

FAMILY IN AFRICA

YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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edited by

Wieńczysław Daniel Czerniewski



WARSZAWA 2025



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

**"Zadanie finansowane ze środków Ministerstwa Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego na podstawie umowy nr MEIN/2021/DPI/333
z dnia 14.01.2022".**

„Realizacja badań naukowych dotyczących kompleksowej i interdyscyplinarnej analizy wolności religijnej oraz zagadnień związanych ze współpracą na rzecz interreligijności i interkulturowości w wymiarze teoretycznym, empirycznym i praktycznym prowadzonych w ramach Uniwersyteckiego Centrum Badań Wolności Religijnej Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie”.

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Cover:

Mafa farmstead (northern Cameroon)
Photo: A. Titone

Print preparation:

Anna Maciejewska i Maciej Ostojka-Lniski

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Wolności Religijnej UKSW

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

Scientific Publishing House
ul. Dewajtis 5, 01-815 Warszawa
Poland

Printing:

Volumina.pl Sp. zo.o.

ISBN 978-83-8281-745-4

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PREFACE

The fundamental role of the family is widely recognized in African culture and tradition. “African culture and tradition hold the family in the highest regard. This is why the peoples of Africa rejoice in the gift of new life, life which is conceived and born; they spontaneously reject the idea that life can be destroyed in the womb, even when so-called ‘progressive civilizations’ try to lead them in this direction; they show their respect for human life until its natural end, and keep elderly parents and relatives within the family. African cultures have an acute sense of solidarity and community life, especially in relation to the extended family and the village. These are signs that you understand and fulfil the requirements of that justice and integrity about which the Prophet Isaiah speaks in the First Reading (cf. Is 56:1). It is precisely in relationships within the family and between families that justice and integrity become an immediate reality and a practical commitment”, said John Paul II of the African family¹. And he warned against the many dangers that threaten the African family today.

¹ *Mass at Kubwa Arena, Abuja, Monday 23 March 1998*, [online:] https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19980323_nigeria-kubwa-arena.html [accessed: 19.01.2023].

This volume opens with a chapter entitled *The Family in the Teachings of the Magisterium of the Church in the Second Half of the 20th century*. In this text Rev. Prof. Zdzisław Struzik refers to the teaching of John Paul II on the family. Subsequent texts refer directly to conditions of family life in Africa. In the first of these, Rev. Prof. Faustin Nyombayire talks about the family in Rwanda today, living between tradition, Christian values, and the tides of modern times (*La famille au Rwanda aujourd'hui: Entre tradition, valeurs chrétiennes et vagues du présent*). Next, Rev. Polycarp Opio, a priest of the Diocese of Lira, (Uganda) presents human development in the traditional Lango of Uganda. The next chapters are dedicated to various aspects of family life in Cameroon. Rev. Prof. Jarosław Różański OMI presents *Human and Christian values in the birth ceremonies of the Gidar of northern Cameroon*.

The last block of texts is dedicated to widowhood in Africa (Rev. Marcel Mukadi SDS, *Widowhood in the Church as Family of God in Africa: A Shift of Pastoral Paradigm*; Rev. Constantine Rupiny, *The Plights of Widows in Alur/Lwo Society of Uganda*; Rev. Jacek Gorka OFM, *Widowhood in Tanzania: An Element of Cultural Stagnancy*). In Africa this state affects mainly women: for example, in South Africa, the widowed consist of 90% widows and 10% widowers. This is explained by several factors. In countries at war, mostly men are lost, leaving behind wives and children. Most of the world's refugees are women and children and among them, many widows. The custom of marriage between older men and young girls results in the former leaving relatively young widows when they die. It transpires that widows are the most marginalized group in society. Alongside the loneliness and mourning directly related to the loss of her husband, the widow is engulfed in a terrifying fear for her future. Her social status came from her husband's status. After his

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death, the woman must fight for it all over again. Often, she loses her home, which is occupied by the husband's family; she is deprived of custody of her children; sometimes she is sent back to her family. It also happens that she is forced to remarry, accused of witchcraft, deprived of the means of survival, so that she must beg in order to survive.

The issue of widowhood is rarely addressed. It may seem as though everything in Africa is regulated by tradition. However, on closer inspection, widowhood – especially in cities – is a very painful loss associated with loneliness, lack of livelihood, and an uncertain future.

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THE FAMILY IN THE TEACHINGS OF THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Abstract

The teachings given by the Magisterium of the Church regarding the marriage and family are extremely diverse and have been elaborately analysed. They include references to diverse sources, such as the Holy Scripture and Tradition, and incorporate findings of the medical, psychological, historical, pedagogical, and philosophical sciences relating to the axiology of human life, especially to the dignity of marriage and family. This caused a desire to develop the theology of marriage and family, so that Catholic Church members and other people of good will might strengthen their faith drawing from modern scientific developments. European and global societies have created many new philosophical trends with purely a secular, or even atheistic, perspective, shedding some light on the aspects of the family.

Keywords: Church teachings, pope, marriage, family, community, laity

Introduction

The Magisterium of the Church (defined as the Church's authority to teach the Word of God exercised by the College of Bishops headed by the Pope, and individually by bishops in consultation with the College¹) offers solemn teachings devoted to the role and meaning of the family, including its foundation, which is marriage. The Magisterium of the Church is founded upon basic sources, including the Bible and Tradition.

Over the centuries and during recent decades, the Magisterium² has tried to revise the entire Church doctrine to better explain its significance in the context of the dynamically changing environment of human life. In the second half of the 20th century, we observed dynamic growth in medicine, biology (microbiology), sociology and psychology. This scientific invigoration led to an urge to develop the theology of marriage and family, so that the members of the Catholic Church and other people of good will could strengthen their faith drawing from modern scientific findings. European and global societies created many new philosophical

¹ Cf.: F. Arduoso, *Magisterium Kościoła. Posługa Słowa* [Magisterium of the Church. Preaching Ministry], trans. M. Stebart, [online:] https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/T/TD/magisterium_ard4.html [accessed: 20.04.2022].

² “By ‘ecclesiastical Magisterium’ is meant the task of teaching that by the institution of Christ is proper to the College of Bishops or to individual bishops linked in hierarchical communion with the Supreme Pontiff. By ‘theologians’ are meant those members of the Church who by their studies and life in the community of the Church’s Faith are qualified to pursue, in the scientific manner proper to theology, a deeper understanding of the Word of God and also to teach that Word by virtue of a canonical mission”. International Theological Commission, *The Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology*, [online:] https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1975_magistero-teologia_en.html [accessed: 20.04.2022], Thesis 1.

trends of purely secular, or even atheistic, nature which shed some light on matters of the family.

Saint John Paul II in the encyclical *Fides et ratio* explicitly argued in favour of collaboration between faith and reason. This encyclical describes relations between faith and reason: these two human traits should collaborate and not preclude each other. The workings of the mind do not negate faith, and faith uses the mind to remain authentic, aware, voluntary and internally non-contradictory:

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves (cf. Exod 33:18; Ps 27[26]:8-9; 63[62]:2-3; John 14:8; 1 John 3:2)”.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Magisterium of the Church published many documents³ of various character and

³ *Enchiridion della famiglia. Documenti magisteriali e pastorali su famiglia e vita 1965-2000*, ed. Pontificio Consiglio per la Famiglia, Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, Bologna 2000. This list includes the following types of documents: Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, 07.12.1965; Paul VI, *Encyclical Letter on The Regulation of Birth, Humanae Vitae*, 25.07.1968; John Paul II and Holy See: *Code of Canon Law*, 25.01.1983; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 11.10.1992; John Paul II: *Post-Synodal Exhortation On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, Familiaris Consortio*, 22.11.1981; John Paul II: *Apostolic letter on the dignity of women, Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15.08.1988; John Paul II: *Letter to Families, Gratissimam Sane*, 02.02.1994; John Paul II: *Letter to children, Ad Pauco Dies*, 13.12.1994; John Paul II: *Encyclical on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life, Evangelium Vitae*, 25.03.1995; John Paul II: *Letter to women, A ciascuna di voi*, 29.06.1995; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Charter of the Rights of the Family* (proposed by the Holy See to all people,

scope⁴, including documents of the Second Vatican Council,

institutions, and authorities interested in the mission of the family in the modern world), 22.10.1983; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Declaration on certain questions concerning sexual ethics, Persona Humana*, 29.12.1975; *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation, Donum vitae*, 22.02.1987; *Letter concerning the admission to Holy Communion of faithful who are divorced and remarried, Annus Internationalis Familiae*, 14.09.1994; Pontifical Council for the Family (established by John Paul II in 1981 based on the *motu proprio Familia a Deo Instituta*, based on the Committee for the Families, established in 1973 by Paul VI; under the *motu proprio* of Pope Francis of 1 September 2016, it was incorporated into the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life): *Service of Life*, 03.1992; *From desperation to hope* (family and addictions), 08.05.1992; *Church and International Year of the Family (1994)*, 25.12.1993; *Ethical and Pastoral Dimensions of Population Trends*, 25.03.1994; *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality. Guidelines for Education within the Family*, 08.12.1995; *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, 13.05.1996; *Vademecum for confessors concerning some aspects of the morality of conjugal life*, 12.02.1997; speeches by John Paul II to the members of plenary meetings of the Pontifical Council for the Family: I Plenary Assembly, *Tasks of the Family in the Modern World*, 30.05.1983, II Plenary Assembly, *Preparation to Christian Marriage*, 26.05.1984, III Plenary Assembly, *Christian Teachings about Marriage and Family*, 13.12.1985, IV Plenary Assembly, *Sacrament of Marriage and Educational Mission of Christian Parents*, 10.10.1986, V Plenary Assembly, *Sacramentality of Marriage and Marital and Family Spirituality*, 28.05.1987, VI Plenary Assembly, *Family in the Lay Mission*, 10.06.1988, VII Plenary Assembly, *Sacramental and Ministrative Reality of Young Couples*, 16.06.1989, VIII Plenary Assembly, *Priestly Formation and Ministry of the Families*, 17.05.1990, IX Plenary Assembly, *Marriage Preparation Courses: a guide for Bishops' Conferences*, 04.10.1991, X Plenary Assembly, *National and Diocesan Structures for the Family and Life*, 30.01.1993, XI Plenary Assembly, *Woman, Wife and Mother in the Family, in Society, and at the Turn of the Third Millennium*, 24.03.1994, XII Plenary Assembly, *Transmission of Faith in the Family*, 29.09.1995, XIII Plenary Assembly, *Pastoral Care of Divorced Living in New Unions*, 24.01.1997, XIV Plenary Assembly, *The Paternity of God and Paternity in the Family*, 04.06.1999.

⁴ Cf. *Posoborowe dokumenty Kościoła katolickiego o małżeństwie i rodzinie*

encyclicals, exhortations, proclamations, letters, speeches, and supplementary documents, such as: the *Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and other documents published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Saint John Paul II has written a profound catechesis called *Man and Woman He Created Them*⁵. This catechesis speaks about the value of marriage and family through which the love of God for humanity, and humanity's love for the God is manifested.

The Catholic Church initiated the announcement and global spread of the Charter of the Rights of the Family⁶. According to this document: “the family constitutes, much more than a mere juridical, social and economic unit, a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society”⁷.

[Post-Conciliar Documents of the Catholic Church on Marriage and Family], K. Lubowicki, Ed., vol. 1-2, Wydawnictwo M, Kraków 1999.

⁵ *Man and Woman He Created Them* was a series of Wednesday catecheses offered by John Paul II from 05.09.1979 to 02.04.1980.

⁶ *The Charter of the Rights of the Family, presented by the Holy See to “all persons, institutions and authorities concerned with the mission of the family in today’s world” The Charter of the Rights of the Family*, [online:] https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_19831022_family-rights_en.html [accessed: 20.04.2022].

⁷ Op. cit.

1. The Essence of Human Love

Within themselves and in society, people recognize the reality of the natural human communion between a man and a woman. The partakers of this communion offer their gift of love, which is later returned to them, and this is how the highest value, a new life, emerges. The “covenant of marital love” is made in the creation of a marriage⁸. Creation of a new life and having children requires unabated and constant love between both spouses; it creates a community founded upon mutual acceptance. Thus, a solid and unique community is created – a family.

Marriage and family constitute a community of people who knowingly and responsibly undertake actions of human dignity. “Through the communion of persons which occurs in marriage, a man and a woman begin a family. Bound up with the family is the genealogy of every individual: the genealogy of the person”⁹. The human person – women and men – manage their feelings and use their free will with the help of their minds. Decisions concerning the communion of love and marriage requires awareness and responsibility. The nature of marriage and of the family assumes marital stability, fidelity and honesty¹⁰.

The decision to get married and have children carries social significance, as it relates to the community in both the narrow and wider sense: the community of family, nation, and country. This social character makes marriage and family indispensable and at the same time equips this community with tools to provide care, help,

⁸ Cf. John Paul II, *apost. const. Familiaris Consortio*, 19.

⁹ John Paul II, *Letter to Families, Gratissimam Sane*, 9.

¹⁰ Cf. Liturgy of the Sacrament of Matrimony.

and education; in the case of a sacramental union, it authorizes the Church to indicate significance, goals, and dangers, and to offer assistance.

1.1. Teachings of the Holy Scripture

The theology of marriage and family is based on the revelation written of in the Bible. The first pages of the Good Book, namely the Book of Genesis, reveal the truth that humans are created in God (Genesis 1:26-27). A man and a woman form one body in the spiritual and physical (sexual) sense. Therefore, both a man is defined through a woman, and a woman is defined through a man. The term “human” is a generalisation here, as there is a general distinction between a male and a female. This phenomenon is common among living organisms which reproduce, and humans also belong to a living species, called *homo sapiens*. The value of sex, its significance and development and the beginning of life is confirmed by the biological sciences, and microbiology in particular.

Theology understands and underlines the significance of biological nature and relates this nature to the act of creation as a value blessed by God. This blessing is pronounced at the beginning of the wedding ceremony and is still always repeated whenever a new couple enters into a marriage: “Be fruitful and increase in number...” (Gen 1:28).

The New Testament contains the preaching of Jesus Christ, Son of God, which confirms the dignity of marital communion, its stability and indissolubility. “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (Matthew 19:9). Transmission of human life and revealing the value of marriage and family are values transmitted by the

Son of God, from the mystery of the Incarnation, through His life in Nazareth, teaching the Disciples and other people biblical parables, until the Testament given on the cross: “Woman, behold, your son (...) Behold, your mother!” (John 19:25–27). The New Testament includes the teachings of Saint Paul the Apostle on marital love; it is meaningful especially in the Epistle to the Ephesians. “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph. 5:25–26).

The message from Holy Scripture is present in most teachings of the Magisterium of the Church, in both official and standard documents. The entire Christian life is filled with Christ’s love for the Church, defined as the community of the People of God. Such love lends some special air of dignity to marriages and families. This dignity stems from the love of God, and from sanctity, because a marriage is a sacrament¹¹. “Sanctity of Marriage and Family: The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48). This message will be later elaborated by a theology of the Domestic Church, a lay movement for married people, inspired by the spirituality of Father Franciszek Blachnicki. It constitutes the family branch of the Light-Life Movement (Polish: *Ruch Światło-Życie*).

The Domestic Church was established in 1973, when the first meeting was organized in the town of Krościenko nad Dunajcem.

¹¹ The sacramentality of marriage in the Church has been defined by the Council of Trent as a truth of the Faith (session 24th *Dottrina sul sacramento del matrimonio*: Denz. 1800; CIC 1055 §1) and was recalled in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48).

In the very same year, Fr. Blachnicki established the first circle of families in Lublin. In 1974, there were as many as 36 circles¹². The Domestic Church is a communion of developing family life and love based on the model of the Holy Trinity. A family, with a husband, wife and children, create some form of a triad. Fatherhood is the rule of life in this case, marriage is the rule of communion, while the child (fertility) is the incarnated fruit of marital love.

2. Benefits of Marriage

In the theology of marriage and the family, it is emphasised that marriage and the community of family are beneficial for the family, and for the entire society. The family practices basic virtues and values: love, fidelity, honesty, righteousness, mutual support, fertility (cf. *Donum vitae*¹³), and solidarity. The family allows humans to exercise their basic and inherent right to raise a new generation.

2.1. Mutual Love in Marriage and in the Family

Christ's love for the Church is a benchmark for mutual love between spouses; it was declared by the Saviour and confirmed through His salvific deeds. Salvation occurred on the wood of the cross, when the rule of the true love was fulfilled: "Greater love has no one

¹² Cf. <https://www.bing.com/search?q=kosciol+domowy+co+to&cvid=fa582f2e1d1c4179bb56d058e503a4c8&aqs=edge.1.69i57j0.9531j0j4&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531>. [accessed: 20.04.2022].

¹³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation, Donum vitae* (22.02.1987).

than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). For this reason, marriages and families enjoy Christ's constant presence in their lives. This presence continually shapes the development of spirituality among family members and helps to create a blessed community in the Church and in domestic churches. "Therefore, by presenting certain key points of Church doctrine in a clearer light, this sacred synod wishes to offer guidance and support to those Christians and other men who are trying to preserve the holiness and to foster the natural dignity of the married state and its superlative value" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 47).

Marriage and family transmit faith along with their values, they defend the truth about God, and salvation in Jesus Christ; in their bosom occurs the spiritual transformation of a man who has the dignity of a child of God. Through the operation of mercifulness, forgiveness and rebirth, they reveal and lead to the sacrament of Reconciliation. "If, however, sin still exercises its hold over them, they are not to lose heart. Rather must they, humble and persevering, have recourse to the mercy of God, abundantly bestowed in the Sacrament of Penance. In this way, for sure, they will be able to reach that perfection of married life which the Apostle sets out in these words: 'Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church'" (HV, 25).

The sacramentality of marriage and spirituality of the family is present in the teachings of John Paul II. The father's and mother's role in the family reflects the love of God for man, both in the act of creation, and in the act of collective development (raising and teaching a new person) (See: John Paul II's speech, audience on 28.05.1987)¹⁴. All members of the Church should appreciate the

¹⁴ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, X/2 (1987), 1884-1890.

role of marriage and family in their everyday life. These blessings come from God, and lead to God, sanctifying spouses and families (cf. LG, 40):

“The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy”.

2.2. Transmission of Life and Conditions of Living

Spouses receive a great gift, a life which they are supposed to pass onto the next generation, pursuant to their natural calling. The gift of life comes from God and constitutes a collaboration in the act of creation, as well as the transmitted faith in the act of salvation. Abortion of any kind stands against the calling of the spouses to transmit life. John Paul II teaches: “Contraception, sterilization and abortion are certainly part of the reason why, in some cases, there is a sharp decline in the birth rate. It is not difficult to be tempted to use the same methods and attacks against life also where there is a situation of ‘demographic explosion’” (EV, 16).

The overpopulation problem should be solved according to the rules of social justice, all people should have the right to live, and to enjoy the conditions necessary for worthy life, across all communities. In the encyclical on human labour, *Laborem Exercens* (14.09.1981), the Pope calls for social justice regarding the problems of work and sustenance. “Work understood as a „transitive” activity, i.e. an activity beginning in the human subject and directed towards an external object, presupposes a specific dominion by man over „the earth”, and in its turn it confirms and develops this

dominion” (LE, 4). To wisely rule over the world, people need to reasonably manage and use natural, social, economic and scientific resources, which allows for the just and beneficial distribution of goods produced by humans. John Paul II explains: “Having thus confirmed the personal dimension of human work; we must go on to the second sphere of values which is necessarily linked to work. Work constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something that man is called to. These two spheres of values (one linked to work and the other consequent on the family nature of human life) must be properly united and must properly permeate each other” (LE, 10).

Dominion over the world is a struggle with political and governmental problems, as well as even revolutions and wars. John Paul II did not avoid social problems; he believed that the well-being of man should be a factor when developing structural solutions. “This principle directly concerns the process of production: in this process labour is always a primary efficient cause, while capital, the whole collection of means of production, remains a mere instrument or instrumental cause. This principle is an evident truth that emerges from the whole of man’s historical experience” (LE, 12).

2.3. Expression of Faith

Faith is a gift from God, but it is also the task of man to recognize God and worship Him. “The other articles of the Creed all depend on the first, just as the remaining Commandments make the first explicit. The other articles help us to know God better as he revealed himself progressively to men. “The faithful first profess their belief in God” (CCC 199, cf. Roman Catechism 1-3).

Evangelization in marriage and the family must be performed every day: this act is a form of collaboration with God and the building up of the Church; it is also a path to sanctification. The work of love and sanctification also has its part in religious education, especially as it helps to prepare a new generation to live in a community of love. “The Christian family is thus called upon to offer everyone a witness of generous and disinterested dedication to social matters, through a „preferential option” for the poor and disadvantaged. Therefore, advancing in its following of the Lord by special love for all the poor, it must have special concern for the hungry, the poor, the old, the sick, drug victims and those who have no family” (FC, 47).

2.4. Education

Education in the family is an act of parental love towards their children. This gift, aside from the feeling of love, brings other values as well. Parents share their knowledge and teach their children how to think, how to act individually and in the community; parents often teach their offspring certain professional skills¹⁵. Education includes spirituality, that is, transmitting and teaching humanity based on values. These values include a certain worldview, religion, respect for fellow human beings, the ability to cherish social life on all levels of school education. Education in the family is accomplished through the example shown by the immediate and extended family¹⁶. According to John Paul II, education is both law and duty.

¹⁵ “Because each individual absorbs within the family the contents and values that go to make up the culture of a given nation” (LE, 10).

¹⁶ Extended family includes grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and adopted family.

“The task of giving education is rooted in the primary vocation of married couples to participate in God’s creative activity: by begetting in love and for love a new person who has within himself or herself the vocation to growth and development, parents by that very fact take on the task of helping that person effectively to live a fully human life” (FC, 36).

“Even amid the difficulties of the work of education, difficulties which are often greater today, parents must trustingly and courageously train their children in the essential values of human life. Children must grow up with a correct attitude of freedom regarding material goods, by adopting a simple and austere lifestyle and being fully convinced that „man is more precious for what he is than for what he has”” (FC, 37). Sexual issues are an important part of life, and of upbringing. New generations must and should understand the positive nature of human and marital love, which should be an intimate, sexual relationship imbued with love and with the goal of procreation.

These educational duties and tasks are performed not only by parents, but also by school and community. “Then the school, making itself available to carry out programmes of sex education, has often done this by taking the place of the family and, most of the time, with the aim of only providing information. Sometimes this really leads to the deformation of consciences. In many cases parents have given up their duty in this field or agreed to delegate it to others, because of the difficulty and their own lack of preparation”, according to the Pontifical Council for the Family¹⁷.

¹⁷ Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, [online:] https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html [accessed: 20.04.2022].

