Jarida la Kichungaji," issue of Jan - June 2003.
39 I had the privilege of visiting Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre, Clinical Research Centre in October 2002 where I made a number of interviews with clinical social workers and a few AIDS patients.
40 Jackson A. Malewo, p. 245. For further understanding, the reader of this article is encouraged to read the whole Appendix 2 "Pre-marital Counselling and the Threat of AIDS" (pp. 237-252).
41 Cf. Raymond, S. Mosha, p. 128.
42 *ibid.*

11

PREPARING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR MARRIAGE IN AFRICA

Sahaya G. Selvan

1. Introduction

Aylward Shorter has written:

In contemporary Africa traditional family and social structures are being undermined by socio-cultural change and social mobility. Traditional initiation rituals are disappearing, or are ceasing to be truly communitarian. Sex education is given neither in the home, nor in the school. Consequently, young people are morally disoriented, and sexually promiscuous.¹

Shorter's observation is typical of contemporary analysis - be it anthropological, sociological or even theological with regard to family and marriage in Africa.² The quotation includes also a statement about the condition of young people, which is very relevant to our topic here. On the one hand, the above referred to collapse of family structures and the corresponding youth behaviour must be seen in the context of the global situation of social change and sexual liberation. On the other hand, it is a challenge for all, especially the churches, to make a concerted effort towards a reconstruction of marriage and family structures in a way that will be specifically African.

This restoration of Christian families in Africa, I believe, has to begin with the formation of young people. Young people in Africa today have two options to follow. One, to immitate the irresponsible marriage behaviour of the generation of their parents, and further the demise of families. (For I believe, the collapse of family structures in Africa is only two or three generations old.) Two, to learn from the mistakes of these previous generations and work towards the restoration of family life in Africa. The signs of the time show that many serious young people are already on the path towards this restoration.³

The churches, as major agents of formation of young people in Africa, have a pivotal role to play in bringing about awareness, in motivating and in accompanying these young people. The churches need to invest time and resources in the formation of young people especially towards family life. In the ten maxims below I would like to suggest dimensions and concepts of importance that need to be stressed in this process of formation of young people towards building Christian families in Africa.

2. The Beauty of Sex within the Covenant of Marriage

With the advent of HIV-AIDS, the awareness programmes which have been launched by the churches with a lot of good intention, have often fallen back to a puritanical concept of sex and marriage. It is not uncommon these days to hear preaching, particularly by celibate ministers, on the "evils of sex." This may largely be a reactionary opposition against the all-permissive secular propaganda. However, on the long run this may only develop a negative attitude on the part of young people towards sex and marriage. This would not help in the building of healthy families.

Our young people need to be told the truth about sex. Sex is beautiful; sexual act is pleasurable; and all these have a meaningful place within the creative plan of God. However, since it is such a precious reality, sex has to be dealt with deep respect and sexual act has to be performed with great responsibility. The covenant of marriage ensures that individuals involved in the sexual act, which becomes the ultimate symbol of love, are in a position to fulfil the responsibilities that go with such an act. These responsibilities may be emotional, spiritual, social, or simply physical and economic.

For this purpose, appropriate sex education becomes necessary. Who should give the sex education - family, school or the church? What should be the content of such education? These are the ongoing debates in the contemporary African society. The churches as a whole have been skeptical of Sex Education

(or Family Life Education, as it is called in some countries) offered in schools. It may be true that sex education in schools have been too secular and often inappropriate for the ages of young people. But the fear of the churches that sex education may encourage sexual promiscuity, has been proved unfounded by scientific sociological researches.⁴ The churches should also realize that because today more and more young people are staying away from home for reasons of education, schools need to cater to formation aspects that were traditionally catered to by the families. So while the churches have to play a direct role in sex education, they have the responsibility to monitor (and not deter) sex education in schools.

3. The Ends of Christian Marriage

According to Christian teaching, the three ends of marriage are: intimacy, pleasure and procreation. Young people in Africa at present are caught between tradition and modernisation - which in Africa is largely downright Westernisation. The African marriage traditions are centered on fecundity. "Traditionally, every African was expected to get married and beget offsprings.... The motive for such a desire was the urge to transmit and continue life."⁵ On the other hand contemporary Western culture, at least as portrayed by the media, celebrates a pleasure-oriented sex. The modern means of birth control give people the freedom to enjoy the pleasure of sex without the fear of childbirth.