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the *Declaration on Certain Questions on Sexual Ethics: Persona Humana* (29.12.1975), claims that “According to contemporary scientific research, the human person is so profoundly affected by sexuality that it must be considered as one of the factors which give to each individual’s life the principal traits that distinguish it. In fact, it is from sex that the human person receives the characteristics which, on the biological, psychological and spiritual levels, make that person a man or a woman”.

2.5. Preparation to Live within a Marriage and a Family

The Catholic Church recognizes the need to properly prepare the sacrament of marriage and to properly understand tasks and responsibilities of the family life. Elevating the natural dignity of marriage and family to the sacramental dimension, that is as signs of Christ’s presence in marital and family relations, is a great spiritual nobility. Marriage and family become a road to salvation, all basic activities and values in marriage and the family gain supernatural significance.

The Pontifical Council for the Family explains that: “Preparation for marriage, for married and family life, is of great importance for the good of the Church. In fact, the sacrament of Marriage has great value for the whole Christian community and, in the first place, for the spouses...”¹⁸. “The starting point for an itinerary of marriage preparation is the awareness that the marriage covenant was taken up and raised to a sacrament of the New Covenant by the Lord Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit”¹⁹.

¹⁸ The Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, 13.05.1996, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 9.

Later the Pontifical Council for the Family indicates and recommends preparation for the sacrament of marriage, which includes:

1. Remote preparation.
2. Proximate preparation.
3. Immediate preparation.

Description and implementation of these preparations is defined in local Churches by the Episcopal Conference's Instructions²⁰. These Instructions emphasize the environment of life and faith in a couple's place of origin and show ways to teach about the sacramentality of marriage and about spiritual, moral, psychological, and social goods brought by the sacrament of marriage, and increasing the dignity of spouses and their future family.

The Code of Canon Law²¹, Book IV, Chapter I, describes proper and legally valid preparation for marriage and family life: "Pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection. This assistance must be offered especially by personal preparation, a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage, help offered to those who are married" (CCC, 1063). The Code of Canon Law includes much other information and as well as legal arrangements regarding marriage and family in canons 1055-1165.

²⁰ Polish Episcopal Conference, *Instrukcja o przygotowaniu do zawarcia małżeństwa w Kościele katolickim* [Instruction on Preparation for Marriage in the Catholic Church], 13.12.1989, I.

²¹ *Code of Canon Law*, [online:] https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html [accessed: 20.04.2022].

2.6. Woman's Role in Marriage and the Family

Parents are the most important initiators of marriage and family, as they decide the shape and character of life. The teachings of the Church are especially aimed at women, who should follow the Blessed Mother – Mother of the Holy Family and Mother of the Church. “The reference to the dignity of women and their vocation, precisely in our time, can and must be received in the ‘light and power’ which the Spirit grants to human beings, including the people of our own age, which is marked by so many different transformations. The Church ‘holds that in her Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point, and the goal of man and of all human history’” (cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 29-30)

Woman's calling in marriage and family is often exercised in very difficult conditions, but – due to the support of the Holy Spirit – the family always undergoes an evolution of faith and of nature, transmitting love and faith to a new generation.

3. Teachings of John Paul II in Africa

Throughout the whole of his pontificate, John Paul II made one hundred and four journeys. The task of these pilgrimages was to strengthen the faith of Catholic communities. In 1980, and in 1995, John Paul II embarked on two apostolic journeys to Africa. He visited the continent eleven times. During his pilgrimages, he repeatedly taught about marriage and the family. John Paul II, the pilgrim-pope, initiated the tradition of interacting with people on squares, at stadiums, and in sacred places. He knew how important his contact with others was; he wanted to meet with people in their

natural environment, in their country. He wanted to learn about their problems, to see how and where they lived.

3.1. Apostolic Exhortation about the African Church, *Ecclesia in Africa* (14.09.1995)

The publication of the *Ecclesia in Africa* exhortation was preceded by numerous meetings of the Pope with representatives of African society and the African Church during Synods and in the Council of the General Secretariat. “Speaking to the members of the Council of the General Secretariat on 23 June 1989, I laid special emphasis on the involvement of the whole People of God, at all levels and especially in Africa, in the preparations for the Special Assembly. If this Synod is prepared well”, I said, „it will be able to involve all levels of the Christian Community: individuals, small communities, parishes, Dioceses, and local, national and international bodies” (EiA, 23).

Such a broad array of actions was meant to support new evangelization on the African continent. “The new evangelization will thus aim at building up the Church as Family, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups, favouring solidarity and the sharing of personnel and resources among the particular Churches, without undue ethnic considerations” (EiA, 63). It was decided that dialogue would become the fundamental quality of the evangelism. “United to Jesus Christ by their witness in Africa, Catholics are invited to develop an ecumenical dialogue with all their baptized brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations, in order that the unity for which Christ prayed may be achieved...” (EiA, 65).

Some sections of the exhortation are devoted to the family as a foundation of the grand work of evangelization. The Holy Family is a benchmark indicating dignity as well as male and female values in African culture. Christian perspective on marriage and family is determined by Christ's mission. "In this sacrifice [of Christ – Z.S.] there is entirely revealed that plan which God has imprinted on the humanity of man and woman since their creation (cf. Eph 5:32-33); the Marriage of baptized persons thus becomes a real symbol of that new and eternal Covenant sanctioned in the Blood of Christ" (EiA, 83).

4. Dangers and Anomalies of Marital and Family Life

The Catechism of the Catholic Church consistently teaches about marriage and family: "The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament" (CCC, 1601). Despite such an elevated goal of love and transmission of life, human moral weaknesses cause many threats and anomalies. According to the Catechism, this includes profligacy, masturbation, prostitution, pornography, rape, homosexuality, and with a particular focus on abortion²².

²² Cf. The Pontifical Council for the Family *Ethical and Pastoral Dimension*, 25.03.1994; *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, [online:] https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html [accessed: 20.04.2022].

The increasing number of divorces is alarming, both in civil and sacramental partnerships. In the Catechism we can read that: “Today there are numerous Catholics in many countries who have recourse to civil divorce and contract new civil unions. In fidelity to the words of Jesus Christ: „Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10: 11-12), the Church maintains that a new union cannot be recognized as valid, if the first marriage was” (CCC 1650, cf. 2382)²³.

The dignity, validity, and durability of marriage are defended by guidelines and the canons of the Code of Canon Law (cf. CCL 1063-1165); they also obligate respect of the wedding vow (CCL 1199-1204).

All forms of aggression contradict marital and family love; they destroy all positive relations and attack human dignity, as they undermine the freedom and safety to which each person has a natural right. Alcoholism is similarly dangerous for marriage, as it destroys health and all social relations. Addiction to drugs brings similarly negative outcomes.

In the light of the increasing number of divorces, the Church does not spiritually leave people who could not remain in sacramental relations. Pastoral concern for divorced people who live in new relationships is described in the message of the XIII Plenary Assembly “Pastoral Care of Divorced Living in New Unions” (24.01.1997). John Paul II focuses on the increasing moral and

²³ “The Lord Jesus insisted on the original intention of the Creator who willed that marriage be indissoluble. He abrogates the accommodations that had slipped into the old Law. Between the baptized, „a ratified and consummated marriage cannot be dissolved by any human power or for any reason other than death” (CCC 2382).

religious problems of the divorced people: “The Church, which was set up to lead to salvation all people and especially the baptized, cannot abandon to their own devices those who have been previously bound by sacramental marriage and who have attempted a second marriage. The Church will therefore make untiring efforts to put at their disposal her means of salvation” (FC, 84).

Specific means undertaken by the divorced were listed in the Post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* published by Pope Benedict XVI: “Yet the divorced and remarried continue to belong to the Church, which accompanies them with special concern and encourages them to live as fully as possible the Christian life through regular participation at Mass, albeit without receiving Communion, listening to the word of God, eucharistic adoration, prayer, participation in the life of the community, honest dialogue with a priest or spiritual director, dedication to the life of charity, works of penance, and commitment to the education of their children” (SC, 29).

God’s mercy encompasses all people dealing with all sorts of living situations, but it also relates to individual responsibilities (between husband and wife). Communal and social life faces economic, political, and cultural threats in many African and South American societies.

5. Conclusion

The teachings offered by the Magisterium of the Church on the issues of marriage and family are extremely diverse and have been elaborately discussed. They include references to various sources, such as the Holy Scripture and Tradition, and incorporate findings

of medical, psychological, historical, pedagogical and philosophical sciences relating to the axiology of human life, especially to the dignity of marriage and family.

The teachings of the Magisterium of the Church are included in documents devoted both to the entire Church, and to the given regions of the world. This magisterium includes, among others, encyclicals, exhortations, letters, and proclamations. These solemn teachings are developed and documented in the Catechism of Catholic Church, in the Code of Canon Law, and by the Council for the Family. The entire teaching of the Church is aimed at showing marriage and family as a path for achieving sanctity through the values present and practised in marriages and families. This education continues, and new documents are to be published²⁴. These will include guidelines and recommendations as the value of the family is pleasing to God and important for every human who draws the most important values from family life.

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²⁴ Many documents defending family values have been published in the 21st century. Marriage and family in the teachings of Benedict XVI and Francis: Benedict XVI, *La verità sulla famiglia*, in “Quaderni dell’Osservatore Romano”, Città del Vaticano 2007; Benedict XVI, *Rodzina i wspólnota chrześcijańska* [Family and Christian Community], „Sprawy Rodziny” 3 (2005), p. 29; Francis, post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (19.03.2016), 31-49.

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LA FAMILLE AU RWANDA AUJOURD'HUI : ENTRE TRADITION, VALEURS CHRÉTIENNES ET VAGUES DU PRÉSENT

Abstract

The contemporary Rwandan family stands at the crossroads of three powerful forces: inherited cultural traditions, Christian values deeply rooted in the society, and the rapid transformations brought about by modernity. This article examines how these elements interact in shaping family identity, roles, and social responsibilities. It explores the resilience of traditional structures, the influence of Christian teaching on marriage and family life, and the challenges posed by social change, urbanization, globalization, and evolving moral perspectives. Particular attention is given to tensions between continuity and transformation, as well as to the pastoral implications for the Church, which is called to accompany, support, and guide families living within this dynamic and sometimes conflicting context.

Keywords: family, moral tradition, solidarity, domestic church, values, globalization, creation order,

Introduction

La famille au Rwanda n'est pas simplement l'une des institutions culturelles de la société dont elle ne serait que -comme partout ailleurs la plus petite cellule : elle est le fondement de celle-ci, le point de départ, mais aussi de convergence, de toutes les valeurs, pratiquement la base et le faite de la culture rwandaise. Au contact avec le message chrétien, elle n'a pas été altérée mais plutôt augmentée, embellie et ennoblie, au point d'avoir même des modèles de probité et de sainteté proposés au monde entier. Cependant, dans l'entre-temps, l'ouragan de la crise véhiculée notamment par la nouvelle éthique postmoderne, raflant presque tout sur son passage, n'épargne pas la famille rwandaise, qui – comme un peu partout ailleurs dans le monde – vit comme une sorte de descente aux enfers, ces temps-ci. Ceci interpelle tous les acteurs et surtout les décideurs à tous les niveaux car, si la famille coule, nous sommes tous des naufragés.

C'est sur ces trois articulations que je vais jeter un regard cursif, en m'attardant un peu sur la situation actuelle qui requiert de nous tous une prise de conscience, une réaction cohérente et un retour créatif aux sources.

1. Considérations sur la famille

De tout temps et sous tous les cieux, la famille est la toute première institution de droit divin, dès la création. Elle n'est pas simplement (ou seulement) la cellule de base de la société, mais le réceptacle et l'école de la vie. Lieu de nos premiers pas dans l'existence (même bien avant la naissance), elle est aussi et surtout le lieu de notre

humanisation, de notre „culture” : en effet, si de par la nature nous les humains sommes un peu comme toutes les autres créatures, c'est par la culture (l'éducation) que nous devenons progressivement distincts des autres êtres, que nous devenons „hommes”, que nous nous épanouissons comme enfants de Dieu : la langue et le langage, les us et coutumes (l'héritage ancestral), les artefacts, et surtout les valeurs¹, nous sont transmis au sein de la famille pour contribuer à notre maturation et nous aider à devenir progressivement ce que nous sommes déjà dans le plan de Dieu.

Toute atteinte à la famille est atteinte à l'homme dans sa dignité, et pratiquement atteinte à Dieu lui-même. Ce n'est pas par hasard que le dragon polycéphale de la nouvelle éthique mondiale qui a claironné ses intentions à peine voilées dans la fameuse „révolution sexuelle”, vise d'abord ce qui est stable dans les paramètres de l'homme : la famille, la tradition, la morale...

Avec la mondialisation (et/ou globalisation², fer de lance de la *nouvelle éthique postmoderne*), accélérée et répandu sans frais par les nouvelles technologies de l'information, le modèle occidental (déjà aux abois) s'impose sans courtoisie dans tous les coins de la planète et dans chaque aire de la vie : ce qui naguère constituait la spécificité culturelle d'ici ou de là s'est effrité, tout tend à s'uniformiser et à s'aplatir ; mais c'est aussi une sorte de loi de la jungle, car le plus violent s'impose plus aisément, que ce soit au niveau

¹ Cf. F. Nyombayire, *Topiques de la culture contemporaine. Edgar Morin, par-delà les scories de la modernité*, Domenici-Pêcheux, Rome 1996.

² Dans les langues latines, il y a distinction entre deux concepts différents dans les langues germaniques notamment – ou autres langues non latines – : qui n'ont que le mot „globalisation/Globalization”, tandis que justement dans les langues latines il y a deux concepts différents :
– *Globalisation* touche à l'économie („économie globale”) ;
– *Mondialisation*, qui concerne tout le reste des domaines, à commencer par la culture...

militaire, économique, culturel ou moral. Partant, le modèle de la famille africaine (dont la famille rwandaise fait partie) s'est estompé au gré des idéologies, de modèles évanescents trop vite idéalisés, sous le poids de lois et de politiques peu soucieuses du vrai bien des familles ; mais aussi, hélas, dans le cafouillis de courants contradictoires au sein même de l'église, ce qui désoriente beaucoup de couples et de jeunes qui s'en trouvent désemparés.

2. La famille rwandaise traditionnelle

Avant la rencontre avec la culture occidentale et l'évangile, (à la fin du XIe et au début du XXe siècle), la famille et rwandaise polarisait toute la vie sociale, et morale du pays, s'insérant en ceci dans le modèle bien établi de la famille africaine. De la mémoire de la vie nationale à l'envergure du politique, des us et coutumes aux croyances et aux valeurs, tout partait de la famille et se déployait en fonction de son bien-être. En plus, l'identité et l'harmonie qui s'y vivaient portaient beaucoup à affirmer que ce modèle n'était pas très loin du dessein de Dieu sur la famille³. Beaucoup de traits en définissaient les contours, en assuraient la substance, en garantissaient la pérennité et la fierté ; nous en énumérons quelquesuns ::

- L'implication des parents du futur couple dès avant les fiançailles (qui duraient le temps qu'il faut, quatre ans au minimum) ;
- L'alliance entre les familles de provenance des futurs mariés ;
- Le rôle modérateur d'un médiateur („Umuranga”) qui était comme le regard de la société, par-delà l'horizon des deux familles de provenance des deux époux ;

³ Le premier Synode pour les Églises d'Afrique (1994) s'en inspirait dans ses articulations.

- Le soutien et l'accompagnement du jeune couple par les familles de provenance, et par tout l'entourage ;
- La solidarité et le sens de la famille élargie ;
- La fierté d'être une famille nombreuse, considérant ceci comme une bénédiction de Dieu⁴;
- La distribution et le respect absolu des différents rôles (homme-femme, père-mère, fille-garçon) selon la nature et la culture⁵;
- La stabilité qui tient en horreur le divorce et la séparation, qui est perçue comme une violation – une trahison – de l'alliance („igihango”) entre les conjoints et entre leurs familles respectives ;
- Le sens de la gratitude et de la gratuité, incluant le partage et l'hospitalité (même envers des inconnus) ;
- Le sens du sacrifice et la protection des vulnérables (les petits, les personnes âgées, les indigents...) ;
- Le sens de la réconciliation, allant jusqu'à minimiser le réflexe naturel (parfois institutionnalisé) de la vengeance⁶;

⁴ Notons par exemple que, dans ce contexte, la polygamie n'avait rien à voir avec la luxure, mais s'inscrivait dans la ligne de l'instinct de conservation : plus une famille “avait de bras” (était nombreuse), mieux elle pouvait assurer sa subsistance par le travail de la terre notamment, et se protéger contre l'arbitraire. On connaît beaucoup de cas où c'est la première épouse qui proposait à son mari d'en prendre une deuxième ou troisième, ... etc. et participait même au choix de celle-ci qui, à son tour, lui devra respect et obéissance (comme envers une grande sœur et quasiment une maman).

⁵ Ici, il y a lieu de dire que, longtemps avant l'idéologie du genre („gender”) qui sape aujourd'hui certaines valeurs familiales, la famille connaissait une bonne complémentarité avec un grand respect pour la femme („cœur du ménage”), qui était partie prenante de toutes les décisions importantes de la famille, dans une approche de saine complémentarité et non d'antagonisme ou de revendications qui oublient la spécificité et l'unicité de chacun dans l'ordre de la création.

⁶ Voir par exemple la tradition de „gukaraba inzigo” (litt. se laver se laver

- Le respect de la vie de sa conception à sa fin naturelle, stigmatisant donc tout ce qui aurait trait à l'avortement, l'assassinat ou l'abandon de quelqu'un (surtout une personne handicapée ou très âgée) à son sort alors qu'il est à court de moyens de vie ou de survie ; encore moins, achever quelqu'un même dans le cas de celui qui est grièvement blessé (au champ de bataille) ou „diminué” (loin de cette culture toute idée d'euthanasie, pour rappes) ;
- Un grand sens du sacré, mettant Dieu à la première place en tout, même au temps où la révélation plénière de Dieu en Jésus-Christ ne nous était pas encore parvenue, qu'on cherchait Dieu comme „à tâtons”, etc.

À l'arrivée des missionnaires et de l'évangile qu'ils portaient, le point d'ancrage allait vite s'identifier avec certaines de ces „valeurs” préexistantes, qui seront vues et intégrées comme des „pierres d'attente” au vrai sens⁷.

3. La rencontre avec le message chrétien

Pour ceux qui ont embrassé le christianisme, la rencontre avec le message chrétien n'a en rien amoindri la famille, mais l'a enrichie, ennoblie et purifiée de certaines scories : tant il est vrai que la

des saletés de la vendetta), c'est-à-dire annihiler le contentieux faisant objet de vengeance en chaîne (vendetta) ; on le croirait inspiré par l'heureux adage : „Œil pour œil produirait un monde d'aveugles” !

⁷ C'est ce sur quoi le Père Dominique Nothomb, membre de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs) qui ont évangélisé le Rwanda, mettra l'emphase dans un livre sur la prédisposition de la culture rwandaise à l'accueil du Christianisme (D. Nothomb, Un humanisme africain. Valeurs et pierres d'attente, Éd. Lumen Vitae, Bruxelles 1965, avec préface du célèbre abbé Alexis Kagame)

parole de Dieu, même en s'adaptant aux différents milieux, ne laisse jamais les êtres comme ils étaient avant mais agit toujours comme un ferment. Benoît XVI ne disait-il pas, à juste titre, qu'il n'y a *pas d'inculturation de l'évangile sans une évangélisation de la culture*⁸. L'une des nouveautés fut sans doute le caractère monogamique du mariage et son indissolubilité, ce qui impliquait chez les nouveaux baptisés (surtout adultes) un grand renoncement et un vrai discernement: un homme polygame converti devait ainsi choisir parmi ses épouses une seulement avec laquelle s'engager dans le mariage chrétien, tout en accomplissant ses devoirs paternels envers les enfants nés des autres épouses qu'il ne devait plus fréquenter comme époux⁹.

Mais c'est la caractéristique essentielle du mariage chrétien qui va tout transfigurer : l'amour conjugal cesse d'être considéré simplement de manière horizontale (comme institution sociale), confiné dans les contours du passé et du présent (les ancêtres et nous), mais s'ouvre aux horizons d'éternité. Loin d'être une institution purement socio-culturelle, le mariage (ou le fait de fonder une famille) est désormais perçu comme une vocation et donc, à l'initiative de Dieu, un appel à la sanctification, un chemin d'éternité. La qualification de „Église domestique” (Paul VI) est tellement belle et promeut le foyer au rang de cellule vivante du corps dont Jésus-Christ est la tête, temple de Dieu et lieu de sanctification mutuelle ; la traditionnelle complémentarité de l'homme et de la femme, dans la diversité de nature et de rôles, s'en trouve renforcée et même élevée. On verra des couples (mari et femme ensemble) engagés dans l'apostolat

⁸ Benoît XVI, *Africae Munus*, 36-38.

⁹ Une vraie gymnastique d'esprit et de cœur, quand on sait que ses ex-épouses devaient elles aussi être entretenues et protégées.

auprès des non baptisés¹⁰, et beaucoup de couples auront vécu (et vivent encore) l'idéal chrétien de manière exemplaire.

Dans les orientations pastorales, les évêques du Rwanda mettent – à bon escient – la famille au rang des grandes priorités. Lors de la visite du Pape (Saint) Jean-Paul II au Rwanda, la messe pour les familles ne fut pas seulement la solennelle célébration de clôture le 9 septembre 1990, mais pratiquement l'apothéose de cette visite-même. Le saint pontife avait dit la veille, dans sa rencontre avec les intellectuels du Rwanda, que son grand désir était de pouvoir canoniser un jour un couple ; et il ajouta, „...plût au ciel que ce couple soit du Rwanda”¹¹.

D'aucuns voient dans le procès en cours pour la béatification du couple Daphrose et Cyprien Rugamba, un de ces couples ayant vécu de manière cohérente leur vocation conjugale, la réalisation de ce désir-prophétie de Saint Jean-Paul II.

C'est vrai que même pendant la tourmente de de la guerre des années 1990, dont le paroxysme fut le génocide de 1994 et qui mirent à l'épreuve la foi de plusieurs, nombre de familles se sont illustrées par une attitude de témoins de la foi et de la vie chrétiennes, le cas de Cyprien et Daphrose Rugamba¹², étant un parmi tant

¹⁰ Œuvre surtout des deux mouvements d'action catholique qui épauleront les premiers missionnaires : la Légion de Marie (*Legio Mariae*) et la *Ligue du Sacré Cœur de Jésus*.

¹¹ Jean-Paul II au Rwanda, *Discours aux intellectuels*, Kigali-Nyamirambo, 08 septembre 1990.

¹² Cyprien (1935-1994) et Daphrose (1944-1994) sont originaires de la même paroisse au sud du Pays. Après deux ans et demi de séminaire, Cyprien poursuit des études d'histoire au Burundi et en Belgique. Il travaille dans la haute administration. Spécialiste reconnu des sciences humaines, il consacre une grande partie de son temps à la poésie, à la musique et à la chorégraphie. Quant à Daphrose, elle devient enseignante. Par la suite, elle se consacrera à ses enfants.

d'autres (dont certains sont encore en vie); c'est essentiellement sur ces familles vivant de manière cohérente leur engagement chrétien que se sont fondées la renaissance et la relève de l'église du Rwanda qui fait son chemin aujourd'hui.

Mais hélas, les temps et l'état du monde en ce moment de notre histoire n'épargnent rien ni personne, et la famille est malheureusement la première cible.

Un couple engagé dans l'évangélisation

Le couple se marie en janvier 1965 mais connaîtra de grandes difficultés conjugales jusqu'à la conversion de Cyprien en 1982 pour laquelle priaient ardemment son épouse. Dès lors ils deviennent un couple où l'amour, la tendresse, la délicatesse, la connivence sont visibles de tous. Cette expérience de l'épreuve de leur mariage et l'action guérissante de la conversion leur donne une force particulière pour l'évangélisation des couples africains. Ils vivent alors une vie de foi intense à travers le renouveau charismatique et les groupes de prières. Ils exercent la compassion particulièrement auprès des malades et des enfants des rues. Ils rencontrent la Communauté de l'Emmanuel en 1989 par l'intermédiaire de Fidesco, lors d'un séjour à Paray-le-Monial. De retour dans leur pays, ils commencent une maisonnée (groupe de partage hebdomadaire). Le premier week-end communautaire a lieu les 22-23 septembre 1990. La Communauté de l'Emmanuel au Rwanda est née. Au moment de leur mort 3 ans après, la Communauté compte une centaine de membres rwandais. Aujourd'hui, ils sont 1000.

Une famille unie jusqu'au martyr

Leur attitude pacifiste ainsi que les prises de positions publiques de Cyprien dénonçant les appels à la violence et la mention ethnique sur les cartes d'identité dans le climat de guerre civile montante, ont placé les Rugamba en tête des personnalités à abattre. Ils seront assassinés le premier jour du génocide à leur résidence avec 6 de leurs 10 enfants.

„Le 7 avril 1994, premier jour du génocide, les soldats de la garde présidentielle investissent la maison de la famille. „Es-tu toujours chrétien ?”, demande leur chef à Cyprien. „Oui”, répond celui-ci. Les soldats rassemblent toute la famille dans le jardin et ils tirent. Tous s'écroulent sur le sol : avec les parents, meurent Émerita, Serge, Cyrdy, Dacy, Cyrdina, Ginie et la petite cousine Gabrielle”.

4. La famille au creuset des vagues du présent

Ce modèle qui faisait des envieux a vite fait de se contaminer – déjà au contact avec l'Occident-, et de s'éffriter dans le tourbillon de la mondialisation/globalisation et leurs anti-valeurs (quoique avec des versants avantageux pour l'humanité), accélérées et diffusées par les nouvelles technologies de l'information: l'individualisme, l'utilitarisme, le calcul matérialiste, les idéologies de l'émancipation et du genre (*gender*), le plaisir égoïste, le goût de l'éphémère et le refus de s'engager dans la durée, mais surtout la perte de la référence à Dieu et au sacré ont pris le pas sur ce qui faisait le trésor de la famille rwandaise (et africaine en général), que la rencontre avec le Christ avait encore élevée et vivifiée.

4.1. Accueil aveugle des „dérives” de l'occident

Désormais, puisque „le monde est devenu un village”, les africains (et les Rwandais en sont) ont presque honte d'être eux-mêmes, dans tous les secteurs de la vie ils veulent imiter l'occident, et ceci n'épargne pas la famille: oubli du sens de la famille élargie, banalisation de la sexualité, légitimation de ce qui naguère était vu comme contre-nature, mariage à essai, séparations et divorces à la légère, peur de l'enfant (jadis vu comme une bénédiction et aujourd'hui appréhendé comme une menace au bien-être, quasiment une malédiction), ... etc. De l'Occident et des différents „programmes” on copie surtout une théorie délétère des droits et des choix. Dans le sens du fameux „consensus” qui se veut normatif, il y a une série de „droits” contradictoires, qui en définitive nient la dignité humaine, favorisant des choix pervers qui en sont les pendents, dont le droit de choisir son sexe: le sexe n'est pas naturel, les catégories garçon-

filles, homme-femme, etc. sont étiquetés de constructions sociales frisant la discrimination traditionnelle et surannée propre aux sociétés peu civilisées; d'où la liberté de se choisir et se construire son propre sexe, ceci étant érigé un droit fondamental et intrinsèque.

- Le mariage pour tous, revendication du „mariage” même pour les LGBT alors qu'ils en dénigrent la nature et l'institution divine ;
- Les Droits de la femme qui impliquent l'avortement, comme c'est le cas dans le fameux Protocole de Maputo (2003) et l'agenda qui en découle, normatif et donc obligeant pour tous les pays qui l'ont ratifié.

Sans fermer les yeux sur la pertinence de s'adapter aux temps que nous vivons (conjoncture de l'économie et du travail), force est de constater que ce qu'on appelle ici émancipation ou modernisation, c'est une gamme de droits qui disent tout et son contraire. À ce propos le Pape (émérite) Benoît XVI remarque que : „La multiplication des droits conduit finalement à la destruction du concept de droit et s'achève dans un „droit” nihiliste de l'homme de se nier lui-même : avortement, suicide, production de l'homme deviennent des droits de l'homme qui en même temps le nient”¹³.

4.2. Lois et politiques sans souci de la famille

Ce serait peut dire que de déplorer les mauvaises lois et les politiques alignées sur des modèles qui ne sont pas du terroir rwandais ou africain, simplement pour faire plaisir aux bailleurs de fonds

¹³ J. Ratzinger/Benoît XVI, *Libérer la liberté. Foi et politique (Préface du Pape François)*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana – Parole et Silence, Paris 2018, p. 17.

(conditionnement de certains financements aux positions à l'égard des droits des LGBT, par exemple), aux multinationales ou simplement à ceux qui sont susceptibles d'assurer aux dirigeants africains la pérennité au pouvoir. Un africaniste renommé disait un jour par euphémisme „les occidentaux ne nous aiment pas outre-mesure” : les responsables politiques les plus admirés et les plus soutenus ne sont pas ceux qui promeuvent le vrai bien-être de leur peuple, mais plutôt les enfants dociles de l'occident (et de l'Extrême-Orient car maintenant la Chine, le Japon et le Singapour font leur poids dans la balance), ceux qui représentent au mieux les intérêts de leurs maîtres inavoués, ou qui mettent bien en application les protocoles et les programmes dictés, peu importe leur répercussion sur le vrai bien-être du peuple¹⁴, sans aucune homologation — pourtant nécessaire — des expériences des autres, comme par exemple l'hiver démographique en Occident ou les ravages de la politique de l'enfant unique en Chine. D'où des législations contre la vie, contre la liberté (y compris la liberté religieuse), une sorte de reniement de soi-même, de ses propres racines et repères, pour plaire à l'extérieur. Mais à petit feu on s'est retourné contre soi-même, dans certaines législations et allégeances qui ne présagent rien de bon pour la famille dont nous disons pourtant qu'elle est sacrée et vitale pour l'avenir de la nation :

- Légèreté dans l'octroi des divorces ;
- Campagnes en faveur de la facilitation de la contraception pour les adolescents et adolescentes, avec ce que cela implique déjà comme dépravation des mœurs ;

¹⁴ Cela fait penser au slogan que le philosophe Karl Jaspers n'a pas voulu reprendre, au paroxysme du nazisme, préférant perdre sa chère et être exilé : „Je siffle la chanson de celui dont je mange le pain” !!!

- Accessibilité de l'avortement aux mineures, sans même requérir l'avis de leurs parents ou tuteurs ;
- Stérilisation, souvent à leur insu, de certaines mamans après l'accouchement du 3ème (ou du deuxième) enfant, avec toutes les conséquences imaginables et inimaginables sur les concernées et leurs familles.

Ceux qui, normalement, ont en même temps le droit et le devoir de protéger la famille, en deviennent plutôt les destructeurs : C'est le monde à l'envers !!

4.3. Désorientation au sein même de l'Église

Mais cette panoplie serait incomplète et même injuste, si nous ne mentionnions pas la désorientation au sein même de notre église.: tout en connaissant bien la volonté de Dieu sur la famille, la sainte doctrine consignée dans la Parole de Dieu et l'enseignement bimillénaire de la sainte église, il y a foisonnement de tendances contradictoires; l'une des meilleures illustrations à ce propos, c'est la tactique dite du „salami” (Matyas Rákosi), bien illustrée par le Cardinal Robert Sarah (qui en démasque ensuite la supercherie et la bat en brèche) :

„Dans cette tactique, on accorde tranche par tranche ce que l'on ne refuserait toujours de concéder en bloc. On veut ainsi introduire par petite dose, par „tranche”, le laxisme moral dans l'Église, et changer progressivement les exigences de Jésus et de son Évangile pour, en réalité, s'adapter à la décadence anthropologique et morale, et à ce véritable „dessalement” de la foi des sociétés postmodernes. Observons bien le processus.
Première tranche : au point de départ, on trouve, bien entendu,

des rappels de l'enseignement des Saintes Ecritures et de la Doctrine de l'Eglise sur le mariage. **Deuxième tranche** : on insiste sur les difficultés à „accueillir” et à „mettre en pratique” cet enseignement qui correspond, selon ses partisans, non à un ordre et une exigence de Dieu, mais à „un idéal à atteindre”. **Troisième tranche**, sous la forme d'une question : les divorcés „remariés” sont-ils en état de péché grave ? La **Quatrième tranche** voit l'entrée en scène du directeur de conscience, qui doit aider les divorcés „remariés” à „discerner”, c'est-à-dire à choisir ce qui leur convient dans leur situation. Ce directeur de conscience doit se montrer très compréhensif et indulgent. Il doit faire preuve de compassion... Mais de quelle compassion s'agit-il ? Pour le casuiste, en effet, lorsqu'on procède à la qualification morale d'un acte, le souci de la compassion doit l'emporter sur les actions objectivement mauvaises. Il faut pratiquement fermer les yeux sur les actes mauvais, les situer dans leur contexte, les comprendre dans l'ambiance de la dépravation générale actuelle, et, ainsi, les tolérer. Il faut donc être clément, s'adapter aux circonstances. Parvenu à la **Cinquième tranche du salami**, chacun est appelé à discerner, personnellement et en toute liberté de pensée, ce qui lui convient le mieux”.¹⁵

La famille se fonde sur le mariage qui part de l'amour et a comme fin principale l'amour¹⁶ : il s'agit de l'union entre un homme et une femme qui, par le sacrement, deviennent un, et visent toujours

¹⁵ R. Cardinal SARAH (Cardinal), *La famille comme foyer de la Miséricorde divine*, in XXX, *Miséricorde divine : Source d'espérance pour la nouvelle évangélisation en Afrique. Actes du 3ème Congrès panafricain de la Miséricorde divine. Sanctuaire de la Miséricorde Divine à Kabuga, Rwanda*, Kigali 2017, p. 195.

¹⁶ Combien, aujourd'hui, se marient vraiment par amour ?

cette unité profonde dans un lien indissoluble de fidélité, ouvert à la fécondité.

Mais une certaine mentalité ou tendance actuelle, même au sein de l'Église, n'ose plus parler de la famille et du mariage selon le plan de Dieu comme vocation à l'amour, à la sainteté, impliquant donc le sacrifice et même le martyre qui n'est rien d'autre que la cohérence de l'amour qui va jusqu'au bout : l'unité, l'indissolubilité et l'ouverture à la vie ne se comprennent que dans cette optique.

De cette précarité du mariage et de la famille aujourd'hui, j'aime souvent citer l'étiologie qu'en a fait le Cardinal Giacomo BIFFI (alors archevêque de Bologne), en avril 1999. C'était à l'occasion de la journée mondiale de prière pour les vocations au sacerdoce et à la vie consacrée, et le journaliste semblait insinuer que la pénurie de ces vocations en Occident est due essentiellement à la loi du célibat consacrée. Le Cardinal lui fit remarquer alors que ça ne va pas mieux du côté des vocations au mariage, avant de pointer du doigt la cause de tout cela : le four à micro-onde, l'aspirine et le papier-mouchoir. À bon entendeur, salut !

Voici l'explication de la remarque du Cardinal :

- *Four à microonde* : vouloir avoir tout de suite, ne pas savoir attendre comme on fait normalement lors d'une cuisson qui a ses règles. Dans une mentalité où on ne sait pas être patient pour attendre, il n'y a ni mariage, ni vie consacrée qui tienne.
- *Aspirine* : aujourd'hui on tend à éliminer directement toute souffrance, toute douleur, même celles faisant partie du cycle normal de la vie. Dans une mentalité où on ne sait pas endurer, faire un sacrifice, il n'y a ni mariage ni vie consacrée qui tienne.
- *Papier-mouchoir* : c'est la civilisation de l'usage unique, ce qui dure commence à ennuyer et même lasser. Ce qui est définitif ?

Pas question. Jusqu'à vouloir changer d'amis, de partenaire et de conjoint comme on fait pour le papier-mouchoir. Dans une telle mentalité, pas de mariage ni de vie consacrée qui tienne.

4.4. Épilogue

„Le monde est en feu, ce n'est donc pas le moment de parler de choses de peu d'importance", disait en son temps Sainte Thérèse d'Avila.

On pourrait parler de crises très longuement et sous divers aspects : étiologie, phénoménologie, effets... Que dire maintenant, ou plutôt, que faire ?

Nous ne devons pas les considérer comme une fatalité, surtout que nous croyons fermement que la famille n'est pas condamnée à rester en crise. Nous devons nous lever, tous et chacun, pour défendre la famille : c'est le présent et l'avenir de nos sociétés, de l'église et de toute l'humanité qui sont en jeu. Bien-sûr qu'il faut beaucoup de courage pour être soi-même, tenir à son originalité et à ses valeurs, surtout quand il en va de la lutte pour la vérité et la vie. Je cite ici un mot percutant et clair du Pape François, dans sa préface au livre de son prédécesseur que j'ai évoqué plus haut :

„...la défense de l'homme et de l'humain contre les réductions idéologiques du pouvoir passe à nouveau aujourd'hui par le fait d'inscrire l'obéissance de l'homme à Dieu comme limite de l'obéissance à l'État. Relever ce défi, dans le véritable et clair changement d'époque que nous vivons aujourd'hui, signifie défendre la famille. Pour sa part, Jean-Paul II avait bien compris la portée décisive de la question ; appelé avec raison le „pape de la famille", il ne soulignait pas par hasard que „le futur de l'humanité passe par la famille" (*Familiaris consortio*, 86). Dans le même ordre d'idées, j'ai moi aussi

insisté sur le fait que „le bien de la famille est déterminant pour l'avenir du monde et de l'Église” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 31)¹⁷.

Heureusement, nous pouvons dire que dans le contexte de l'Afrique et du Rwanda en particulier, tout n'est pas perdu car il y a encore des familles qui vivent avec cohérence leurs engagements du baptême et de leur vocation particulière: les soutenir et les encourager à ne pas se laisser contaminer, à ne pas troquer leur dignité contre les mirages de la postmodernité, c'est le premier acte de sauvetage; oser aller à la source, oser retourner à la source, cela nous redonnerait à tous la fraîcheur qui nous manque aujourd'hui: et la source c'est la sainte Écriture, c'est le magistère vivant de l'Église, c'est aussi les valeurs de la famille rwandaise/africaine, fécondées par l'Évangile, qui pourraient revivifier la famille par-delà les crises qui la terrassent. Jadis, lorsque Jésus Enfant Jésus était menacé par le roi Hérode, c'est en Afrique qu'il a trouvé refuge, et heureusement pour le genre humain.

Aujourd'hui encore, Jésus est chassé et pourchassé par les familles qui prétendent se constituer sans amour (et donc sans lui), par des familles qui ne veulent pas d'enfants (donc qui ne le veulent pas, lui); par des familles sans solidarité (et donc sans miséricorde, sans lui), des familles qui se construisent sur le sable et non sur le roc (et donc pas sur lui); si donc Jésus pourchassé par les simulacres de familles, si Jésus -et avec lui les membres de son corps-, cherchait refuge au Rwanda, en Afrique, le trouverait-il aujourd'hui ? Faisons en sorte que la réponse soit „oui” !

¹⁷ J. Ratzinger/Benoît XVI, *Libérer la liberté*, op. cit., p. 9.

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT ACCORDING TO THE TRADITIONAL LANGO CULTURE OF UGANDA

Abstract

This article sheds light on the understanding of human growth and development according to the Lango culture, highlighting within the human life cycle the progression of human life and all that human growth and development according to the Lango culture entails.

Keywords: human, development, customary transmission, culture, way of behaviour, custom

Introduction

The Lango people, a Nilotic ethnic group of northern Uganda, originated, according to oral tradition, from the Falasha of Solomonic ancestry at Axum in Abyssinia, in about 900 AD, and, via Nazareth and Addis Ababa, arrived at their destination of the Omo valley, north of Rudolf, in 1250. They spread to different parts of Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, and the Lango of Uganda arrived and

settled at Otuke hill in 1800 and later dispersed to other parts of Uganda¹.

The Lango people live in the Lango region (North-Central Uganda), north of Lake Kyoga. The 2014 National Population and Housing Census put the Lango population at 2,165,948 people. A close study of overlooked oral and print sources indicates that the Lango of Uganda are not a homogeneous group. Instead, they are composed of people from diverse backgrounds².

The local dialect for the Lango people is “Leb Lango” which is also understandable by the neighboring Acholi, Jopadohla, Alur, Kuman, and the Luo of Kenya. There are also a handful of the Lango people who speak Kiswahili resulting from trade relationships with neighboring Kenya, with whom the medium of communication was only Kiswahili.

The Lango are agro-pastoral, relying on agriculture and raising livestock since olden times and this trend is still kept up to date with common animals such as sheep, goats, and cows being popular³. At the time that community land was abundant, many men participated in hunting to subsidize their diet.

The region has two planting seasons each year and this makes it possible to plant varied crops. The main ones, among others, include beans, pigeon peas, green grams, groundnuts [peanuts]. There are other root crops with the common ones being cassava

¹ Cf. *The Tri-Centenary of Lango People in Uganda*, [online:] <http://www.laonaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/THE-TRI-CENTINARY-OF-LANGO-PEOPLE-IN-UGANDA.pdf> [accessed: 04.05.2022].

² Cf. S.A. Owiny, *The Lango of Uganda: Identity, Origin, Migration, and Settlements. Working Papers in African Studies*, African Studies Center Pardee School of Global Studies Boston University, Boston 2021, p. 2.

³ Cf. *Uganda-Economy*, [online:] <https://africanvoiceonline.co.uk/the-lango-of-uganda/> [accessed 04.06.2022].

and sweet potatoes. Cereals (millet, maize, sorghum, rice) [are also cultivated]; the Lango people also grow a lot of oil crops which include (simsim, sunflower, soybeans) and there is commercial growing of cotton and sunflower.

Lango is a fruit basket for fruit trees such as mangoes, oranges, avocados, and lemons which most families have, and also other crops – bananas and pineapples are grown across the region⁴. The region has a special identity with shea trees which grow naturally and produce plenty of shea fruits. Shea oil which is processed in Lango on a large scale has entered the external market in recent years.

1. Understanding human development

Human Development can be understood as the totality of human values, material and spiritual, the growth of each person, and the whole person⁵.

This finds better space within the culture of a people where the families are a major agent for schooling these values.

A central feature of both religious and psychological understanding of the human condition is that people are not static entities.

Life from conception, birth to death, involves many changes in our physical, psychological, and spiritual makeup and we must have a history to confide in to maintain human stability.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cf. John Paul II, *Synodal letter to the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar*, Pauline Publications, Nairobi 1994.

2. Stages of human development

The psychologists Kelvin and Hoffnung present human development in stages ranging from Oral stage, Anal Stage, The Phallic Stage, Latency Stage, the Genital, Physical development, Cognitive development and Psychosexual development⁶. All the above stages form a part in the process of understanding development in the traditional/cultural perspective of development according to the Lango people, and the direct initiations at the different stages of life.

3. Consideration of life cycle among the Lango people

The social units of the Lango people are the family, lineage (Jo Dog-gola), and the clan (Ateker), who trace their ancestry to a “grandfather”. The lineage [family group] lives close to each other, within reach for consultation, assistance, and participation in marriage and birth ceremonies. When a lineage member travels out of his neighbourhood, clan affiliations become important⁷.

The consideration of the cycle of human life according to the Lango culture starts from conception to death and each stage has celebrations to recognise the importance associated with it. This is aligned to the teaching of the Catholic church which teaches life as beginning from conception.

⁶ Cf. R.L. Seifert – K.L. Hoffnung, *Child and Adolescent Development*, Houghton Mifflin, New York 1987, p. 5.

⁷ Cf. J.H Driberg, *The Lango, A Nilotic Tribe of Uganda*, T. Fisher Unwin, London 1923, pp. 192-204; idem, *Engato the Lion Cub*, George Routledge & Sons, London, 1933, p. 29.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church recognises and teaches that *every human life from the moment of conception until death is sacred* (CCC 2319). This forms the basis for the understanding of the life cycle according the Lango culture. The Lango consideration of life cycle ranges from conception, birth, initiation, marriage, death, and life after death.

3.1. Conception and Birth

The Lango people value children to the extent that the child was the shield of the marriage, and it was the woman who remained central in fulfilment of this, hence the need for a woman to be fertile. The fertility of a woman is proved by conception. This proves the thought that a woman is placed by God as the mother of humanity, dispenser and sustainer of life⁸.

In this case, a mother who declared her pregnancy is celebrated provided her pregnancy is within the approved, married, family life. And in the event that the woman is barren, she is considered dead and another woman would be recommended so as to bear children whom the first woman as her own, hence the approval of polygamy⁹.

In traditional Lango society, the birth procedure was usually carried out at home by traditional birth attendants. Once a new baby has been born, the relatives and other friends come to congratulate the parents of the newborn for ushering a new life into the world.

⁸ Cf. G.W. Kenyuyfoon, *Women Religious Missionaries and Their Role in Evangelization of Africa: Seed for the African Sisterhood*, Mambo Press, Zimbabwe 2014, p. 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

The mother is expected to breastfeed the baby for up to one year before introducing supplementary foods. This is because it is believed breastmilk has enough antibodies to help the child fight viruses and bacterial infections in the process of growth. It also saves the child from contracting asthma and other respiratory infections. Weaning the child is the responsibility of the mother.