Christian marriage, however, is built on the triad of intimacy (or simply love), pleasure and procreation. Intimacy here is the conjugal love that exists between the couple. It is a love of agape (sacrificing love) that makes eros (sensual love) meaningful. Within this context pleasure is not only legitimate but also beautiful. Finally, the married love is open to procreation and education of the offspring. In addition to a clarity on the above three elements, young people need to understand that to preserve these good of marriage, fidelity and indissolubility become necessary and indispensable. The lack of a holistic approach towards marriage in the formation of youth, and only a mere insistence on the law fails to convince the young people.

4. Importance of the Covenant of Marriage

What has come to be known in Swahili as '*suria*', is a marriage whereby a boy and girl come to live together without a formal wedding. It is a sort of a trial marriage. There may be several reasons for this. Sometimes things happen too fast and the situation has gone out of hand, like the girl finds herself pregnant and so just decides it safer to go and live with the boy than to be ostracized by her own family. Other times young people do not want to go through the ordeal of the haggles between the elders and the squabbles between their parents on the question of bride price. They just do not have the patience. Another main reason for this type of marriage is a fear of commitment, which is a global weakness among young people.

But another common factor is also the economic implications of the westernized church wedding. Young people need to be made to understand that the meaning of a church wedding is not the white gown for the bride or the suit for the bridegroom, nor is it the whole paraphernalia of brides' maid and best man, the flower girls and page boys. Certainly, these too have their social significance when they are done within a particular cultural context.

A wedding in all cultures is a social event, whereby the boy and the girl are now recognized by the society as married couple. The Church wedding is a formalization of the marriage covenant. The two concerned formally pronounce their promise to live together through thick and thin, in the presence of the Church minister and the witnesses thereof. Such a formal covenant, to some extent, ensures the permanent aspect of marriage.

Religious rituals, like the Church wedding, are also pedagogical. The preparations, instructions and reflections that precede a church wedding together with the whole ambient of the wedding liturgy, the event becomes a powerful experience for the couple. It is an opportunity for the church to instruct the couple on the meaning of marriage and to teach, by means of symbols, their responsibility in family life.

5. Honourable Aspects of African Marriage

The process of restoration of marriage and family life in Africa needs also a deep process of inculturation. While the essential Christian values of marriage, not the additional Western customs, become accepted and lived in the African context, there is also a need for a dialectic of integrating into Christian living traditions whatever is good and honourable in the African marriage traditions. For instance, the communitarian aspect of marriage, the value of preserving life, respect for human sexuality are values that our young people need to be reminded of.

Returning to the roots also implies a critical evaluation of the dysfunctional elements found in the traditional African marriage system. For instance, African traditional polygamous marriages and widow inheritance were highly patriarchal and often victimized the women. African traditional marriages tended to be fecundity centered, often leading to the break-up of childless marriages and the mistreatment of barren women. Some other customs neglected the exclusive mutuality of the married couples.

Traditional polygamous families, for instance, lacked firm and clear family boundaries. The child belonged to the whole extended family, to the clan and in a sense to the whole village. The child grew up automatically, so to say, without the clear orientation from his or her immediate parents. Absence of clear family boundaries may often lead to what experts call, "enmeshment". That is, a lack of sense of esteem and belonging characterized by absence of clear self-identity. This is a dysfunction that needs to be dealt with in the inculturation of process of African marriage, especially in the contemporary urban society.

6. Planned Family: Christian Responsibility

Christian teaching wrongly imparted leaves the young people confused. Many of them are wrongly convinced that planning the family is not Christian, and that it could even be a sin. Some of them hold on literally to the blessing of God to Adam

and Eve as an imperative: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth..." (Gen 1:28). Others, forced by economic conditions of urban life today, know the need to plan their families, but do so with much guilt. A literal stand of "Be fruitful and multiply", interpreted in the sense of having large families, is not a contemporary Christian view. Genesis 1: 28 has it that, "God blessed them, saying to them: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it." This is not an imperative, but a blessing. "Human beings too receive God's blessing that empowers them to transmit the life they have received from God. In this way they participate in his work of creation. But transmitting life is to be seen as involving a serious responsibility."⁶ The position of the Roman Catholic Church is very clear:

Conjugal love requires that spouses be fully aware of their mission of responsible parenthood....