The naming of the child usually followed from events surrounding birth or the situation at stake, and in some instances, nature would also determine the naming of the child. Considering circumstances, if the child is born on the road (yoo), that child could be named Oyoo if a boy and Ayoo if a girl, being derived from yoo (road). If the children born are twins, it is automatic that the first to come if a boy is named Opio and if a girl is named Apio. In case a child is born with any kind of deformity, if a boy he is named Ojok and if a girl, she is named Ajok. The ceremony of naming marked the end of birth initiation.

A childless family is considered a failed family, and the man is usually advised to marry another woman if the wife had failed to conceive within a period of one year after marriage. Having children is a ticket to participation in the elder's forum and being elected as a leader (Rwot kaka, Awitong, Wonnyaci).

The Lango people value children. It is widely believed that the more children you have, the more respect and economic gains. This is especially the case if there are more girls in the family, because marrying a girl involves a dowry, i.e. a marriage gift usually made of cows and goats (approximately 5 cows and 10 goats for an uneducated girl and 10-20 cows, 30 goats for an educated girl).

3.2. Initiation and Marriage

The initiation ceremonies among the Lango people are one of the key events in the life cycle of everyone and encompasses instructions on some basic principles of life to guide a smooth process of [transition from] childhood to adulthood.

From the earlier days of childhood, the Lango women take up the responsibility of raising a child, as opposed to the modern co-parenting.

At the age of reason, for instance, the child is identified with his or her skills and this will determine how best the uncles and aunts can help. The boys accompanied their uncles on daily chore activities like, farming, hunting, fishing... and the girls accompanied their aunts in house chore activities like harvesting, cleaning the house, cooking, collecting firewood and water...

Youth are also given some instruction on family life when they reach adolescent stage, and this was very important: that for instance a girl who misses it would risk missing obtaining a husband and so remain childless and what a misfortune it would be since children form a centre point in the life of every human person¹⁰.

The women generally played a key economic role and thus proper work initiation by the aunts and mothers was necessary. The women thus besides teaching children the traditions, language, and other things, also taught them what was needed for food production in terms of planting, harvesting, and storage of food. On the other hand, the men taught the boys the need for clearing the garden, building fences, building houses, hunting, fishing, and

¹⁰ Cf. J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, East Africa Educational Publisher, Nairobi 2002, pp. 129-130.

other activities that contribute to family growth and supplement food supply¹¹.

The climax of initiation according to the Lango culture is in marriage between a man and a woman at the age of maturity, 18 years as per the constitution of Uganda. Upon marriage the family of the boy is expected to pay the “bride price”, as a seal of marriage, to the family of the girl; this also defined the worth of the girl and it was usually the responsibility of the uncles and other relatives to raise what was demanded as bride price.

The payment of dowry is usually done by payment of live-stock as a sign of appreciation to the family of the girl, usually the number of the animals is determined by the status of the girl. If the girl is uneducated and with low status, the number would range from five to ten animals and if the girl is a graduate, the number could be between ten to twenty cows. Whereas it is important and valued for people to pay a dowry as a seal of marriage and source of security in marriage¹², it subjects women to some forms of abuse and in some instances to their being seen as the property of men. However, to men who understand and value culture, this is usually not a big problem.

The parents often had the decision in whom their daughter should marry and in some cases the parents might also make arrangements for a boy to marry the girl which also prompted

¹¹ Cf. A.C. Gabriella, *Inculturation and Women Religious in Uganda: Implications for the Missionary Apostolate of Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church (MSMMC) Lira*, Thesis in Licentiate in Missiology, Pontifical Urban University, Rome 2021, p. 47.

¹² Cf. E. Salam, *What is a Dowry?* “Brides”, [online:] <https://www.brides.com/what-is-a-dowry-5074408> [accessed 06.06.2022].

marriage at an early age¹³. This was a challenge as it would sometimes lead girls to inappropriate partners and could also lead to some marital abuses. It also promoted early marriage and teenage pregnancy which subjected young girls to a lot of vulnerability since physically they would not be fully developed for handling the related issues of parenthood.

Marriage was considered a mark of maturity, and one was declared a man or woman having proved their manhood and womanhood by starting a family in marriage and above all by begetting children.

As a way of regulating morality, the Lango people do not support boys impregnating girls outside of marriage; this would attract heavy punishment, usually paying a stipulated number of animals (*culu luk*). Some clans even subjected the boy to a beating after paying the animals as demanded by the family of the girl. Unfortunately, a child resulting from pregnancy outside of marriage is never celebrated and would be considered as a child of the home of the girl (*atin pacu*) and the father could only claim possession after paying the punishment imposed by the family of the girl.

Notably, anybody who has reached the age of maturity is expected to marry and to remain unmarried when one has reached the age of marriage was an abnormality that called for a cultural interpretation (*Dwoko dano i ot*).

Traditionally, the Lango practice polygyny and attach considerable importance to bride-wealth. Men commonly extol polygyny as an ideal, but in the 1960s only about 20 percent of the men who

¹³ Cf. M. Lucy, *African Marriage and Social Change*, Frank Cass and Co., Great Britain 1984, 2.

were married at any given time were married polygynously. Today, a few vestiges of this can still be identified¹⁴.

In case of divorce, the family of the girl is expected to refund the cows/goats... that were paid as bride price and because of this, sometimes the woman is forced to endure hardships in marriage because the family is unable to pay back the bride price. This poses a challenge in the event of abusive marriage.

4. Rites of Initiation

The rite of initiation is done according to specific groups and for specific reasons. The young boys and girls were taught and prepared to appreciate the importance of participating in community activities like cleaning the water source, marketplaces, places of worship, but above all to appreciate communal farming work known as *alea* which was a system that operated within the confines of specific locality (*wang tic*) and it gave each community a sense of identity but above all it built a spirit of support for each other. This community work usually ended with a social evening especially for elders to sit together and take a local beer *kongo ting* as they continued to discuss matters within the society. In some instances, some people would form groups and work in someone's garden – the payment could be the local beer, or a cow might be slaughtered and shared by the group¹⁵.

¹⁴ *Lango-Marriage and Family*, [online:] <https://www.everyculture.com/Africa-Middle-East/Lango-Marriage-and-Family.html> [accessed: 04.06.2022].

¹⁵ Cf. J.H. Driberg, *The Lango, A Nilotic Tribe of Uganda*, op. cit., p. 97.

4.1. Work Initiation

From the age of 7-10 years, the boy identifies with his uncles or any elder who instructs him, and he is expected to accompany them for major chore activities. The boy, for instance, is introduced into the kraals, gardens, hunting, fishing, grazing animals... (generally to work hard and provide for the family). The girls on the other hand identified with aunties or any elder within the community, who taught them house chores, harvesting, food processing, storage, cooking, personal hygiene, good morals etc. What the child loves determines the line of developed skills the child is guided into.

4.2. Initiation into Adulthood

By the constitution of Uganda, anybody who reaches 18 years is considered an adult¹⁶. Culturally it is about going through certain cultural events, besides consideration of age, which climaxed in marriage.

Before one gets to marriage, it is important among the Lango people that the parties go through the process of understanding all that marriage entails, having to do with sexuality. The issue of sexuality is intensely talked about by the uncles to the boys and by the aunties to the girls (physical body changes and personal hygiene, responsibilities associated with motherhood and fatherhood, home economics).

At the age of 18, a boy is expected to leave the house of his parents and construct his own house (*otogo*) with the help of other

¹⁶ Cf. *The Constitution of Uganda*, Uganda Printing and Publishing Cooperation, Kampala 1995, n. 3 §11, p. 7.

peers. This will make it easier for the peers to visit and discuss important issues to do with their life and also share experiences. A boy without a house at this stage and still staying in the parents' house is considered a child.

A boy is given a few cows/goats/chickens by the grandfather and uncles to start his kraal, and sometimes a garden also. This was a mark of responsibility so that one feels the urge of parenthood and the responsibility that comes with it.

The girls however are expected to remain in the parents' house until they are married. This is for the purpose of control since a girl had to be protected so that at the time of marriage, she is still intact. The girl is encouraged to take care until marriage, and such a girl is always valued and cherished by the parents.

The girls are expected to be in the company of only other girls until the age of maturity. They teach each other some basics of handicrafts such as weaving, knitting, braiding. They also share a lot of issues of womanhood.

5. Marriage (*nyom*)

The young people only entered marriage after having gone through the initiation process and marriage is the climax of maturity and any boy or girl at the age of maturity is expected to marry.

The Langi attach so much importance to bride price that it marked the seal of a marriage. The boy is expected to pay some animals (cows, goats, chickens...) and other assorted items as a sign of appreciation to the girl's family, and only then can the girl be handed over to the boy officially as his wife. The uncles are supposed to contribute some cows for their son [relative] to pay as bride price

and this is not optional for the uncles¹⁷. Often, the girl's dowry is not consumed/spent but saved to offset her brothers' dowries when it is their turn to marry and pay and also for dowry refunds in the event of a divorce.

Marriage among the Lango also bonds and strengthens kinship ties within the community, making the families of the couples relate in a special way with special attachment; the in-laws are often referred to as *mako*. Marriage unites relations and binds communities.

The Lango men extolled polygyny for various reasons like having the opportunity to have more children because the more children one had, the more respect and wealth, and also in case one married a barren woman, it was upon the recommendation of the current wife or elder that one could get a second wife. However, this has drastically changed for the reason that those men find it difficult to arrange the bride price for a second wife since this was entirely left to them with no family or community contribution. Besides that, due to increase in population, land has become so scarce that the men find it difficult to bring in a second wife whom they are supposed to provide for in terms of allocating fields for farming¹⁸. These reasons however have nothing to do with spiritual influence, and it would be important to bring in the values of Christian marriage so that it harmonizes the gap created by weakness within the Lango culture of polygyny.

The Lango consider marriage as a sacred activity resulting in the transmission of life and so the elders usually made pronouncements

¹⁷ Cf. *The Lango of Uganda*, "African Voice, Britain's No. 1 African News Paper", [online:] <https://africanvoiceonline.co.uk/the-lango-of-uganda/> [accessed: 01.06.2022].

¹⁸ Ibid.

“*wan omito kuc, yotkom kede nyodo*” meaning “we want peace, good health, and multiplication of children”. This is more of a ritual of blessing marriage by the elders, invoking blessings on the couple. Among the Lango people, childlessness is counted as one of the most serious misfortunes to befall a couple, with women typically taking all the blame even when it could be the problem of the man. The wife is expected to get pregnant in the first one year. Failure to conceive called for interrogation by the uncles and aunts and certain ceremonies to be performed (*Abwoc*, “impotent” or *alurr*, “barren”). The family is the domestic unit of the Lango people which is only complete when comprised of husband, wife, and children. In some cases, the traditional Lango would not encourage the setting up of a home, until the first child is born and not until this happened, then the woman would be encouraged to still be with her parents. This trend however has changed, and young people can now set up a home upon payment of dowry but with high expectations that in a short while, they would have a child.

6. Methods of Initiation

The Lango people have special ways of passing on information from one generation to the next. These include dances, riddles, proverbs, taboos, totems, practice.

Dances (*Kiri* – war dance, *otule* – celebration, *okeme...*). There are vast riches of expression in the different dances of the Lango people, *kiri* for instance portrayed the need for courage during war. Each time the children dance *kiri*, they are motivated to cultivate the spirit of courage. They also use several riddles (*Ceko icina*,

okoc) usually depicting history and daily life experience. With such a drawing back to history, the young people are able to understand the past, relate it to the present, and project it to the future.

Proverbs were used too, to subject a young person to deeper thought so as to be able to learn and to act; for example, “*ngini_ ngini too i dwolo*” “small ants are caught in butter and die in it” for they are attracted, but also entrapped by it... Meaning, your source of pleasure can also become your source of death.

“*Obwol ka dong ocoro ceng,pe dok i bye*”, “once a mushroom has come out into the sunlight, it cannot go back into the ant hill”, meaning, once you have taken a decision, stick to it.

Taboos greatly regulated the morality of the young people, for instance, there is no mention of private parts in public. In many instances totems too played a role similar to taboos to regulate the morality of the people.

Other forms of initiation consisted of practice, such as hunting, fishing, gardening, herding animals, cooking. The Lango valued culture and the above processes easily found a place in the life and culture of the people¹⁹.

Sharing food after a successful hunt or harvest. Eating together is encouraged not only as a social event but as a time for passing on values of the family/society and that is why after eating, people would remain and continue talking.

Dress code. The women dress in a long dress called *gomesi*, which has a history of preserving decency of women.

Although the culture of the Lango people easily found space within the life of the people and formed part of the established

¹⁹ Cf. *Langi People and their Culture*, [online:] <https://ugandatourismcenter.com/place/langi-people-and-their-culture/> [accessed 04.06.2022].

rules, it is unfortunate that such cultures are fast eroding. A strategy is needed to go back to it and preserve it. Families have a bigger challenge in this regard, as well as cultural leaders.

7. Death (*too*)

7.1. Death and Burial Rites

The Lango have a continuous expression of love for the human person, not only in their lifetime but also at death and after death, which they express by mourning for the dead. Losing a loved one causes grief to not only the family but to the entire community. It is the responsibility of the community to identify with the bereaved family and organize the burial ceremony in terms of provision for all that the burial demands.

Love and respect for the human person demanded that no one take the life of the other person. If one caused the death of another, traditional Lango justice would demand compensation (*culo kwor*) which consisted of payment of animals and perhaps money as restitution for the same and this would later be followed by a ceremony of reconciliation (*kayo cuk*) so that the affected families make amends²⁰.

As a matter of keeping the memory of one who died after a decent life, a child would be named after this person so as to keep the legacy and memory of this person. It should be noted that this was

²⁰ Cf. S.A. Owiny, *The Lango of Uganda: Identity, Origin, Migration and Settlements* (Working Papers in African Studies 274), African Studies Center Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies Boston University, Boston 2021, p. 10.

done in the event that one lived a decent life. And in the event that one lived a bad life causing problems within the society, no child could be named after such a person for fear that he or she could easily take after that person.

Among the Lango people, as life brings joy, death brings a lot of sadness. They however believe that if one has died, the spirit goes to the world of the dead and continues living, and the spirits of those who died unhappy could acquire the status of evil spirit and haunt others (*jok*). This prompted the erecting of family shrines in order to perform rituals upon the spirits (*joggi*) so as to prevent the spirits from causing any form of harm to anybody; usually a sheep is slaughtered and a ceremony of chasing away the spirit is conducted (*ryemo cen*)²¹.

It is difficult for the Lango people to accept death as a normal occurrence and thus most times there is probing to find out the cause of death. This kind of mentality has caused a lot of enmity between neighbours and other relations as accusations have often been attributed to some people as sorcerers, witches, evil magic people, who are believed to cause the death of others.

It is also believed that if someone died complaining or was not properly buried, that person could come in the form of a spirit and claim the lives of many and that is why burial is done with all due respect, and the ceremony of appeasing the spirit is performed. The last funeral rite is a ceremony that is performed to appease the spirit.

²¹ Cf. *The Langi Tribe and their Culture in Uganda*, [online:] <https://petna-hafricatours.com/the-langi-tribe-and-their-culture-in-uganda/> [accessed: 01.06.2022].

7.2. Funerals (*yik*)

The funeral is the last ceremony a community participates in to associate with one who had been living among them, and so it is mandatory for the immediate family members and community members to attend lest the same happen to you when you do not participate in the funeral of a community member. And in some cases, you could also be suspected as the cause of death. Burials among the Lango are done at home – not in a cemetery – in order to identify with the dead. It can only be done in the cemetery if one is homeless and without known relatives. It is the responsibility of the community to dig the grave, at no cost, though in some cases they are given a local brew after finishing digging the grave.

Funerals, just like marriages, are community events that relatives must participate in by provision of food, cooking...and food is served to everyone as a visible sign of charity for the dead during his/her lifetime. Every relative is expected to make a special contribution as agreed upon by the clan, for instance a cup of beans and a cup of posho per family so that people have enough food at the funeral. A relative who does not attend a burial without a serious reason is bound to be punished usually with a beating and sometimes with confiscation of some of his belongings, such as chicken or a goat.

The Langi, just like many African people, strongly believe that the dead are not completely dead; their spirits continue to live and still affect those who are living in this world, and they can even cause harm or sickness or any other form of disaster in the community. It was therefore important to always appease the spirits of the dead and in some extreme circumstances, some people had shrines under big trees where they would offer sacrifice for the spirits of the

dead in terms of taking a little bit of delicious food there, drinks... it was also popular that some people before drinking water or a beer would pour a bit out in order to appease the spirits. However, completion of this appeasement was obtained through the ceremony of the last funeral rite (*apuny*), which they believed would give the spirit of the deceased a lasting satisfaction²².

The above indicates the strong eschatological vision of the Langi and perhaps this vision, through inculturation, can make it much easier to develop the theology of the resurrection, as this finds bigger scope within the Lango belief in the continuous existence of the spirits after the death of a person.

8. Conclusion

Culture is one of the identities that radiate values to humanity. It gives every individual a link and defines who we are. It is a powerful tool for human integration which fits one within the confines of family and society, guided by a pattern of life with an agreed set of rules.

Although culture remains one of the best ways to define a person, it is not free from challenges. But even with this, it still remains relevant in responding to the many challenges facing the family and society today because culture links us up, culture shows who we are, culture is like a cord for humanity. It affects the very core of human values.

²² Cf. J.A. Tosh, *Political Authority among the Langi of Uganda, CIRCA 1800 to 1939*, Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of London, London 1975, p. 105.

The Lango people have adapted to a culture which truly defines who they are and the values they stand for, and these have found a place within the development of the human person from conception to death and all that it entails. Although the Lango people have this identity within culture, it has both positives and negatives, meaning it is subject to some challenges.

Human development in the world today faces many challenges, and rightly so among the Lango people. We must go back to culture to retrace our true identity, defining Christian culture within our traditional identity so that values of the family are reflected in the daily life of the people.

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HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN VALUES IN THE BIRTH CEREMONIES OF THE GIDAR OF NORTHERN CAMEROON

Abstract

This article examines the birth ceremonies of the Gidar people of northern Cameroon as key moments of cultural identity, social belonging, and religious meaning. It analyses the social structures, symbolic gestures, and ritual practices surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, and the reception of the newborn into the community. These ceremonies express fundamental human values such as protection, solidarity, gratitude, and responsibility for new life, while also revealing an implicit openness to transcendence. The chapter further explores how Christian faith encounters, interprets, and, in some respects, transforms these cultural practices, highlighting areas of continuity, complementarity, and necessary discernment. In doing so, it shows how traditional Gidar birth rituals can be appreciated as meaningful spaces for dialogue between culture and faith, and as an opportunity for deeper pastoral reflection.

Keywords: Gidar; Cameroon; birth rituals; culture and religion; Christian values; initiation; family; anthropology of religion

Introduction

The Gidar¹ mainly inhabit the lands of the North Cameroon plateau, covered in the shrubbery of the savanna and small, isolated mountain ranges such as Hossere². The greatest concentrations of the Gidar can be found in two cities of this region: Guider, seat of the Mayo Louti Prefecture, and Figuil. Other large clusters of the Gidar are found around the villages of Lam, Djougi, and Bidzar, on the banks of the Mayo Louti (from Mayo Loue all the way to Figuil), and around Sorawel³. There is only a rather modest amount of literature dedicated to the Gidar. The first extensive publication on the history of the region was the work of colonial administrator Jacques Lestringant⁴. The next important publication was authored by Chantal Collard, who conducted sociological research among the Gidar⁵. The most extensive study of the culture (especially

¹ The name “Gidar” most likely originates from French researchers, who spelled it “Guidar”, after the name of the town “Guider”, derived from the Gidar “g̃dar” – “tireless”, “restless”. Other notations and names: “Guiddar”, “Giddar”, “Gidr”, “Koudak” (“Kudak”) in Daba and Giziga; “Marbun” in Fali.

² *Hosséré* – in Fulfulde, “mountain”. “Hosséré” became part of the name of individual mountains.

³ Currently their population in Cameroon is approximately 170,000, and approximately 15,000 living in the territory of Chad.

⁴ *Le pays de Guider au Cameroun. Essai d'histoire régionale*, Versailles : [s.e.] (1964).

⁵ The fruit of her research was a doctoral dissertation entitled *Organisation sociale des Guidar ou Baynawa (Cameroun septentrional)*, Paris X Nanterre University, Paris 1977. Cf. C. Collard, *Du bon ordre des enfants. Etude sur la germanité guidar*, „Anthropologie et Société” 4/2 (1980), pp. 39-64 ; *La société guidar du Nord-Cameroun. Compte rendu de mission*, „L'homme – Revue Française d'Anthropologie” 11/4 (1971), pp. 91-95 ;

religious culture) of the Gidar was a publication of Antoni Kurek OMI, based on research of that region conducted from 1976-1977⁶. Also worthy of mention is the contribution of Polish missionaries to the development of literature in the Gidar language⁷.

In addition to the aforementioned literature, the author has also referred to his own field research, conducted in 1991-1993, 2001 and 2011, and to auxiliary literature.

Les „noms-numéros” chez les Guidar, „L’homme – Revue Française d’Anthropologie” 13/3 (1973), pp. 45-59.

⁶ A. Kurek, *Wierzenia i obrzędy Gidarów, ludu północnokameruńskiego. Studium historyczno-hermeneutyczne*, Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, Warszawa 1988. It is also worth recalling here the thesis written by Loucien Boub, a Gidar seminarian at the Major Seminary in Maroua, entitled: *Mariage coutumier Guidar ou Kada et exigences du mariage chrétien. Memoire de fin d’études de Grand Séminaire*, Grand Séminaire Saint Augustin, Maroua 1991.

⁷ The evangelization of the Gidar began in 1948. In 1970 the Polish Oblates of Mary Immaculate joined in this very actively. Cf. Also worth of mention is the contribution of Polish missionaries to the development of literature in the Gidar language. A fruit of this was the publication of a Gidar-language grammar, first published in only a dozen or so copies on a mimeograph in Figuil (W. Kozioł – J. Manglé, *Grammaire guidar*, Figuil 1993). That same year a new translation was begun in Lam of the Mass readings for Sundays and feast days. The outcome of this years-long work of the Polish missionaries and their co-workers was the publication of three liturgical lectionaries and an abbreviated Roman Missal as well as translations of the New Testament (*Θμανμαν Meleketeni. Nouveau Testament, guidar*, trans, ed. and rev. L. Bouba – T. Doulaneni – W. Kozioł – J. Maingle – M. Oumarou – J. Róžański – K. Zielenda, Bernardinum, Pelplin 2008) and the Psalter (*Psaumes na Makada (gidar)*, trans, ed. and rev. L. Bouba – T. Doulaneni – W. Kozioł – A. Madi – J. Maingle – B. Haman – M. Oumarou – J. Róžański – K. Zielenda, Missionaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée, Figuil – Varsovie 2015). The first professional grammar in the Gidar language came out in 2008. Its author was the linguist Professor Zygmunt Frajzyngier of the University of Colorado, USA (Z. Frajzyngier, *A Grammar of Gidar*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2008).

In Cameroon we are dealing with three types of marriage: traditional, universally practiced marriage; civil marriage⁸, required by state law before entering a religious marriage; and, finally, sacramental marriage. Most widespread is the traditional form of contracting marriage. This article will concentrate on this particular form, referring to Gidar traditions and showing its similarities to, and differences from, the Christian tradition brought by the missionaries. It will also propose solutions which combine the two traditions.

1. Schema of Gidar birth ceremonies

Rituals of transition among the Gidar – as among other peoples – formed one of the fundamental factors of integration into the community. They were celebration of ties to the tribal and territorial community: of the desire of putting oneself under its laws, commands, prohibitions, of honouring the values of this community and all of its rules of life. This concerns equally births, initiations, marriages, and funeral rites – through which a member of the community passes on to another community of his family existing beyond the visible world. A characteristic trait of rites of passage was their multi-stage nature.

Among birth rituals can be distinguished the time of pregnancy, birth in the biological sense, and birth in the cultural sense. The first stage begins at the moment of the pregnancy being recognized and can be likened to exclusion from the original state⁹.

⁸ Based on French law.

⁹ Por. R. Jaouen, *Le rituel de la naissance au Nord-Cameroun et au Tchad. Session d'anthropologie, Garoua, 27 juin – 1 juillet 1977*, in : *Session*

Preparations for the birth of a child among the Gidar began even before his or her birth. Usually, after first signs of pregnancy had become apparent, the future mother was surrounded with care. At this time began her isolation, watched over with many prohibitions, especially concerning meals. The woman could not eat spoiled meat, wild game, poultry, or eggs (the seeds of life). Neither could she drink the traditional *bil-bil* beer. She was also not allowed to leave the compound nor to use metal tools. She was subjected to many hygiene treatments. The child's father was also subjected to certain prohibitions: he could not participate in funeral rites or hunt during this time. Immediate preparations for the birth began in the seventh month of pregnancy. These were preceded by a visit to the "seer"¹⁰ and by obtaining appropriate amulets.

The second stage of birth rituals was birth in the biological sense of the term. The place of the birth was inside the compound, next to the hut occupied by the future mother. The cutting of the umbilical cord was associated with appropriate ritual: a boy's umbilical cord was cut using an arrow shaft, and a girl's, with the use of a millet stalk. Next would begin a quarantine period for the mother and child, lasting seven or nine days if the baby were a boy, and eight to ten days for a girl. The third stage of birth rituals was combined with the rite of bringing the child out of the mother's hut into the yard (*igil gen wina* – the first coming out). This was the symbolic acceptance of the child into the community, into the presence of all the members of the extended family. The child was given a first

d'anthropologie, Garoua, 27 juin – 1 juillet 1977, Garoua 1977, pp. 1-21. René Jaouen compared the birth rituals of 12 tribes of northern Cameroon, 11 of which were Paleo-Sudanese (Musey, Gisiga, Durru, Tupuri, Masa, Kapsiki, Mundang, Muktele, Gidar, Fali and Mafa).

¹⁰ "Truth-speaker", colloquially "fortune teller" – in the Gidar language the most important of these is *m'z kielgi* – "the one who throws pebbles".

name, usually numeric, and the ancestors were asked to show favour on him.

Numeric names given to boys included: Tizi, Zurmba, Tumba, Vondu, Madi, Todu, Daway, Damba, Turmba; girls got such names as e.g. Keza, Miste, Tongu, Naigna, Madeke, Toduku, Dawayke, Dambeke, Trumbanke. These names indicated the child's place in the community hierarchy. This would come up in everyday life in the form of many customs and activities, such as the place occupied by the child, the order in which meals were eaten and the division of who ate with whom, the distribution of sweets among children, the division of labor, etc¹¹.

The rite was crowned with celebration, including a festive meal. The final part of the birth rituals was to take the child beyond the family compound (the "second coming out"). This rite was also accompanied by a celebratory meal¹².

2. The value of the family and clan solidarity

The socio-economic life of the Kirdi is certainly closely linked to its familial-territorial structure, which is designated by the boundaries

¹¹ For more on the ordering and meanings of numeric names see: C. Collard, *Les „noms-numéros” chez les Guidar*, op. cit., pp. 45-59; A. Kurek, *Wierzenia i obrzędy Gidarów*, op. cit., pp. 300-302; J.J. Ziomek, *Katolicka praktyka chrztu dzieci wobec gidarskich obrzędów narodzinowych*, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, Wydział Teologiczny, Poznań 2013, pp. 28-29 (magisterial thesis written in the seminar of UKSW Professor dr hab. Jarosław Różański OMI).

¹² For comprehensive information on birth rituals see: C. Collard, *Du bon ordre des enfants. Etude sur la germanité guidar*, op. cit., pp. 39-64; A. Kurek, *Wierzenia i obrzędy Gidarów*, op. cit., pp. 293-307; J. Ziomek, *Katolicka praktyka chrztu dzieci*, op. cit., pp. 15-28.

of clan and of village – sometimes identical with the clan. This familial structure determined the lines of development and the limits of all socio-economic activity. The importance of blood ties is evidenced by the fact that when meeting another person, that person is not classified by profession or place of origin, but by relationship. Among the Gidar – similar to many other African cultures – parenthood is stronger than marriage. Thus, it can be said that the Gidar family is more a union of father and mother¹³, than of husband and wife. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the immediate family is usually subordinate to the extended family to such an extent that the term designating family is often replaced by the term “compound” (*sare*) or its equivalents.

The compound type reflected the structure of the family. There were huts, usually made from clay, and circular in shape. They were about two to three meters in diameter. Their walls went up about one- and one-half meters. They were topped by a conical roof made of dry grass. This was known as the “Sudanese style building”. The number of huts within the compound depended on the importance of the family, as their number and quality were determined by the number of wives and some domestic animals, such as goats, rams, donkeys, and rare specimens of cattle or horses. Most often, the farm was made up of huts for the head of the family, his wives, a kitchen, and for boys over seven years old, because boys up to age seven, and girls until marriage, usually lived with their mother. An important element in the compound, and one which also spoke of family relationships, were the granaries – one for the head of the family and separate ones for each of his wives. These were usually constructed on stilts, as a protection against rodents. In the centre

¹³ The Gidar term “father” – *afuwa* – is “he who begot me” and mother – *mawa* – is “she who gave birth to me”.

of the compound was a meeting place. It was within this framework of an extended family living together in its compound, that children were born.

Attesting to familial solidarity is also the fact that for the child, each brother of his father was a father, and every cousin on the father's side, a brother. Even girls (future mothers), whose destiny was to leave the clan (in the social sense, though not for the so-called "ancestor cult" – the ancestors remained the same for them) brought a material recompense to their families when they got married, in the form of the marriage guarantee¹⁴. Their wealth, their reason for being, but also in practice a living relationship, continues mainly to be children, since they come to fulfilment in becoming mothers. A woman completes and fulfils herself in marriage; through it she becomes an adult, responsible to her family and community. Marriage and motherhood give her dignity and respect in society. In this way women became important and "senior", by having large numbers of children¹⁵.

The unquestioned authority and traditional head of the family was the father. His was the deciding voice and everyone owed him unconditional obedience. Woman clearly felt her inferiority, which was acknowledged by all and confirmed in dozens of everyday, traditional rules of life. The entrance of a girl into the separate world

¹⁴ Each stage of marriage rituals was accompanied by material assets, from the symbolic to actual payments. Among the Gidar there first were presents of millet, tobacco, and chicken, treated as a kind of proposal. After that a fee was settled upon to be paid to the father for the girl. In the past the bulk of this fee was paid in cattle, or in iron bars; today money is strongly preferred.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Różański, *Matka-rodzicielka – kobieta w tradycji północnokameruńskiej*, in: *Ewangelia między tradycją i współczesnością*, ed. J. Różański – P. Szuppe, Missio-Polonia, Warszawa 2003, p. 81.

of women was to be seen already from the leaving of her mother's womb, at the ritual cutting of the umbilical cord. Among the Gidar, midwives were remunerated with two hens after the birth of a girl, and three after the birth of a boy. A difference unfavourable to girls was also seen in the length of quarantine the mother would undergo¹⁶.

Hierarchy within the extended family was also inherent in the community of wives in polygynous marriages. Among children, too, a clear classification can be observed – depending on age and gender – which is also expressed in the assigning of numerical names.

3. The Value of the Child and Fertility

In keeping with traditional African mentality, it is impossible to imagine a family without children. In writing about family life, Jacek Pawlik compares it to a hearth whose fire is fed by a life force. In this context he emphasizes the exceptional role which children play in the family, “It is certainly accurate to say that in African societies man sees himself as a microcosm of the universe, and the universe as a macrocosm of man. Yet it is not a solitary man who is the image of the world, but a man involved in social relationships and who is a fertile being; the parental couple is the prototype of the cosmic unity of earth and heaven”¹⁷. Fertility is seen as one of

¹⁶ Seven or nine days for boys, eight or ten days for girls. Cf. A. Kurek, *Wierzenia i obrzędy Gidarów*, op. cit., pp. 297-298.

¹⁷ J. Pawlik, *Tradycyjna rodzina afrykańska wobec dzieci*, in: *Dzieci żyjące na ulicy – nowe zjawisko miast afrykańskich*, ed. J. Różański, Komisja Episkopatu polski ds. Misji – Missio-Polonia, Warszawa 2004, pp. 11. Cf.

the basic elements of fulfilment, for the individual and the family. For this reason, the Gidar treat having numerous offspring as great good fortune. The more children, the better. An only child, like any child, is threatened with illness and misfortune. He or she can be easily lost and then there will be no child at all in the home. This mentality has been entrenched for centuries, for whoever has children, has strength. He is also wealthy. There are Gidar sayings about this: “Awraḃḃŋyan dara ḃəf nok sa – You can’t starve to death among your own people”, or also, “An ḃəḃar akok ḃana anga kəḃa ɛsənəŋ na kəwuka di – Not until you have experienced great difficulties in life can you properly value having children”¹⁸.

The economic foundation was also to be found in the extended family, for production and consumption were balanced within it. Clans as a rule strove to be self-sufficient. Despite the existence of individual forms for the production of goods within the family, the right to use them is usually a communal right, under the authority of the father of the family. From this also comes the imperative of bringing aid and solidarity to the family group. It is also not easy to do harm to the member of a family, because if a relative is attacked, solidarity demands coming quickly to his aid: *Əlfa acpan zən sa – The blood of the family cannot be denied*¹⁹. And in the event of death, he must be avenged.

M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, trans. J. Wierusz-Kowalski, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1966, pp. 239-259.

¹⁸ From the author’s personal collection. Their neighbors the Gisiga have similar sayings, such as *Mangal hana daf fuk da kiri – A small child is already able to give the dog its millet groats*; that is to say, even the youngest offspring can be useful. Cf. *Mali’i ahin ti maya ta. Przysłowia gizigijskie*, ed. J. Różański, Mama Africa, Warszawa 2000, p. 21.

¹⁹ The author’s own collection.

Having offspring is also a *de facto* guarantee of the sustainability of the marriage. The traditional Gidar family did not recognize childless marriage. The Gidar “son” (*utun*) became a “man” (*zile*) when he became a father; a “daughter” (*wanke*) became a woman (*guluk*) when she became a mother²⁰. If a young wife turns out to be infertile, the husband returns her to her father in exchange for a refund of the matrimony payment.

A child is also necessary in order for his parents to be immortal. This is linked to the obligation of children to carry out prescribed funeral rites. Without these rituals the deceased is subjected to posthumous wanderings, during the course of which he may do harm to those living on earth, especially to members of his clan. Having descendants to perform his funeral rites, the deceased may attain “salvation”, becoming a revered ancestor, maintaining the strength of life. From this comes the Gidar saying, “procreation is salvation from death (*Uwa miha na əmtayi*)”²¹. Succeeding generations are also a guarantee of extending the line of the clan. Children remain a part of their parents on earth, remembering them after their death.

This great appreciation for having children and of human fertility causes childlessness and infertility to appear to the Gida – and to other Kirdi – as a misfortune. These conditions make it impossible to fulfil the vocation to fatherhood and motherhood. In these cases, the woman is usually the one blamed for lack of offspring. “Even the birds laugh” at this kind of woman, as the Gisiga saying

²⁰ In the Gidar tradition parenthood was reserved only for those who were married. Conceiving a child before the marriage ceremony, known as “conceiving in her father’s compound” was treated as a curse, for which the girl would be punished and her child killed.

²¹ The author’s own collection.

goes (*Ngwas hana, diyuw asingir angan*), and a Tupuri proverb explains that a man is always capable of begetting children, “a man produces offspring even with a dry tree” (*je twar bin koo de hegge*)²². In these cases, it is necessary to go to a “seer” and search for the answer to the question of what the cause of the infertility is, and then to perform remedying rituals so as to draw the misfortune out of the person.

4. Solidarity with the Territorial Community

The most typical developments in the land of the Gidar remain to this day their “villages”²³, composed of many scattered “neighbourhoods”. The size of a “neighbourhood” usually depended on the lay of the terrain and formed, so to speak, a geographic unit. It consisted of a certain number of separate compounds, known as *sare*. Often villages were inhabited by various clans. This solidarity with the territorial community was especially evident in the ritual of bringing a child out of the compound where he was born. The moment and other details of this rite were consulted upon with the “seer”. He would determine who was to bring the child out of the compound, and how far out he must come.

During this coming out, a woman with a girl-child on her back would gather millet stalks, seasonings for cooking, and wood for the fire. If the child were a boy, the coming out ceremony would be performed by a man from his clan. He would take a throwing knife,

²² The author’s own collection.

²³ Many local languages do not know the term “village” in the European sense of the word; here it refers more to the spread-out nature of a neighbourhood, or to the territorial community.

a hoe, a jagged-sided spearhead, a flat-sided spearhead, a quiver, a bow, and an arrow²⁴ and would place these objects one by one between the infant's hands, saying, "Take this throwing knife (*kafahi*) so to be able to defend yourself against enemies; take this hoe (*jigin*), so as to be able to cultivate the earth, take..."²⁵. "The child is shown with what he or she will one day be occupied: a boy will hunt and build huts; a girl will grow vegetables and use them to prepare meals for her husband"²⁶. This ritual would end with the giving of small presents to the child's mother, and with a meal together. Depending on the family's financial situation, cooked millet flour, roasted goat and sesame are served. Apart from this, the basic product that is served during the celebrations described above is the traditional alcoholic drink *bil-bil*²⁷.

5. Respect for Life

In Gidar birth rituals can be observed also respect for unborn life. When it is first noticed that a woman is expecting a blessed event, it is not spoken of, in order to avoid jealousy and malicious actions on the part of anyone hostile to the given family. The news is first made public at the *uldrubo* ceremony during the second trimester. Then the woman changes her maiden style of dress for that of an adult woman. Also, at this time she has a consultation with a "seer".

²⁴ *Kafahi, jigin, ntelho, pokoro, gelom, ble and hara.*

²⁵ K. Zielenda, *Wspólnototwórczy wymiar tradycyjnych religii północnoameruńskich ludów kirdyjskich*, Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, Warszawa 1998, p. 178.

²⁶ Cf. A. Kurek, *Wierzenia i obrzędy Gidarów*, op. cit., p. 306.

²⁷ Cf. T. Krzemiński, *Wspomnienia misjonarza*, CAN Andrzej Cedro, Warszawa 2004, pp. 99-100.

Offerings of atonement are made according to his orders so as to avoid difficulties and dangers. At this time, too, numerous prohibitions come into force for the mother, which are meant to protect her and her child from misfortune. The child is recognized from the moment of conception as a human being, endowed with vitality. In the event of a miscarriage the child is buried with due respect, though with modest ceremony.

The women of the mother's family accompany her during the birth. If there are complications, a more experienced midwife is called in. After the birth the mother is washed in warm water; the baby is bathed in cool water and placed in a previously prepared tanned bark²⁸.

A multiple pregnancy is something unusual in local traditions. In the culture of Sub-Saharan Africa, the birth of twins requires different rituals. Having twins, like being childless, signifies a disturbance of the natural order. Some tribes have a positive attitude toward the birth of twins. But there are others who see this as a misfortune²⁹. Among the Gidar, the birth of twins is treated as an interference from the evil spirits, and a threat to the neighbourhood. On the other hand, they are seen as an honour and distinction for the family³⁰. The news of their birth is announced with the joyful shout *salalaj*³¹. However, to avoid any potential misfortune,

²⁸ Cf. J. Ziomek, *Katolicka praktyka chrztu dzieci*, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

²⁹ Cf. J.J. Pawlik, *Zaradzić nieszczęściu. Rytuály kryzysowe u ludu Basari z Togo*, Studio Poligrafii Komputerowej „SQL”, Olsztyn 2006, pp. 113-122.

³⁰ Cf. A. Doufissa, *Le village Djougui. 20 ans d'expérience d'un Comité de développement Au Nord Cameroun*, Comité de Développement de Djougui, Djougui 2009, pp. 98-99.

³¹ English equivalent: *Yuhuu*. A cry made by women, characterized by a high-pitched tone.

a number of purification rites are performed. These ceremonies form the so-called “feast of twins”, going beyond the sphere of family rituals. This is one of the greatest and most solemn feasts of the village community³².

Purification rituals are required if any physical pathologies are observed in a newborn. Disability among the Gidar was long understood as direct interference from evil spirits or as punishment for not following taboo prohibitions. If a child’s handicap was [seen as] caused by the parents’ disobedience of tribal tradition, the child was killed³³.

6. Spiritual vision of life

When speaking of their dead, the Gidar say, “our living dead” (*mumtimi modoro*). This expresses the close family bond with the ancestors, whose blood and names both are present in the everyday earthly life of the community. The earthly community owes all its social and religious order to them. The ancestors are not at all dead, nor are they ghosts. They are beings treated as living, building a community. After death the ancestors linger close by, in a vague location called *teda*, literally, “the land of happiness”, which is the place for chosen men and women. Their power and influence are much stronger than the means possessed by the earthly community. The ancestors ensure continuity of the family’s life for the earthly community. For this reason, they are often invoked at birth

³² Cf. T. Krzemiński, *Guidarskie święto bliźniąt*, in: *Misjonarze polscy w świecie*, vol. 1, Nasza Rodzina, Paris 1976, pp. 230-234; A. Kurek, *Wierzenie i obrzędy Gidarów*, op. cit., pp. 358-363.

³³ Cf. J. Ziomek, *Katolicka praktyka chrztu dzieci*, op. cit., p. 21.

rituals, as can be seen for example in the offerings made to ancestors before a birth, and called upon them during the ceremony of bringing the child out of the compound.

For the sake of comparison, the Gisiga – neighbours of the Gidar – also hold a similar belief: they believe that before a person is conceived, he lives in “heaven” under the care of the “spirit mother”. So therefore, the person’s soul is already a personal being before he finds himself in his mother’s womb³⁴.

7. God as Creator and Giver of life

In traditional African religions, a Supreme Being rules over the whole visible and human world, and over the whole invisible spirit world connected to it. The belief systems associated with this, however, are clearly varied. Their structures are further hindered by the nature of the African mental construct, which is more concrete than abstract. When studying the experience of God in the religious life of the Gidar of northern Cameroon, Antoni Kurek emphasized a faith in the existence of one God, a single and transcendent God. They call him *Mangelva* – “It is enough that He wants something, and that thing happens”³⁵. They say that “God made it so that there is life on earth” (*Mangelva apsemuk Enzie egge*), that “God gave man life” (*Mangelva azduk Defa*). This same researcher noted that in the last stage of birth rituals – the leading of the child out of the father’s compound, *gil gen wina* (the first coming out) – the woman

³⁴ For more see R. Jaouen, *Le rituel de la naissance au Nord-Cameroun et au Tchad*, op. cit., p. 10.

³⁵ *Ma* – mouth; *ngel* – to desire, to love; *va* – as, how. Cf. A. Kurek, *Wierzenia i obrzędy Gidarów*, op. cit., p. 219.

who delivered the baby, after bringing the child out of the hut, lifts him up to the sun and prays to God in these words: *aula win nka* (“look upon your child”) or *dbalgen aroko* (“may he walk before you”). The child’s father rubs the newborn’s head with a dry branch saying: *aula paya* (“you are looking upon the sun”)³⁶.

8. Interculturation perspective

Gidar birth rituals are of a precautionary, protective nature, although they do include invocations to the *Mangelva* asking for a blessing for the child. Through the rite of baptism, in contrast, the child becomes a new creation, identifying himself with the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. However, one can also perceive certain points in these traditional rituals which coincide with the rites of baptism of children in the Catholic Church. The Gidar birth rituals also have an aspect of purification (quarantine in the hut), of sacrifice (the ritual of offering the child before the Sun-*Mangelva*), and of community (giving the child a name, bringing him out into the community). These elements correspond to the main principles of the theology and spirituality of holy baptism in the Catholic Church (purification aspect – the person being baptized is cleansed of the stain of original sin; sacrificial aspect – baptism is an integration with Christ; community aspect – incorporation into the Church in both the temporal and eschatological sense). It should be noted here that this concerns the baptism of children, so therefore the parents are already baptized, which is increasingly more often the case in the young north-Cameroonian Church.

³⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 221, 298-299.

Up until the present time the practice for baptism among Polish missionaries working among the Gidar has been essentially based on the sacrament's structure as contained in the Roman Ritual³⁷, without reference to local symbolism. The rite of baptism of children is performed in the Gidar language, in a chapel or a church. Indigenous Christian hymns had already been an important part of the liturgy. But elements of local religious culture have also made their way into the Catholic liturgy. One example is the adaptation of the calabash³⁸ as a water vessel; another is traditional musical instruments with the tam-tam *gema*³⁹ playing a leading role. Christian themselves, though – certainly influenced by the teaching of the first missionaries – have a reserved approach to traditional practices, which are however still very much alive in the local community. It seems, therefore, that it is worthwhile more broadly establish local traditions in baptismal practice, making for a better understanding of the essence of the baptism of children.

It would certainly be possible to link the sacrament of baptism with the ritual of bringing the child outside of the hut (*igil gen wina*), as the giving of a name takes place in both of these rites. It could be of a para-liturgical nature, presided over by a priest or by a catechist or Christian member of the family. The central point could be the reading of the Gospel and a short catechesis. Then

³⁷ *Rituale Romanorum ex decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Pauli PP. VI promulgatum, Ordo baptismi parvulorum*, Editio typica altera, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, Città del Vaticano 1973. A simplified ritual approved by the local ordinary: *Baptême des petits. Français-Foufoulde*, Garoua 1994.