If we look further to physical, economic, psychological, and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised by those who, guided by prudent consideration and generosity, elect to accept many children. Those are also to be considered responsible who, for serious reasons, and with due respect for moral precepts, decide not to have another child for either a definite or an indefinite amount of time.⁷

But what the Catholic Church reiterates is that the conjugal act always remains "worthy of human dignity."⁸ Hence it insists that the means of family planning used be those which do not rob the individuals in marriage of their human dignity. Sexual intercourse should always remain an act of love.

Realistically looked at population growth in Africa may not be "on the whole, a pressing problem of today; it is however, the future that has to be seriously considered and planned for now. Care must be exercised at this moment in time so that a satisfactory quality of life can be enjoyed as the population grows."⁹ So our young people need to be educated in responsible parenthood.

7. 'Real' Families Versus 'Virtual' Families

Young people are the largest consumers of modern means of

communication. Being at a stage where they are building up their own value system, young people are easily influenced by the attractive, sometimes improper, values colourfully propagated by the modern media. The programmes that are used by media in Africa are largely Western. Thus the young people have an unfiltered access to Western values - which are actually altered and made attractive by the media themselves. Internet particularly is an area where filters are not easily possible, and hence has growing influence especially among the urban youth.

A positive contribution of the Western media to relationship between the sexes in Africa that needs to be acknowledged, I think, is the romantic element that the media have added to the carnal-oriented traditional approach. However, media have manifest messages and latent messages. Manifest messages refer to those that are communicated by the media in the form of words - spoken and written. Latent messages are those that are subtly communicated by hidden means, often through symbols. An advertise for a toothpaste may use a setting of a happy family that has two children. The manifest message is, "This toothpaste makes your teeth sparkling white!" But the latent message is that happy families always have two children - one a boy and the other a girl!

Young people need to be trained to be critical consumers of the media, especially in values that pertain to family life. Media may portray a happy family as one that lives in a big house, which has a toilet as big as the living room, with bath tub, plants and colourful lighting. Our young people need to critically view this as only an advertisement. A happy family is not necessarily the one that has everyone's teeth sparkling, nor the one that uses particular brand of soap or car. These are mere capitalistic tactics to woo the consumer.

Young people should not easily be lost in a dream world, but aim at building realistic families. Otherwise, when they do enter into a commitment in marriage and are exposed to the stark nakedness of real families, their icon of the dream family stands to threaten the commitment. Realistic families do have their human, social and economic contingencies. In any case, they can be happy families on account of the love that reigns therein.

8. Man and Woman as Equal Partners

Man and Woman are equal partners with different responsibilities. One of the positive aspects of the contemporary marriage scene is that despite the fall of number of stable families, partners are enjoying greater levels of equality, within marriage, than any previous generation. Economic independence, fertility control and education have given women a competitive position within the household. African families are no exception to this global scene.

Nonetheless, there are still young men who are having their last fight to hold on to the patriarchal system of family. It is not rare to hear these opinions in seminars, workshops and discussions among young people. On the other side, there are the "liberated" young women who mistakenly think that equality with men means doing the same things as the men do. Both these attitudes threaten the restoration of family in Africa. Equality is not "sameness". Within the family both the partners can enjoy high level of equality while performing different tasks. Equality would be seen in the decision making process, in the level of communication and in the love shared. Young people need to be formed in terms of skills in decision making and communication within the family.

9. Healthy Children Within Healthy Families

Anthropologists studying the history of marriage and family all over the world agree that while customs and traditions attached to marriage have been different,

Certain ideas were universal, however. Marriage was a public alliance between families. Its purpose was to create a permanent bond between a man and a woman that would produce and protect the next generation. It spelled out the rights and obligations of a couple and established their legitimate descendants. To this day these basic principles are the foundation of marriage systems around the world.¹⁰

The plan of God that we become aware of, particularly

through these anthropological studies, is that preparation towards marriage and child bearing is preceded by several well laid out steps. In most societies the common elements are : courtship, agreement by the families, the actual social event of wedding, the couple living together and to this new family welcoming children, who may be born to them. Giving birth to children before the actual validation of marriage is putting the horse before the cart.