³⁸ Calabash (bottle gourd) in Gidar, *hignewa* (plural form: *hilingidi*).

³⁹ Made from the trunk of a tree, used during the greatest and most important Gidar celebrations.

there is also a place for the blessing of the child by his parents and godparents.

The second stage would be closely related to the sacrament of baptism. The symbolism of going beyond the area of the compound could be more highlighted in the liturgy. It could be led – in accordance with tradition – by the father (if the newborn is a boy) or the mother (if the newborn is a girl). During this ritual the child is able – according to tradition – see his or her future place of work, as well as places of prayer of the local Christians. The rite of baptism could be the essential step in the coming out from the compound. After this rite and the child's return to the compound, there would be time for giving small gifts to the child's parents, and for a traditional meal together.

One of the encouragements, inter alia, to inculturation included in St. John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* states that its goal is, "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures"⁴⁰. This is a difficult process because it cannot in any way affect the specificity and integrity of the Christian faith. However, it is a necessary process, especially for the rites of passage essential in every culture.

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⁴⁰ *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 52.

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WIDOWHOOD IN THE CHURCH AS FAMILY OF GOD IN AFRICA: SHIFT OF PASTORAL PARADIGM

Abstract

The present article aims at advocating for a shift of pastoral paradigm from ideal to real, theory to praxis, theoretical to practical pastoral theology in the Church as Family of God in Africa with regard to widowhood. In fact, the key element to open the mystery of widowhood in Africa lies in the picture that Africa has of a woman. In a nutshell, “like woman, like widowhood” in Africa. Viewed negatively, one might dare to say that the African woman is a container of problems and curses from birth to death. She undergoes a kind of substantial and ontological poverty whereby her being is being totally denied of her from the very moment of conception, through the period of widowhood, till death. Christians are urged to combat all acts of violence against women, speaking out and condemning them. In this area, the conduct of the members of the Church ought to be a model for society as a whole. The African Church is, therefore, called to be the voice of the voiceless widows.

Keywords: Church in Africa, African woman, African widow, paradigm shift

Introduction

Cardinal Murphy in his book *The Family of the Church* states that “the strength of any human family lies in the internal unity, trust and love of its members which gives it in turn the strength and confidence to share in the wider community of the world and play a creative part within it”¹. This statement is self-explanatory because for many of us, when we make a deep introspection, we realize our identity owes much to the education and formation received from our parents. We can hardly deny that the family is truly the first school. The family is the first school in so far as it initiates children into all kinds of human relationships. The family becomes the *ecclesiola*, the little church, whereby parents faithfully transmit proper faith to their children. In the language of the Second Vatican Council, the Christian family is ‘Domestic Church’² and ‘Domestic sanctuary of the Church.’³ In it parents are called to be first preachers of faith⁴. In view of this, Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor splendidly argues⁵.

¹ C. Murphy-O’Connor, *The Family of the Church*, Dartmouth Longman and Todd, London 1984, p. 1.

² *Lumen Gentium* (LG), n. 11.

³ *Actuositatem Apostolicam* (AA), n. 11: “The family has received from God its mission to be the first and vital cell of society. It will fulfil this mission if it shows itself to be the domestic sanctuary of the Church through the mutual affection of its members and the common prayer they offer to God, if the whole family is caught up in the liturgical worship of the Church, and if it provides active hospitality and promotes justice and other good works for the service of all the brethren in need”.

⁴ LG, n. 12.

⁵ C. Murphy-O’Connor, *The Family of the Church*, op. cit., p. 11.

Nor should one ignore the fact that parents themselves share in the teaching authority of the Church. It is axiomatic that it is within the Christian family itself that children are taught to worship God and love their neighbor according to the faith given to them in baptism. If the Church really is a family of faith, one will find that the duty of teaching the faith and learning the faith is focused not only on the hierarchy of the Church but also at every level where the Christian community comes together. Thus, in the school, the home, the parish, there will be a relationship between the teacher and the taught that serves to deepen the unity of the whole family of the Church.

Going further, widowhood, from the Africa viewpoint, reflects the place of the woman in the African family. It unveils the main role played by women in the African society. In regard to this, Benedict XVI affirmed: “Women in Africa make a great contribution to the family, to society, and to the Church by their many talents and unique gifts”. In support of this view John Paul II maintained: “woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root”. The Church and society need women to take their full place in the world “so that the human race can live in the world without completely losing its humanity”⁶. He immediately underscores:

“While it is undeniable that in certain African countries progress has been made towards the advancement of women and their education, it remains the case that, overall, women’s dignity and rights as well as their essential contribution to the family and to society have not been fully acknowledged or appreciated. Thus,

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortations Africa Munus* (AM), 2011, n. 54.

women and girls are often afforded fewer opportunities than men and boys. There are still too many practices that debase and degrade women in the name of ancestral tradition”⁷.

In this way, the key element to open the mystery of widowhood in Africa lies in the picture that Africa has of a woman. Viewed negatively, one might dare to say that the African woman is a container of problems and curses from birth to death. She undergoes a kind of substantial and ontological poverty whereby her being is being totally denied of her from the very moment of conception, through the period of widowhood, till death. Considering the above, Pope Benedict XVI, with the Synod Fathers, urges “all Christians to combat all acts of violence against women, speaking out and condemning them. In this area, the conduct of the members of the Church ought to be a model for society as a whole”. This is the key issue this paper attempts to explore: “Widowhood in the Church as Family of God in Africa: Shift of Pastoral Paradigm” from ideal to real, theory to praxis, theoretical to practical pastoral theology. In a nutshell, “like woman, like widowhood” in Africa. The African Church is called to be the voice of the voiceless especially the widows.

1. African Family

The word *family* in Africa must be understood with a much wider meaning than in Europe. It goes beyond the nuclear circle and includes relatives both living and the dead (normally referred to as the extended family).

⁷ AM, n. 56.

By nuclear family, I mean a family that consists of father, mother and children, when it is thought of as a unit in society. There is not much room for outsiders out of the above mentioned to step in. Whereas the extended family is a family group with a close relationship among the members that includes not only parents and children but also uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins, and grandparents. All belong to the same family. The ideal African family is based on the extended family system where members are united in a common ancestor, which gives each person his or her identity⁸.

Africans recognize each other as family members and consequently have family relations to a degree, which seems puzzling to the non-African mind. This labyrinth of relations denotes the family as the unique place for community and communion among its members. The family becomes an oasis of rest, security and identity. Such understanding confirms the sociological golden rule that a human being is a social being.

For instance, many non-Africans will hardly understand that Africans have neither cousins, nor paternal uncles, maternal aunts, nephews, nor nieces. Instead, all male cousins are brothers, and all female cousins are sisters. Moreover, all brothers of our father are not uncles, they are our fathers (in Swahili identified as *baba mdogo* or *baba mkubwa*) and all sisters of our mother are our mothers (*mama mdogo* or *mama mkubwa* in Swahili). The children of our brother are our children too. We have the same power over them as our brother. That seems very strange for Western people. It would be a great insult for a child to call the brother of his father uncle. This could even lead to the child being cursed. It is regarded as

⁸ Further readings, J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Eastern African Publications, Nairobi 1994, pp. 106-107.

an act of disrespect and irresponsibility from the context of their parents. It is perceived as the duty of the parents to educate their children to consider the extended family members no longer as a cousin, or an uncle or an aunt rather as a sister, brother, mother, or father. The lesson behind this is to educate the children with a sense of belonging together, of being one strong and big family. From early childhood, parents reinforce the notion that there is no life outside the community and the communion of the family. The family becomes the center of the possible human ties among the members. The greatest wealth for the parents is to have many children and mainly male children.

Having this in mind, we should look at the African life as a 'being with'. Ontologically, Africans are 'being with'. That means, they are being taught from their very youth through sayings and proverbs that any human being is powerless without the family community and communion. There exist popular proverbs in the mouths of Africans such as *Mtu ni Watu*, (which can literally be translated as "Man is Men") and the second *Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa* (which means, "one finger does not pick out a louse"). These sayings emphasize the togetherness dimension and underscore the fact that the family is the first place of education and human formation. The family, so to say, is the first school where every person experiences and tastes the community-communion life. There is no individual life, and life outside the community means nothingness. Anyone living outside the community-communion is considered as a living dead. There is no life in him or her because to live is to 'be with'. And to 'be with' is to be in harmony with the community-communion. Once the 'being with' is broken, the member loses his/her integrity and lacks energy and vital force. In order to avoid such disastrous situations, parents repeat unceasingly to their kids

this principle of life 'I am because you are; and without you, I am not; you and I are the community.'⁹ The moral behind this is to incorporate as much as possible the individual into the large community-communion of brothers and sisters. As the African Synod Fathers presented:

"By its nature, the family extends beyond the individual household; it is oriented towards society. The family has vital and organic links with society, since it is its foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life: it is from the family that citizens are born and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself"¹⁰.

In this sense of 'being with', Africans are very conscious of their being for one another and with one another. In *Bantu Customs in Mainland Tanzania*, Van Pelt splendidly expresses the same idea:

"Africans feel responsible for one another and are held responsible for one another by the other groups of related people. They keep in contact with one another and frequently stay with one another. They rely on each other in all circumstances and are very much interested in the family's offspring"¹¹.

This is how the extended family in Africa operates. It creates the 'being with' ready to relate to others, to help them, to live with

⁹ For more information, Cf. J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* pp. 108-109; A.E. Orobator, *The Church as family: African Ecclesiology in its social context*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000, pp. 154-155; S. Bockie, *Death and the invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington – Indianapolis 1993, p. 10. He is quoted by Orobator: 'No one speaks of 'my life' separated from 'our life'.

¹⁰ EA 85.

¹¹ P. Van Pelt, *Bantu Customs in Mainland Tanzania*, Tabora: TMP Book Department, Tabora, 1982, pp. 13-15.

them, and die for them. Van Pelt goes on to stress that, “as the nuclear family is only a cell in the extended family, it is natural that the children belong to the extended family”¹². In some African societies, the nuclear family is considered as an island. And no one can live as an island without perishing sooner than later. Africans are called to be open to others, to ‘be with’. This is why an African is evaluated more by what he is than what he has. “To be with” or “not to be with” is the radical question for Africans. To have or not to have comes afterwards. In fact, an African might get rich but that wealth is not for him/her alone. It is for the whole family, because his/her being is always ‘being with’. Otherwise, the more he/she has, the less he/she is.

Meanwhile, we should bear in mind that the ‘being with’ dimension of Africans goes together with their respect for life. Life is the ultimate reality for Africans. On this concern, the Synod declares:

“In African culture and tradition, the role of the family is everywhere held to be fundamental. Open to this sense of the family, of love and respect for life, the African loves children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of God. The people of Africa respect the life, which is conceived and born. They rejoice in this life... Africans show their respect for human life until its natural end and keep elderly parents and relatives within the family”¹³.

In this context, the Africans juxtaposes with the church. Human life is perceived by the church as a precious gift from God. To use Orobator’s words, the church as family is at the service of life. He refers to Bishop Laurent Monsengwo who states : “D’une façon plus large l’Eglise-Famille doit être toujours présente du côté des

¹² P. Van Pelt, *op. cit.*

¹³ EA 43.

forces de la vie dans ce grand duel qui l'opposera aux forces de mort jusqu'à la parousie...»¹⁴

To borrow Placide Tempels¹⁵ expression, African life is dynamic. Life can either increase or decrease in energy, vitality or spirit. Africans always wish for increase in life. This is expressed through greetings in many African languages and dialects. For instance, the Baluba from Congo often greets each other saying: *moyo* or *kolako*, which means, 'live; be alive' or 'be strong'. To live and to be strong are the great aspirations of Africans. The Igbos of Nigeria express their valuation of life by giving their children names such as 'Ndubuisi' (which literally means 'life is the head'); 'Ndukaaku' (life is greater than wealth).

From this context, life is sacred and must be treated as such. No one has the right to discredit and undervalue it. Moving further, if life is the ultimate reality for Africans, where does it find its fullness? Obviously, individual life is rooted in the life of the community. Africans will never conceive life outside of the community because it is the community that gives life and protects it. Whenever life is diminished because of unworthy behavior, people of Africa call for reconciliation through the rituals of purification and expiation in the family and community. Through the rituals they express their deep religious sense, a sense of the sacred, and

¹⁴ L. Monsengwo, *L'Eglise famille et images bibliques de l'Eglise*, „Revue Catholique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest” 14-15 (1996) 121-138. “In a broader sense, the Church-Family must always be present on the side of the forces of life in this great duel which will oppose the forces of death until the parousia...”

¹⁵ P. Tempels is a Belgian Franciscan Missionary to Congo who wrote the book *La Philosophie Bantoue* in 1947. That was the very first book dealing with African thought. From then on, it aroused many studies for and against him.

of the existence of God the creator, and of a spiritual world. They feel also the reality of sin and the need for reparation.

The African family, therefore, is a shelter of rest, security, identity, solidarity, community-communion of life, mutual participation, belonging together, listening to one another, and mutual understanding in frank dialogue, etc. In other words, the philosophy of 'being with' and that of 'increasing life', which can enrich very much the nature and the mission of the Universal Church, highlight the family in Africa.

2. Challenges of the African Family: The place of the woman

The concept of family in Africa, however, presents some negative connotations and weak elements to which we should pay more attention before fully adopting it to the 'Church'. With regret, we observe that in many African cultures women are disregarded and undervalued. The way women are treated in many parts of Africa is rationally and morally unjustifiable. Perhaps African men could enculturate the prayer of Jewish men 'God, I praise You that You did not create me as a woman'¹⁶. Could we not dare to say that in

¹⁶ *Tosefta Berakhot* 6:18 teaches in the name of Rabbi Yehuda ben Ilai (mid-2nd c. CE) that every (Jewish) man is obligated to recite three blessings daily. These express gratitude for one's station in life through the negative statements: thank God that I am not a gentile, a woman, or a slave (or in earlier formulations, a boor). This language echoes Greek prayers preserved first by Plato. Especially because this text also appears as a legal dictum in the Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot* 43b, these blessings, which modern scholars call the "blessings of identity", gradually became part of the preliminary prayers to the daily morning service. They are found in

the mind of African men it is unworthy to be a woman? Her place is in the kitchen. She is not allowed to do this and that. She must obey her man in each and everything. In one of the tribes of the Republic Democratic of Congo, there is this unfortunate expression addressed to any married woman: “mukaji chitu chanyi”; that means: “my wife is my thing, my object”. That means the man can treat her the way he wishes And Lwamba Katansi had already highlighted it: “In certain African societies, the birth of a boy is greeted with shrieks and cries by the midwife and her attendants, while the same midwife will make light of the birth of a girl”¹⁷. He noticed under the inspiration of Simone De Beauvoir:

“The realization of women’s rights has consistently been linked to an event outside the control of man, or of the male. In the sense that he considers himself as the subject and the woman as the object. Once this event has occurred, self-realization begins its cyclical pattern and the woman, despite some gains, nevertheless does not advance significantly. That is, if, in one or another part of the world, in one or another aspect of women rights, the woman has

the earliest preserved Jewish prayer books, from the end of the first millennium, but not yet universally as public prayers., Y. Kahn, *The Three Morning Blessings “...Who Did Not Make Me...”: A Historical Study of a Jewish Liturgical Text*, PhD. Diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley 1999; J. Tabory, *The Benedictions of Self-Identity and the Changing Status of Women and of Orthodoxy*, “Kenishta: Studies of the Synagogue World” 1 (2001), pp. 107-138; N. Wieder, *About the Blessings ‘Goy – Slave – Woman,’ ‘Brute,’ and ‘Boor’* [Heb.], “Sinai” 85 (1979), pp. 97-115; repr. idem, *The Formation of Jewish Liturgy in the East and the West: A Collection of Essays* [Heb.], vol. 1, Jérusalem, 1998, pp. 199-218.

¹⁷ L. Katansi, *Women’s Rights within the Framework of Human Rights: A socio-judicial essay*, in *Recherches Philosophiques Africaines*, Vol. 7, Actes de la 5ème Semaine Philosophique de Kinshasa, Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1982.

not yet achieved her goals, it is not because she is satisfied with her condition, nor that we will not attempt to improve it”¹⁸.

It should be noted, hence, from the outset that the woman, from birth to death, is and dwells in a completely disadvantage position.

The African synod of 1994, through the mouth of Saint John Paul II: “The dignity of man and woman derives from the fact that when God created man, “*in the image of God* he created him, male and female he created them” (*Gen 1:27*). Both man and woman are created “in the image of God”, that is, endowed with intelligence and will, and therefore, with freedom. The Synod condemned those African customs and practices “which deprive women of their rights” and asked the Church on the Continent to make every effort to foster the recognition of these rights.

The vitality of women in the African society can never be underestimated. The roles they play in any society is unquestionable. Without women in African society, the entire society beginning with the family will indubitably collapse. This is the picture depicted in the poem of Camara Laye where an African child indirectly reminds us of the beauty and vitality of motherhood:

To my Mother.

Black woman, African woman, O mother, I think of you...

O Dâman, O mother, who carried me on your back, who nursed me, who governed by first steps, who opened my eyes to the beauties of the world, I think of you ... Woman of the fields, woman of the rivers, woman of the great river, O mother, I think of you ...

¹⁸ S. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage Books, New York 1974, pp. V-XI. L. Katansi, *Women's Rights within the Framework of Human Rights*, op. cit., p. 350.

O Dâman, O mother, who wiped my tears, who cheered up my heart, who patiently dealt with my caprices, how I would love to still be near you. Simple woman, woman of resignation, O mother, I think of you.

*O Dâman, Dâman of the great family of blacksmiths, my thoughts are always of you, they accompany me with every step, O Dâman, my mother, how I would love to still feel your warmth, to be your child that is close to you ... Black woman, African woman, O mother, thank you; thank you for all that you have done for me, your son, so far away yet so close to you!*¹⁹

This angelic picture is unfortunately challenged by the real experience of African women in Africa. Benedict XVI had clearly seen it when he deplored:

“While it is undeniable that in certain African countries progress has been made towards the advancement of women and their education, it remains the case that, overall, women’s dignity and rights as well as their essential contribution to the family and to society have not been fully acknowledged or appreciated. Thus, women and girls are often afforded fewer opportunities than men and boys. There are still too many practices that debase and degrade women in the name of ancestral tradition. With the Synod Fathers, I urge all Christians to combat all acts of violence against women, speaking out and condemning them. In this area, the conduct

¹⁹ The poem *A ma mère / To my mother* of Camara Laye to his mother (published in *Coup de Pilon*, 1953), is an ode to all African women, and all mothers around the world. Good to note his mentioning of blacksmiths in this poem, especially given that Camara Laye’s family was Malinke and he was born into a caste that traditionally worked as blacksmiths and goldsmiths. The English translation is by Deborah Weagel.

of the members of the Church ought to be a model for society as a whole”²⁰.

3. Widowhood in Africa: Ontological poverty

Actions focusing on the Rights of Women, effective implementation of commitments on gender equality, and women’s empowerment ought to be facilitated. Issues such as gender equality, Women’s autonomy, equality and reproductive health, Women’s land rights, Criminalization of adultery, and gender discrimination have all been spoken about by feminists. On the other hand, the synod fathers have called upon African Christians to draw attention to some of the false beliefs and practices from African cultures that lack rational justification. These include witchcraft, abuse and victimization of women in matters of inheritance, the rights of widows, sexual mutilation and forced marriages²¹. These issues impede the autonomy and rights of the human person in and must be addressed²².

Being a widow in Africa is being anthropological and ontological poor. A widow is the weakest creature. The society denies her existence. A widow is a less human being and does not have any right at all. The African widow suffers both an “anthropological

²⁰ AM, n. 55-56.

²¹ Synod of Bishops II, *Instrumentum Laboris, Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for Africa: The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, 2009, n. 32.

²² F. Ihunegbo, *The Church in Africa as an Agent of Social Transformation through Reconciliation, Justice and Peace in Light of the Second African Synod*, Master’s Thesis, Faculty of St Michael’s College and the Pastoral Department of Toronto School of Theology, Toronto 2015, 51.

and an 'ontological' poverty; not just a poverty of not having but of not existing and being. The greatest poverty is the loss of one's soul; one's existence and being²³. From birth to the death of her husband, a woman is being denied her "being-there". Using Jean-Paul Sartre's terminology, she is a "être-en-soi"; a "being-in-itself" opposed to the "being for itself" and "being-for-others". Prior to discussing the topic per se, it would be advisable to dwell upon the terms mentioned above.

Being-in-itself can be thought of as a mere thing. At any one moment we ourselves are a being in-itself. Then, at the next moment, we are a different in-itself. Being-for-itself is, in Sartre's term from Being and Nothingness, a "flight" from an in-itself toward another in-itself. The for-itself is a nothingness between every in-itself we have been and are right now; consciousness of being a being which has the possibility to become another being. The being we become is the choice we make in flight from the in-itself we are just now towards the in-itself we attempt to become. And attempt is an exact and important choice of word here, since the in-itself we become is never exactly the in-itself we imagined we would become. This is not a failure on our part, it is simply a fact that we cannot anticipate everything as it will be before it has come to pass (some take this to mean life is a tragedy, in a philosophical way). So much for the individual, but we are not alone in the world. Being-for-others has further aspects to it that need to be carefully distinguished. My entire being-for-others is composed of separate aspects of my being. There is my being as I think others see me, the way that I act in respect of how others might perceive me. But how others really

²³ J. Baur, *2000 years of Christianity in Africa*, Paulines Publications, Nairobi 1994, pp. 296-298. E. Mveng, *Spiritualité et libération en Afrique*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1989; J.M. Ela, *African Cry*, Orbis, New York 1986.

perceive me is an aspect of my being which I can never apprehend. Truly, I can only project myself into the world as I believe I will be affective upon it and others and that is all; how I am received by others is up to them. For Sartre this creates a tension, specifically anxiety in the face of being unable to recover that aspect of our being-for-others which we can never have for ourselves. But Sartre also points out that we are entirely responsible for it, despite being unable to have control over how others perceive us. Since, it is our actions which bring that aspect of our being-for-others into being at all, and so it can only be grounded in our blindness to how we are perceived by others.

A woman is thus similar to a thing, an animal or a tree. The “être-en-soi”, characterizes any object that lacks the possibility to acknowledge its own existence. It is worth noting that death in the African context is accompanied by multiple cultural practices aimed at honoring the departed and protecting the next of kin from bad consequences. Not all of these practices can be labelled bad or harmful to the widow. In fact, some pay testimony to the African notion of “being with” as it expresses the communities “support towards the widow and her children”. Others, however, can indeed be labelled as harmful in the sense that it can complicate the grieving process by distracting the widow from the core tasks associated with the grieving process. These last practices deprive the woman of any civil and even spiritual right: Strange Mourning Rituals, humiliating rituals in relation to dressing codes, eating foods, isolation, and some kind of discrimination being imposed on the widows.

Far more restrictions are placed on widows than on widowers. They are subjected to “levirate” system compulsory in the community; they are denied the right to inherit the house and land after

the husband's death; they should undergo the purification rituals to be cleansed from the husband's ghost by sleeping with the husband's brother. Being an African Widow is to suffer stigma; she is being treated as a witch and sometimes kicked out from the house and the village. All these restrictions form a chain of humiliation and oppression that make African widows to feel lonely, bitter, and frustrated as they are believed to be the source of bad luck. In fact, African widows go through much hardship that stems from the society, the husband's family and from tradition. Adebowale (2015:113) states that there are many cultural practices in African societies that worsens the situation for widows. The African widow is treated as inhuman. She does not exist. She suffers from the fundamental, anthropological, and ontological poverty. The "être-en-soi" of the widow is opposed to the "être-pour-soi", which could be translated into "being-for-self", and characterizes a type of being that has a conscience and is able to distance himself from himself, and to reflect upon his own existence. This sort of being is categorically denied to the African woman. Finally, she is even opposed to the "être-pour-autrui", or "being-for-someone-else", a being capable to acknowledge its existence by seeing that others see him existing. In other words, seeing yourself in someone else's eyes makes you realize you do exist. Widows are neither seen nor recognized; it is as they are already dead.

At this juncture, we should note that the issue of widowhood is a very serious challenge in the life of the African society and the Church as Family in Africa. On a closer look at widowhood especially in the big cities, it is a very painful experience associated with loneliness, lack of livelihood and an uncertain future. However, the issue is rarely addressed. Everyone does as if there is no problem to be addressed to. The sad part of it is that even the Church does

not seem to get seriously involved or implicated despite the call of the synod Fathers through the voice of Pope Benedict XVI when he maintained: “we must recognize, affirm and defend the equal dignity of man and woman: they are both persons, utterly unique among all the living beings found in the world”. Unfortunately, not much has been done in this area. The Church has the duty to contribute to the recognition and liberation of women following the example of Christ (cf. Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 7:36-50; 8:1-3; 10:38-42; John 4:7-42)²⁴.

Heretofore, a contextualized practical pastoral approach should at least have an insight about the African worldview and culture. Knowledge of this worldview and culture will be crucial in understanding the plight of African widows. The bad situation of the widows in Africa requires strong pastoral strategies in order to free them from the burden of oppression, the prison of anthropological and ontological poverty. Being a woman does not mean being a less human being. So also, being a widow is not a curse from God.

4. Conclusion

At the end of this paper, we urge the African Church to be at the front line in being the voice of the voiceless widows who are being denied their rights of autonomy, existence, and being. The challenges that African widows are facing are anthropological and ontological not only at the death of their husbands but from birth. There is no greater poverty than anthropological and ontological poverty; the denial of one’s existence, one’s own soul, and one’s own

²⁴ AM, n. 57.

being. We can compare this denial faced by African women to that of Ukrainians at the hands of Russian Federation laid by Vladimir Putin. He refuses to recognize their “raison d'être”. The Church should raise her voice to denounce this unfair and unjust situation African widows are experiencing. The prophetic mission of the Church should be more visible than ever. The Church in Africa as the Family of God should become the voice of the voiceless.

Christians are to be instruments of redemption, and this task has been accepted by the Church. “The Synod Fathers concluded their work by renewing their commitment to accept the challenge of being instruments of salvation in every area of the life of the people of Africa. ‘The Church,’ they declared, ‘must continue to exercise her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless,’ so that everywhere the human dignity of every individual (especially of widows) will be acknowledged, and that people (widows) will always be at the centre of all government programmes (and church pastoral plans). The Synod challenges the consciences of not only Heads of State and those responsible for the public domain but also of priests and pastors) to guarantee ever more the liberation and development of their people (widows)”²⁵. Our great desire is the accomplishment of this Latin expression: “Verba movent, exempla trahunt”.

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THE PLIGHT OF WIDOWS IN THE ALUR/LWO SOCIETY OF UGANDA AND KENYA

Abstract

This article explores the social, cultural, and economic challenges faced by widows in the Alur/Lwo society of Uganda and Kenya. It analyses traditional practices and community expectations that often leave widows socially vulnerable, deprived of property, and exposed to psychological and moral suffering. Particular attention is given to inheritance denial, forced remarriage, stigmatization, and the weakening of traditional support structures in contemporary society. At the same time, the chapter highlights contexts in which cultural practices can provide protection and solidarity, showing the ambivalence of tradition. The study emphasizes the need for cultural discernment, legal protection, and strong pastoral accompaniment, urging both Church and society to defend the dignity and fundamental rights of widows and to promote social justice.

Keywords: widowhood; Alur/Lwo; Uganda; Kenya; cultural practices; property inheritance; social marginalisation; pastoral care; women's rights

Introduction

Death, as a separation of the human soul from the human body, is an inescapable reality. Specifically regarding the death of husbands in the Alur or rather the Lwo (Luo) society in general, widows find themselves in a more humiliating situation, culturally, than in a breath-taking one. This presentation focuses on the plight of widows in the Alur society of Uganda. Since Alur is part of the Luo society, the presentation also takes into consideration the plight of widows in Luo society in general. The Luo people are Nilotic Africans found mainly in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Kenya. This presentation is quite descriptive, without statistical data such as the number of widows in Alur society or Luo society in general.

1. The sense in which widows belong to the lineage of the deceased husband

In Alur and Luo tradition in general, marriage gives a woman the legal right to work, to bear children to her husband, and to belong to the extended family (lineage and clan) of the husband. But the sense of belonging to the family of the husband is not total; it is a limited one. She can participate in certain important activities of the husband's family, but she is restricted in others.

Specifically with regard to widows, the term widow is “dha tho” in the Alur dialect of the Luo language, which literally means “wife of death”. The Luo of Kenya refer to a widow as “Chi liel”, which literally means “wife of the grave”, but not widow of the grave or

of death¹. The Luo terminology for widow shows that the dead are alive and death does not bring to an end the marriage of a woman. In fact, Mae has stated the following:

A woman got married once in her lifetime, there was no dissolution of her marriage due to the death of her husband; the widow continues to be regarded as a functioning wife. In the Luo tradition, there was no “until death do us part” agreement between the bride and groom as in death².

In Luo society, a woman is not just married to her husband but is considered as “our wife”, that is, the wife of the lineage and clan of the husband although the conjugal relationship is between her and her husband.

With the death of the husband, a marriage is not considered ended. Instead, a male relative of the deceased husband can inherit her so that her marriage to that lineage or clan is perpetuated. In fact, Alur/Luo society has an extensive kinship system. A brother does not mean only the son of one’s mother but also kinsmen, that is, other male relatives. So, an Alur/Luo has literally hundreds of kinsmen or brothers. This implies that after the death of a husband, a widow has many potential husbands to pick from.

It is sometimes claimed that the traditional custom of inheriting widows was initiated with good intentions and had many functional values especially for the good of the widows and their children: the inherited husband promised to protect and cater for the welfare of the widowed and orphaned members of the family, which, in some

¹ V. Abong’o Ngore, *Wife Inheritance and the Fate of Widows in Luo Society in Kenya: A Philosophical Appraisal*, “African Journal of Education, Science and Technology” 2/2 (2015), p. 212.

² R.A. Mae, *Widows: The Challenges and the Choices*, Salamta, Nairobi 1999, p. 85.

sense, was a perpetuation of the duties and responsibilities of the deceased husband³. In this way, widow inheritance gave a sense of security to the widow and her children. With inheritance, children have a father-figure in the home, especially for protection and for the provision of at least the basic economic needs. A home without a father-figure is usually despised. In fact, Kirwen has noted that:

“The custom for widows must be seen as a temporary adjustment in the marriage of a deceased brother to ensure that his family achieves its goals as if he were alive... Moreover, if one refuses to care for a brother’s wife, it shows that you do not love your brother. Such a breach of trust could cause the deceased to put the evil eye on you and bewitch you, seeing how you have treated his wife and family unjustly”⁴.

So, culturally it is claimed that the practice of inheriting widows was positively understood as a way of extending a helping hand to a nuclear family that has lost its father-figure. Inheriting of widows was not meant to be a way of stealing from the bereaved family or grabbing their property.

Although there is a positive consideration of widow inheritance, critics argue that most of the so-called inheritors are simply economic predators⁵, who are interested in inheriting especially widows with valuable property, and not poor widows. They inherit such widows not to assist and care for them and their family, but to perversely enjoy the material benefits, and the warmth of the quite young widows.

³ J.P. Owino, “Chira” and “Wife Inheritance” Among the Luo Community in Kenya, Osienala, Kisumu 2000, p. 18.

⁴ M.C. Kirwen, *The Missionary and the Diviner*, Orbis Books, New York 1987, pp. 64-65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

It is also important to know that some widows also behave perversely. Some of them steal resources of their deceased husbands, abandon their children and matrimonial home and elope to enjoy themselves.

2. Plight of Widows in Alur/Luo Society

2.1. Degrading Mourning Practices

In Luo societies, a widow is supposed to properly follow cultural mourning rituals, which indeed signify the death of her husband. In Alur society, a widow is culturally supposed to be somewhat shabby (with unkempt hair, somewhat dirty dresses). Among the Luo of Kenya, in Nyanza province, a woman whose husband has just died has to wear some of the clothes of her deceased husband as a sign of her fidelity to him since she has not yet inherited; her head should be shaved as a sign of sadness but also as a sign of honour and respect to the deceased husband, and she can also tie banana leaves around her waist as a sign of strength to go on but also as a sign of her shabby appearance, and therefore as a sign of her unclean status⁶. She is then to be ritually cleansed from her ritual uncleanliness, which has possibly been brought about by the death of her husband. So, in addition to the grief, which is directly related to the death of her husband, a widow's mourning period is marked by humiliating practices.

⁶ R.M. Ayikukwei – D. Ngare – J.E. Sidle – D.O. Ayuku – J. Baliddawa – J.Y. Greene, *HIV/AIDS and cultural practices in Western Kenya: the impact of sexual cleansing ritual on sexual behaviours*, “Culture, Health and Sexuality” 10 (2008), p. 589.

2.2. Ritual of “Widow Cleansing”

Among especially the Luo of Nyanza province in Kenya, once the community has observed that the widow is properly mourning the deceased husband according to custom, the roof of her house (usually grass thatched hut), is slightly altered or damaged to further show the death of the head of the family. The woman is then isolated, stigmatized and treated like an outcast who must be ritually cleansed⁷.

At this moment, her brother-in-law or a cousin of the deceased husband who is willing to cleanse and inherit her, goes to her in her isolated house and performs the ritual of “widow cleansing”, which involves (unprotected) sexual intercourse. The widow is required to have sexual intercourse with a “male cleanser” in order to remove any possible ritual impurity ascribed to her with the death of her husband. The cleansing is also believed to prevent the spirit of the deceased husband or any other spirit associated with the deceased husband from interfering in her life⁸. In fact, the Luo of Kenya believe that during “widow cleansing”, the ritual cleanser chases away all the evil spirits, which could have been responsible for the death of the husband of that particular woman (widow)⁹. In addition, by this ritual, the Luo believe that the widow, her inheritor, and

⁷ R.A. Mae, *Widows: The Challenges and the Choices*, op. cit., p. 46.

⁸ V.N. Kimani, *Human Sexuality: Meaning and Purpose in Selected Communities in Contemporary Kenya*, “Ecumenical Review” 56/4 (2004), p. 408.

⁹ R.M. Ayikukwei – D. Ngare – J.E. Sidle – D.O. Ayuku – J. Baliddawa – J.Y. Greene, *Social and Cultural Significance of the Sexual Cleansing Ritual and its Impact on HIV Prevention Strategies in Western Kenya*, “Sexuality & Culture” 11 (2007), p. 45.

the community would not be haunted by the spirit of the deceased man.

Some of the ritual cleansers are strangers to the widows, that is, not in-laws (not relatives of the deceased husband), especially if no male relative of the deceased husband is willing to inherit her, yet the widow is supposed to be ritually cleansed. Some widows even used so called “professional cleansers” to perform the ritual, including having sexual intercourse with the widows. The widows then “appreciate” them by paying for their services. Once the “cleansing ritual” is properly carried out according to custom, the widow is considered to be again in right standing with the community. She can again relate in a normal and usual way with the other members of the community.

Of course, the practice of “widow cleansing” indeed degrades widows, in addition to other consequences such as infections with sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Hence, some widows, especially in urban areas, detest the ritual of “widow cleansing”. However, most widows especially in rural areas still observe the practice for fear that their children may face misfortunes and illnesses.

2.3. The Problem Associated with Widow Inheritance

In Alur and Luo society, inheriting of widows is still a common practice. But the Alur people, unlike some other Luo groups like the Luo of Nyanza province in Kenya, do not practice pure levirate marriage by which the children born of the inheritor properly belong to his deceased relative. In Alur society, the children belong to the inheritor but, of course, are considered as clan members of the lineage and clan of the deceased man if the inheritor is a brother or

relative of the deceased husband. So, the marriage can be considered as a pseudo-levirate marriage in the sense that it is not a new marriage as such but simply a continuation of the marriage the woman already was in unless she marries into another clan. In this case, there is no need for an additional bride price.

But the point of concern is that, while a widow who accepts to be inherited is somewhat protected by the community and is left with some of the valuable property of the deceased husband¹⁰, a widow who does not accept to be inherited usually undergoes a lot of plights: the property left by the deceased husband is often seized by his relatives hence the widow is often left without important property such as money, houses, and land. Sometimes the widow is sent away from the patrilocal settlement, and her young children are forcefully taken away from her and taken care of by the brothers of the deceased husband, who may settle in the house of the deceased husband. In order to affect the sending away of the widow from her deceased husband, sometimes she is falsely accused of many evil practices such as witchcraft and wizardry. In other words, the widow can be practically “left empty”.

The cultural plight of widows, especially in rural Alur and in rural Luo communities in general, is enhanced by the vulnerability of widows due to the patriarchal nature of Luo society, by which property is held in the male line, promoting a lack of widows' cultural property inheritance rights and no stable source of income for livelihood. Widows usually find it difficult to resist being inherited for fear of being sent away from their matrimonial homes, usually without entitlement to the estate of their deceased husbands. And

¹⁰ V. Abong'o Ngore, *Wife Inheritance and the Fate of Widows*, op. cit., p. 210.

the brothers of the deceased husband take it as their cultural right to inherit the women for whom bride price has been paid.

This unfortunate experience of rural widows, with practically no cultural property inheritance rights, little or no formal education, vulnerable, no reliable source of income, is in contrast to some urban Alur or Luo widows in general. Many Luo urban widows are quite enlightened, with formal jobs, with regular sources of income, etc. Generally, such widows, though still small in number compared to rural Alur/Luo widows overall, tend to ignore the cultural conditions imposed on women such as the requirement of widow inheritance and guardianship. They are ready to legally fight back against any person who wants to seize their husbands' estates.

In addition, Uganda's Succession Act legally protects women with regards to inheritance of family property: 1% of the whole property of the intestate goes to a legal heir, 15% to the wife (wives), 9% to dependent relative(s), and 75% goes to the lineal descendants¹¹. However, there is a general complaint of women (widows) that the 15% allocation is small and unfair to them, though it is of course better than nothing as in traditional Alur. But still, many rural widows are ignorant of this law, and some of the widows who may be aware of the existence of the law are not helped by the right people to seek justice.

Following the situation described above, it is also worth noting that there is some disconnection between the official government policy on succession or property rights and what is actually practiced at least in Alur society. Most widows and their children are

¹¹ Cf. *Uganda's Succession Act*, Chapter 162, Part V, 27, [online:] <https://ulii.org/akn/ug/act/ord/1906/1/eng@2000-12-31> [accessed: 29.05.2021].

still simply at the mercy of the deceased husband's brothers, who usually seize most, if not all, of the valuable property of their deceased brother. Very few widows fight for their legal property rights but instead are in some sense forced to remarry at least brothers of their deceased husbands in order for them (the widows) and their children to benefit from the property of their family.

3. Proposals for Managing the Plight of Widows in Alur/Luo Society

To the Church: The human person is created in God's image, and the Church has a mission to defend the dignity of the human person. The generally unfair traditional treatment of widows and of their young children contradicts Christian teaching, in which the care of widows is valued. Right in the early Church, the Apostles mandated deacons to care especially for the material needs of widows by collection and distribution of alms (cf. Acts 6:1). In fact, the Church positively teaches and cares for widows and orphans because they are generally a vulnerable group of people. God protects them (cf. Ps 68) and is not pleased with those who mistreat them (cf. Deut 27, Ezek 22:7). The Church has a duty to help the Alur and the Luo people to recognise the dignity of both man and woman as created by God.

The Church also needs to start some associations or organisations which promote the dignity and welfare of widows. In some dioceses, such as Nebbi where many Alur people are geographically settled, there is the Widows' Association. However, this Association seems to exist only in name. There are no tangible empowering

programs for the widows. The Church needs to do more for widows where nothing much is being done with or for widows.

To Civil Society: In Uganda, Kenya, and other east African countries where the Luo are settled, there are laws which are meant to regulate human relationships, including the condition of women with regard to property inheritance rights, among other things. Governments need not to only have good theoretical laws, but to also make sure that these are implemented. Non-governmental organizations should also have some programs which promote fair treatment of widows in Luo society and elsewhere. Of course, there are indeed some organisations already doing something in favour of women and widows, such as the Nebbi Women's Group, the Maaka Orphans and Widows Association of Uganda, Kinship Projects in Uganda, Kenya, etc,

To Cultural Leaders: Luo cultural leaders still have a lot of influence in Luo society. They are generally respected and listened to by their subjects. Hence, the Church and civil leaders need to work hand in hand with cultural leaders. The Church needs to sensitize cultural leaders and the Luo people about respect for human dignity and fair treatment of widows as something which is desired by God himself, as expressed in the Bible and in the teaching of the Church. The civil societies too need to sensitize the cultural leaders and the Luo people about laws such as property inheritance rights so that they are observed by the Luo people. Grabbers of widows' property should face the law. Health experts too need to help the Luo people who still practice "widow cleansing ritual" to know the health risks of such practices, such as HIV/AIDS.

4. Conclusion

It is true that there are many Alur and Luo cultural practices which do not promote fair treatment of widows, such as degrading mourning practices, widow cleansing practice, and unfair property inheritance rights, among others.

However, not everything is dark for widows in Alur and Luo society. There are concerns for fair treatment of widows by the Church, Civil governments and non-governmental organisations, which are working hard for fair treatment of widows in communities. We may not only lament at the plight of widows but also appreciate the positive things being done by different stakeholders to defend the dignity of widows.

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WIDOWHOOD IN TANZANIA: ELEMENT OF CULTURAL STAGNANCY

Abstract

This chapter analyses widowhood in Tanzania as a complex social reality shaped by cultural traditions, economic conditions, and evolving social dynamics. It examines how widowhood, while sometimes offering community support and social protection, often becomes a factor of marginalisation, injustice, and stagnancy, particularly for women. The study highlights harmful practices such as property dispossession, forced remarriage, stigmatization, and exclusion, which deprive widows of dignity, security, and agency. At the same time, it acknowledges the ambivalence of tradition, showing that cultural frameworks can also foster solidarity and communal responsibility. The chapter calls for cultural discernment, greater legal protection, and strong pastoral engagement, urging both Church and society to defend the rights of widows, promote social justice, and contribute to the transformation of practices that undermine human dignity.

Keywords: widowhood; Tanzania; cultural practices; marginalisation; women's rights; property inheritance; social justice; pastoral care

Introduction

Historically, in many parts of the world women who became widows were confronted with serious inequalities and injustices. This reality is still present today, particularly on the African continent, where widows frequently experience discrimination, denial of inheritance and land rights, eviction from family homes, physical violence and, in extreme cases, even death at the hands of relatives. Tanzania is no exception.

According to traditional Tanzanian cultural structures, the social status of a woman is closely linked to that of her husband. Consequently, when a husband dies, the widow often loses not only emotional security but also her recognised place within the community. Widowhood is therefore considered one of the most difficult life situations a woman can face.

Nevertheless, relatively few studies explore the relationship between Tanzanian culture and Tanzanian law in relation to the condition of widows. Most publications focus primarily on questions of inheritance, property rights, poverty transmission between generations, or stigma connected with HIV and AIDS. Unfortunately, many analyses approach the problem almost exclusively from a Western legal perspective, lamenting the lack of individual property rights, while insufficiently recognising that the Western legal tradition, rooted in Greco-Roman law and shaped by Christian ethics, differs significantly from the Tanzanian legal and cultural context.

In Tanzania, for instance, the Land Act of 1999 declares that all land belongs to the State and is held in trust by the President on be-

half of all citizens¹. Any discussion on widowhood must therefore avoid superficial comparisons and instead take into account the specific cultural and legal environment shaped by Tanzania's great ethnic diversity. The country is composed of around 127 tribes, most of them patrilineal, with only a few matrilineal exceptions. Each tribe maintains its traditions and customary law, interpreted and enforced primarily by male elders. These customary legal structures include norms concerning marriage, inheritance and the social position of widows, and continue to exert strong influence within Tanzanian society.

1. Widows in Tanzania

Before analysing more deeply the cultural and legal challenges faced by widows in Tanzania, it is necessary to clarify certain fundamental features of the local legal and social system regulating marriage, family relations and property division. This is particularly important because the traditional understanding of marriage in Tanzania differs significantly from the European context.

Traditionally, when a woman marries, she is understood to leave her natal family and to lose any inheritance rights within it. Although current legal provisions recognise the right of women to inherit property², customary expectations continue to exert a strong

¹ Chapter 113 The Land Act [Principal Legislation], p. 14, [online:] <https://procedures.tic.go.tz/media/The%20Land%20Act%201999.%20Cap%20113.pdf> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

² Cf. Probate and Administration of Estate Act, Chapter 352, r.e 2019, [online:] [https://rita.go.tz/eng/laws/History%20Laws/Probate%20and%20Administration%20Ordinance,%20\(Cap.%20445\).pdf](https://rita.go.tz/eng/laws/History%20Laws/Probate%20and%20Administration%20Ordinance,%20(Cap.%20445).pdf) [accessed: 20.04.2022].

influence. In many communities it is assumed that, once married, a woman becomes part of her husband's economic and social unit, and it is therefore the responsibility of the husband to provide for her and their children.