While we have deep sympathy and also a certain admiration towards single-parents who struggle day after day to bring up their children, as churches we need to educate our young people towards an awareness that these families are dysfunctional. Young people need to be challenged to take up responsibility for their actions.

Unfortunately, there is a new generation of young women who, often watching their mothers or their elder sisters victimized by male chauvinism, come up with a drastic resolution that they are not going to get married. However, they may often mention aside, that they do not mind being mothers! This sort of position is one of the causes of children being born outside the institution of marriage. In my youth ministry I do always challenge these young women, "Who are you to decide for your child that s/he will not have a stable father?" Often they do get the point.

10. Christ as Head of Every Christian Family

Bishop Fulton Sheen, once a popular writer and broadcaster, has a book entitled, *Three to Get Married*. The whole thesis of the book is that there are three persons involved in a Christian marriage: the bride, the groom, and Christ. The point is well made: Christian couples are married in Christ.

Every family has its own problems and struggles. Married couples do have misunderstandings and quarrels. There are temptations to quit. But faith can help them persevere. "Marriages are made in heaven", an outdated adage it may well be, brings out the faith element nonetheless. Christian couples are not alone in their struggle. Christ is with them. When this is

recognized and the married couples pull on together marriage does bring along its joys and fulfillment.

Material wealth, abundance of progeny or other measurable aspects alone does not ensure a happy and holistic family life. It is faith that ensures true peace and gracefulness within marriage. Young people contemplating marriage should give a serious thought to how they are going to live their faith, how they are going to be part of their church, and how they are going to be faithful to the third person in their marriage.

11. Conclusion

Marriage is a vocation, and Family Life is a Way to Holiness. Jesus' injunction, "You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect"¹¹, was a command to every disciple. Married couples too, as followers of Jesus, are to be on the journey towards perfection. Their way to achieve this perfection is through living meaningfully their own family life. "Marriage is therefore a state of life, a way of Christian holiness, a vocation which is meant to lead to the glorious resurrection and to the kingdom, where "they neither marry nor are given in marriage"(Mat 22:30)."¹²

A well lived out Christian family is a "domestic church". It is a living cell of the body of Christ. Young people therefore need to realize the seriousness of the step that they take towards marriage. They should have the ample time and possibility to consider the implications of the vocation that they are choosing to follow in their choice towards marriage.

I have listed ten salient aspects of the content of the formation of young people towards building Christian families in Africa. They are not meant to be commandments nor are they just wishful thinking. They are dimensions that need to be considered in accompanying young people on their way to married life.

Where do we get to meet our young people, so that we can impart these values? We need to meet them where they are: in the playgrounds, in their groups and clubs, in the schools. Already existing structures could be used: Confirmation classes,

youth liturgies. Special occasions have to be sought: youth retreats, youth fests, youth conventions, seminars and workshops.

It is not enough for young people to intellectually understand these elements. Knowledge alone does not bring about behavioural change. Young people have to be helped to develop these convictions through dialogue, discussions and prolonged reflection. Therefore listening to young people is as important as speaking to them. They need to be imparted life-skills to help them to live these convictions; they need to be motivated to build habits towards these life choices. And above all, they need to be taught through the exemplary life of the adults.

NOTES

- 1 Alyward Shorter, *African Culture: An Overview* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1998), p. 95.
- 2 Similar tone can be noticed in the ecumenical work by Benezeri Kisembo, Laurenti Magesa & Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Marriage* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1997).
- See, Constance R. Banzikiza, *The Pastoral Approach to African Traditional Values of Fecundity and Marriage* (AMECEA Gaba Publications - Spearhead nos. 135-137), pp.17-38.
- See also, *Ecclesia in Africa* (Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 1995), nos. 50 & 84.
- 3 For instance, youth groups like True Love Waits, Youth Alive and Worth the Wait advocate sexual abstinence before marriage, and members of some of these groups make promises to this effect.
- 4 Visit Website: www.avert.org
- 5 Banzikiza, p.2.
- 6 *The African Bible* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1999), p.26.
- 7 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (1968), no.10.
- 8 *Humanae Vitae*, no.11.
- 9 Kisembo, et al., p.187.
- 10 Carol Gelber, *Love and Marriage Around the World* (Connecticut: The Millbrook Press, 1998), p.10.
- 11 Mt. 5:48 (NJB)
- 12 *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 83c.