For this reason, it would be overly simplistic to conclude that widows in Tanzania are merely "denied property". Rather, the situation is more complex: a married woman usually no longer holds rights to her family's property, while at the same time her access to her husband's or in-laws' property remains fragile, conditional and often contested. It should also be remembered that "family" in this cultural setting does not necessarily refer only to biological parents; it may also mean the kinship group or household that raised and supported the woman.

Public discourse, especially international and Western media, frequently highlights dramatic cases of widows being deprived of property, evicted from their homes, subjected to violence, accused of causing their husbands' deaths, or even killed. Many widows, losing economic security and social support, fall into deep poverty and social exclusion, sometimes resorting to begging or precarious survival strategies. These accounts reflect real suffering, yet they also require interpretation within the broader cultural context in which kinship, community belonging and customary law play decisive roles.

2. Protective Tanzanian Law

The law does not interfere with the internal management of family finances; however, it clearly intends that the husband bears primary responsibility for guiding his family and ensuring its proper

maintenance. Section 63 of the Law of Marriage Act (Revised Edition 2019) explicitly outlines the duty to maintain a spouse. It states:

“Except where the parties are separated by agreement or by decree of the court and subject to any subsisting order of the court–

(a) it shall be the duty of every husband to maintain his wife or wives and to provide them with such accommodation, clothing and food as may be reasonable having regard to his means and station in life.

(b) it shall be the duty of every wife who has the means to do so, to provide in similar manner for her husband if he is incapacitated, wholly or partially, from earning a livelihood by reason of mental or physical injury or ill-health”³.

Some commentators erroneously argue that there is no legal framework regulating the status of a woman who has lost her husband, or that there is a need for a completely new law protecting widows and widowers. As already indicated above, this is not accurate. The Probate and Administration of Estates Act, Chapter 352 (Revised Edition 2019) provides a legal framework regulating the administration and distribution of a deceased person’s estate, which includes provisions relevant to widows and widowers.

What is often observed in practice, especially in rural areas, is not the absence of law, but rather the limited awareness among widows regarding their legal rights, combined with lack of financial

³ Law of Marriage Act (1971) Chapter 29, (r.e. 2019), [online:] [https://rita.go.tz/eng/laws/History%20Laws/Marriage%20Ordinance,%20\(cap%2029\).pdf](https://rita.go.tz/eng/laws/History%20Laws/Marriage%20Ordinance,%20(cap%2029).pdf) [accessed: 20.04.2022].

resources to initiate legal proceedings. In other cases, widows simply fear confronting male-dominated customary structures and therefore refrain from seeking legal protection.

Under the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania (1977), every person has the right to own property. Property rights are further regulated through specific legislation. Both women and men are legally entitled to own and enjoy property rights on equal terms. Laws such as the Law of Marriage Act, the Land Act and the Village Land Act incorporate provisions protecting women's rights and explicitly addressing discriminatory customary practices that historically limited women's access to land. These Acts recognise the equal entitlement of men and women to own property and prohibit discrimination in property ownership. A woman seeking to acquire property is required to follow the same legal procedures as a man, and she may not be denied solely on the basis of her gender.

These rights – including those of widows – have also been protected through court decisions, where judges consider not only statutory provisions but also broader social needs and evolving community realities. In case law, courts have explicitly classified customary restrictions on women's inheritance of clan land as “oppressive and unjust laws of the past”, contributing to women's suffering at the hands of self-interested clan members. The Government of Tanzania itself has called for the elimination of customs and traditions that impede development, including discriminatory gender practices in inheritance, and has acknowledged the need to revisit and abandon outdated laws.

In another judicial decision, the court ruled that a spouse's domestic services rendered during marriage constitute “effort” and “contribution” within the meaning of Section 114 of the Law of

Marriage Act, thereby entitling a woman to a share in matrimonial property. This demonstrates that courts do not interpret the law in isolation but also in light of social realities. Judges frequently take into account statutory provisions alongside customary norms and lived social conditions to reach decisions that address real community needs.

The above illustrates that the protection of women's rights to own property and benefit from property distribution is not only codified in law, but also strengthened through judicial practice, which interprets legislation in a way that responds both to legal principles and to contemporary social challenges⁴.

Such practice goes contrary to the mentioned already Probate and Administration of Estate Act (succession law) that contain Customary Laws, Hindu Law, and Islamic Laws.

We can't deny the statement that in the African setting, once a husband dies, his wife loses her place in society because in many communities, a woman's social status is inseparably linked to her husband's, that's why losing a husband is considered one of the toughest challenges in a woman's lifetime. There are researchers who argue that from the economic point of view a Tanzanian woman is better off if she gets divorce than by the death of her husband.

Such practices stand in clear contradiction to the Probate and Administration of Estates Act (succession law), which incorporates provisions of Customary Law, Hindu Law, and Islamic Law, and thus provides legal guidance for the administration and distribution of a deceased person's estate.

⁴ Cf. Cornell Law School, *Women and justice: Ephraim v. Pastory and Kaizingele*, [online:] https://www.law.cornell.edu/women-and-justice/resource/ephraim_v_pastory_and_kaizingele [accessed: 20.04.2022].

It cannot be denied that, in many African social settings, when a husband dies, his wife effectively loses her recognised social position. In numerous communities, a woman's social status is inseparably linked to that of her husband; consequently, the loss of a husband is considered one of the most difficult and painful experiences in a woman's life⁵. Some researchers even argue that, from an economic perspective, a Tanzanian woman may in certain situations be better off in the case of divorce than following the death of her husband⁶.

Many widows experience serious financial difficulties because they are forced by relatives to give up their property. Some of these women decide to go to court; however, along the way they become discouraged, encounter procedural obstacles and social pressure, and eventually abandon the case entirely. As a consequence, they not only lose their assets but also the respect they once enjoyed during their married life. This loss of dignity and social standing is often more devastating than the economic hardship itself. What makes the situation even worse is that, while remaining within the same community that upholds such treatment of widows, they have practically nowhere to turn to seek justice or protection.

Additionally, in the Tanzanian context, men tend to avoid the term "widower"; instead, they usually describe themselves simply as "single". This is probably due to the negative connotations

⁵ The Citizen, *How Windows moved from grief to growth*, [online:] <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/oped/how-widows-moved-from-grief-to-growth-2642906?view=htmlamp> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

⁶ Cf. Tamar Ezer, *Inheritance law in Tanzania: The impoverishment of widows and daughters*, [online:] <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Inheritance-Law-in-Tanzania-The-Impoverishment-of-Widows-and-Daughters.pdf> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

attached to the concept of widowhood in many African cultures—connotations culturally associated with women, not with men. In fact, in some Tanzanian tribes calling a man a widower may even be considered offensive.

When speaking about African tribes in general, it is essential to understand their specific customs and traditions arising from cultural heritage. As already mentioned in the introduction, Tanzania is composed of approximately 127 tribes, mostly Bantu and predominantly patrilineal. Only three tribes in Tanzania are known to follow a matrilineal system. Nevertheless, in both systems the proper observance of customary law is reserved for men, commonly referred to as elders. It is they who interpret issues related to marriage, inheritance, and the rights of widows, and members of the clan are expected to follow their guidance in all important matters⁷.

Normally, elders are chosen from among the oldest members of the community, and they are believed to possess the power to bless or curse other members of the tribe, particularly the younger ones. One of their most important responsibilities is to preserve the traditions and customs of their tribe, even when these contradict state law. A striking example is **Female Genital Mutilation**, which has been illegal in Tanzania since 1998⁸. Unfortunately, many online publications repeat the mistaken assumption that this practice is rooted in religion. Once again, we can observe the attempt to

⁷ Cf. Countries and their cultures, *Tanzania*, [online:] <https://www.every-culture.com/Sa-Th/Tanzania.html> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

⁸ Cf. World Health Organization, *Rooting out female genital mutilation in Tanzania*, in internet, (accessed on 7 March 2022), [online:] <https://www.afro.who.int/news/rooting-out-female-genital-mutilation-tanzania> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

interpret African cultural traditions through a Western framework influenced by secularisation and the separation of religion from socio-political and economic life. Such an approach is deeply alien to African culture, and to Islamic tradition.

Already in 1990, the **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child**, in Article 21, explicitly addressed “protection against harmful social and cultural practices”⁹. The same concern applies, for example, to child marriage, which is also mentioned in the above-quoted provision of the Charter.

Nevertheless, in modern times many customs and traditions have either been modified or have gradually disappeared. Unfortunately, in many situations the traditions that determine the social status and rights of widows remain firmly preserved. One of the most common justifications for maintaining this status quo is the fear that family or clan property might be taken away by the widow’s relatives, thereby impoverishing the deceased husband’s family and children. Although such reasoning may appear logical, it cannot be regarded as a sufficient justification for condemning a widow to a life of misery.

At times, it seems that the oppression of widows and the neglect of their position within certain tribes constitute the last bastion of male dominance in society and a form of resistance against gender equality between husband and wife before modern law. Of course, this issue cannot be trivialised, since it concerns cultural heritage lived and transmitted through generations.

⁹ African Charter of the Right and Welfare of the Child, Article 21: *Protection against harmful social and cultural practices*, [online:] https://www.achpr.org/public/Document/file/English/achpr_instr_charterchild_eng.pdf [accessed: 20.04.2022].

Despite this, certain cultural changes are gradually penetrating society. For example, a rapidly increasing number of “single mothers by choice” has been observed in major Tanzanian cities. These women, often well-educated and economically secure, fear that marriage might subject them to cultural expectations of male dominance.

Still, there are also positive developments in Tanzania, including a growing awareness of the need to educate girls and women about their rights in society, supported by an increasingly advanced legislative framework.

For instance, Development Vision 2025 for Mainland Tanzania¹⁰ and Development Vision 2020 for Zanzibar¹¹ articulates the desire to eliminate all forms of inequalities and discrimination including gender-based discrimination.

Among other statements, the Mainland Tanzania Development Vision includes the following declaration:

“For Tanzania this development means that the creation of wealth and its distribution in society must be equitable and free from inequalities and all forms of social and political relations which inhibit empowerment and effective democratic and popular participation of all social groups (men and women, boys and girls, the young and old, and the able-bodied and disabled persons) in society. In particular, by the year 2025, racial and gender imbalances will have been addressed such that

¹⁰ The United Republic of Tanzania, *Development Vision 2025*, [online:] <http://www.tzonline.org/pdf/theTanzaniadevelopmentvision.pdf> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

¹¹ The Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *Vision 2020*, [online:] https://sheriasmz.go.tz/docs/dvv9M8AK3f_ZANZIBAR_VISION_2020.pdf [accessed: 20.04.2022].

economic activities will not be identifiable by gender or race. All social relations and processes which manifest and breed inequality in all aspects of society (i.e. law, politics, employment, education and culture) will have been reformed”¹².

The corresponding Vision document for Zanzibar appears less enthusiastic, most probably because its legal framework is shaped by Islamic teaching regarding gender relations. The document contains a dedicated section on women, where we read:

“the Vision’s policy on the development of women is to ensure them equal access to the opportunities that improve their socio-economic status or that engender full participation in the development process.”

It further addresses the need to “remove gender bias in access to resources, participation in decision making and ownership of property; provide women legal rights to own property and obtain credit; and review laws and regulations to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination and impose severe penalties for sexual and other offenses against women”¹³.

Predominantly Muslim Zanzibar actively seeks opportunities for women, while Mainland Tanzania, a multi-religious society with a strong Christian presence, focuses on promoting gender balance and equality. Despite these numerous efforts, most of them undertaken in good faith, the status of widows in Tanzania remains largely stagnant.

¹² The United Republic of Tanzania, *Development Vision 2025*, 1.2.1 High quality livelihood, p. 3.

¹³ The Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, *Vision 2020*, 5.1 Women, p. 25.

In much of Sub-Saharan Africa, longstanding customary laws regulate social relations at clan, community, and household levels, explicitly privileging men and excluding women from asset ownership and inheritance¹⁴.

In the study areas of Tanzania, most ethnic groups follow patrilineal systems in which women, following the payment of bride wealth, are regarded as belonging to their husband's family. In practice, however, married women often retain ties with their natal families, to which they may return in cases of divorce, separation, or widowhood. In reality, though, after the send-off ceremony and the payment of dowry, a woman loses any inheritance rights in her natal family¹⁵.

Prior to marriage, women “belong” to their father's family. Rather than owning land, women therefore gain only usufruct rights to land through their fathers, husbands, sons, or male clansmen¹⁶. Gender-discriminatory asset inheritance (or non-inheritance) practices following widowhood or divorce can have a major impact on the socioeconomic position and security of women and their children. Traditional inheritance practices usually mean that land and property are divided among male heirs:

¹⁴ Cf. Kate Bird, Jessica Espey, *Power, patriarchy and land: Examining women's land rights in Uganda and Rwanda*, [online:] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286988298_Power_patriarchy_and_land_Examining_women%27s_land_rights_in_uganda_and_rwanda [accessed: 20.04.2022].

¹⁵ Cf. Cuthbert K. Omari & Dorothy A.S. Mbilinyi, 1997, *African values and Child rights: Tanzania*, Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1997.

¹⁶ Cf. Tamar Ezer, *Inheritance law in Tanzania: The impoverishment of widows and daughters*, pp. 643-644, [online:] <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Inheritance-Law-in-Tanzania-The-Impoverishment-of-Widows-and-Daughters.pdf> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

“The National land policy of 1995 covers a wide range of issues relating to women’s equal right to own land. One of its objectives is to promote an equitable distribution of, and access by all citizens to land. Paragraph 4.2.19 and 4.2.20 of the policy, recognize the existing problems relating to land. It states Under customary law, women generally have inferior land rights relative to men and their access to land is indirect and insecure”¹⁷.

In the context of limited land availability and competition for resources, the widows’ and their children’s rights to remain on family property and within the family group often come into conflict with the interests of other family members¹⁸. This is the main reason of why in Tanzania, women are increasingly finding themselves forced from their home and stripped of their assets.

Thus, it is primarily the cultural dimension that generates women’s struggle with profound social, psychological, and economic hardship. Any attempt to design effective policies that fails to take this cultural factor into account remains short-lived and ineffective.

One of the most common consequences of widowhood in traditional societies is the withdrawal of children from school. Girls are usually the first to be affected: they are needed to care for younger siblings while their widowed mother begs or works, or they themselves must find employment. Girls who leave school prematurely

¹⁷ *The implementation of Land Policy in Tanzania*, [online:] https://legusc.blogspot.com/2019/06/the-implementation-of-land-policy-in_29.html [accessed: 20.04.2022].

¹⁸ Cf. Kate Bird, Jessica Espey, *Power, patriarchy and land: Examining women’s land rights in Uganda and Rwanda*, [online:] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286988298_Power_patriarchy_and_land_Examining_women%27s_land_rights_in_uganda_and_rwanda [accessed: 20.04.2022].

are more likely to become child brides and child mothers, which may seriously harm their reproductive health and significantly reduce their opportunities for future economic independence¹⁹.

As already mentioned, there is a growing awareness of the legal interests of widows in Tanzania. However, it is alarming that state law continues to develop in parallel to customary law, which remains highly respected and socially authoritative.

This tension becomes particularly evident when one compares the property and residential rights of widows under customary law with those of deserted or divorced women under the **Law of Marriage Act of 1971**. Section 68 of this Act, which regulates the status and rights of widows, states:

“Notwithstanding any custom to the contrary, a woman whose husband has died shall be free –

(a) to reside wherever she may please; and

(b) to remain unmarried or, subject to the provisions of section 17, to marry again any man of her own choosing:

Provided that where the parties were married in the Islamic form the widow shall not be entitled to remarry until after the expiration of the customary period of iddat.”²⁰.

While a comprehensive reform and integration of the existing laws on marriage and divorce were successfully achieved in 1971,

¹⁹ Cf. United Nations, *Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes of the United Nations system*, [online:] <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw//news/ecosoc.htm> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

²⁰ *The Law of Marriage Act*, Chapter 29, [online:] [https://rita.go.tz/eng/laws/History%20Laws/Marriage%20Ordinance,%20\(cap%2029\).pdf](https://rita.go.tz/eng/laws/History%20Laws/Marriage%20Ordinance,%20(cap%2029).pdf) [accessed: 20.04.2022].

this progressive spirit did not endure long enough to bring about a similar reform of succession law. However, a new impetus has emerged, drawing on the constitutional Bill of Rights, which came into force in 1988 and enshrines, among other principles, the principle of equality.

Consistently, the courts have continued to adapt existing laws – including customary law – in order to bring them into conformity with the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, of which the Bill of Rights forms an integral part²¹. As discussed earlier, recently revised laws provide significant protection for the rights of widows both within the household of their deceased husbands and in relation to their own families.

3. Cultural stagnancy

As previously discussed, customary law remains a powerful factor that often prevents widows from enjoying the rights guaranteed to them under state law. One clear example of this dichotomy between Tanzanian law and customary law can be seen in the customary law of the Kurya tribe in the Mara region. The Kurya are among the most well-known tribes in Tanzania and are present in almost every part of the country, particularly in Tarime, Butiama, and the Serengeti.

The reputation of this tribe is associated with various cultural practices, including marriage. Traditionally, their marriage system is polygamous. Nevertheless, their customs and traditions have

²¹ Cf. Barthazar A. Rwezaura, *Tanzania: Family Law and the new Bill of Rights*, “Journal of Family Law” 29 (1997), pp. 453-461.

been widely recognised as being extremely oppressive towards widows as well²². It should also be noted that this observation is made not by a member of the tribe, but by someone whose perspective corresponds closely to the principles expressed in the Constitution of Tanzania regarding gender equality and the rights of women, including widows²³.

For this reason, it is difficult to accept traditional practices such as sexual cleansing. According to this custom, a widow is expected to offer her body to her brother-in-law within forty days of her husband's death in order to "chase away" the spirit of the deceased, which is believed to haunt her²⁴.

It is believed to be so because, according to tribal tradition, a woman who refuses to carry out the ritual may be cursed and held responsible for her spouse's death. Additionally, within the same tribe, when a wife gives birth to a son, she becomes the first heir to the family property and the guardian of the household. However, when her husband dies and she becomes a widow, she is compelled to marry one of his brothers.

It is the man who holds full authority over the woman entrusted to him as part of the family; he is the one expected to maintain and take care of the family. Once again, it is important to avoid a simplistic interpretation that links such practices primarily with

²² Cf. Lucky Ogbigbi Eboh & Thomas E. Boye, *Widowhood in African society and its effects on women's health*, [online:] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1831944/> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

²³ Cf. Diary yangu, *Mila za kurithi wajane kumbe bado zipo*, [online:] <https://miram3.blogspot.com/2010/09/mila-za-kurithi-wajane-kumbe-bado-zipo.html?m=1> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

²⁴ Cf. Thomson Reuters Foundation News, *Widow sexual cleansing continues in Tanzania*, [online:] <https://news.trust.org/item/20131004013124-9hq3g/> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

religion, as is often suggested in some online sources which examine these issues from a predominantly Western and secularised perspective.

Many widows face serious problems within their families simply because they are unaware of their rights. This lack of knowledge leads many of them to endure suffering, particularly in the form of sexual oppression, without any safe space to speak out, due to cultural traditions and customs that silence and marginalise them.

In relation to such examples, it becomes evident how strongly these customs contradict the laws promoted by the State. In line with this contradiction, and contrary to legal provisions, widows are often deprived of any property accumulated by their husbands during their lifetime. However, despite facing numerous challenges – including stigma and being regarded as a source of shame – some widows refuse to allow their suffering to destroy them. They courageously assume both parental roles, as mother and father, striving to secure a better life for themselves and their children.

Yet not all traditions place women in an unfavourable position. Within the same Kurya tribe there exists a tradition known as Nyumba ntobhu (house of women)²⁵, which allows an older widow who remains childless to undergo a traditional ritual enabling her to take a younger woman as her “wife”. This custom follows the payment of dowry and other ceremonial requirements similar to a regular marriage, although it does not imply that the two women share a marital bed or exchange wedding rings. The aim is that the younger woman may become pregnant by a chosen man, thereby ensuring the continuation of the clan of the barren widow. In this way, any land owned by the widow may be inherited by a son born

²⁵ GlobalTV, *Kumbe desturi za Wakurya zinaruhusu wanawake kouana*, [online:] <https://youtu.be/dp7gu-n9Acg> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

from the younger woman, helping to ensure that her lineage does not fade²⁶.

By mentioning the Kurya tribe, we do not imply that similar customs do not exist in other communities of this region of Africa. Some studies suggest that practices such as *nyumba ntobhu* can, in certain contexts, provide a degree of social and economic security for widows who would otherwise be left vulnerable within rigid traditional structures.

4. Conclusion

In addressing the problem discussed in this study, we have intentionally avoided proposing simple solutions based solely on the widow's right to inheritance. As previously mentioned, unlike many NGOs and other organisations (frequently represented on the Internet), our approach has been to search for answers through an analysis of stagnant cultural structures confronted with modern state law that guarantees a number of essential rights to widows. We have also avoided stigmatising religious beliefs, which sometimes occurs in studies written from a Western perspective that promotes a secular society detached from religion.

Nor was it our intention to provide widows with tools encouraging them to fight against the social system of their tribes. Such an approach may be dangerous, because according to African philosophy, every person belongs to the tribe. Individual identity, personal responsibility, and self-understanding are deeply intertwined with

²⁶ Marta Martinez, *Straight women are marrying each other for safety in Tanzania*, [online:] <https://www.iwmf.org/reporting/straight-women-are-marrying-each-other-for-safety-in-tanzania/> [accessed: 20.04.2022].

the community. The African philosopher John Mbiti expressed this reality in his famous statement: *I am because we are, and we are because I am*²⁷. From this perspective, African social structures differ fundamentally from Western individualism and anonymity. In Africa, no one truly exists outside the tribe. Therefore, it seems inappropriate to propose behaviour that might alienate a widow from her community. This does not mean abandoning the search for positive change; however, any modification of tradition should begin from within society rather than be imposed through top-down mechanisms.

Similarly, we have suggested that the social implications of the send-off ceremony and dowry should be reduced or at least reinterpreted. In particular, the send-off ceremony should not psychologically imply a definitive departure from the woman's family and the consequent loss of any inheritance rights within it. Likewise, we have questioned subtle yet persistent pro-male dominance reinforced by elders.

Nevertheless, the greatest emphasis has been placed on promoting the principles of the Constitution of Tanzania, as well as marriage and succession legislation, which guarantee the rights of widows and support equality between men and women.

Finally, we must also acknowledge the positive contribution of the Catholic Church and its institutions, which tirelessly promote women's rights without ridiculing or rejecting the culture and customs of local communities.

²⁷ J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African religion*, Heinemann, Gabarone 2008, pp. 14-15.

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