

Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage

A History of Church Marriages and a Case for an African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony

by Onesimus A. Ngundu

Abstract

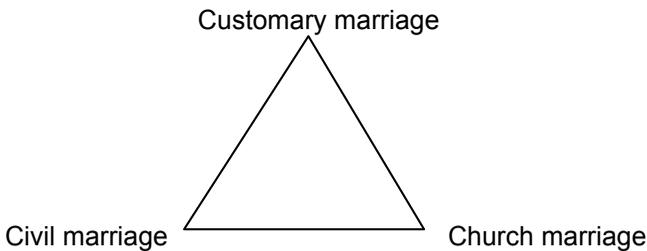
This article traces the historical and theological development, discussion and practice of the European-oriented tradition of Church marriages in Africa. Mission organisations imposed this tradition on African Christians in the name of Christianity, resulting in social and moral dilemmas because of the co-existence of customary and civil systems of marriage-making in African society. If an African Christian couple consummate their marriage after a customary marriage celebration but before a church 'marriage' ceremony, church leaders are too ready to publicly pronounce stern discipline on them. The question is: whose marriage law would they have broken, since the Bible does not sanction church marriages? This paper, a theological and pastoral response to the dilemmas surrounding African Christian marriage-making, offers a practical paradigm shift in establishing valid and legitimate African Christian unions whilst meeting all the essential requirements for a customary and civil (church) marriage. This approach would also reduce the incidents of moral confusion and conflict that presently confront African Christians at marriage.

Introduction

At marriage, every African Christian couple, especially in mission-founded churches, is confronted with three 'worlds' - the world of the traditional culture to which most parents of marrying-age children belong; the world of the civil or legal system under which the couple, like other citizens, live; and the world of the predominantly westernised culture that prevails in the church, especially in urban areas, within which the couple generally worship. The question is: which of these three 'worlds' has a right to declare an African Christian couple married? Is it the traditional world, when upon initiating *lobolo*¹ transactions, the woman is led to and handed over to the man in the presence of key family

¹ *Lobolo*, a Zulu or Ndebele noun from the verb *lobola*, was a form of payment by the bride-receiving family to the bride-giving family in appreciation of their daughter. It may be called by different terms in the different languages of sub-Saharan Africa. For example, in Shona, it is *rooro* an equivalent noun of the Zulu term *lobolo*. This is because there is no letter l in the Shona language, hence the noun *rooro*. In Sotho or Tswana the word is *bogali*. *Lobolo* is the opposite of the dowry practice which is payment by the bride-giving family to the son-in-law.

members and relatives? Is it the legal world, when a magistrate or other marriage officer signs a marriage certificate in the presence of a stipulated number of witnesses as required by the state law? Or is it the religious world, when at the end of a church marriage service, a bride dressed in white, and a man dressed in a suit are pronounced by a church minister, pastor, or priest to be married? Such ambiguity has resulted in legal, social and moral problems for nearly all African Christian couples. For example, how should African Christian couples respond when their traditional relatives in good conscience assign them a single bedroom and expect them to have their first sexual intercourse as husband and wife immediately after the customary ceremony but before a church ceremony which usually takes place several months or even years after the customary marriage? This perplexing situation has confronted every African Christian couple in the wake of church marriage rules and discipline. Lack of recognition of customary marriage by the mission churches for church and government purposes has resulted in numerous Christian dilemmas over marriage. Therefore, it is not an overstatement to say that at marriage, African Christian couples end up with a particular sense of being torn at the three corners of a triangle: the claims of African tradition, the claims of a new-found faith, Christianity, and the claims of the state.²



At what point should a couple married by African custom be recognised as married in the sight of God who created marriage? Or if an African Christian couple consummate their marriage **after** a customary marriage but **before** a church wedding³ have they committed sin in the eyes of God? Since the Bible does not sanction church marriages, on what grounds do Church leaders publicly discipline African Christian couples who consummate their traditionally contracted and celebrated marriage **before** a church wedding takes place? These questions have not yet been fully answered for contemporary African Christian couples in African society, where customary marriage-making

² Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, London: SPCK, 1973, 45.

³ The English word 'wedding' comes from a German term *bewedding* which means the pledge or surety. It came to use when the two parts of a customary marriage celebration (betrothal and nuptials) were combined and used in Church marriage ceremonies. Cf. George H. Joyce, *Christian Marriage: An Historical and Doctrinal Study*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948, original edition, 1933, 50.

practice and procedures are still viewed and valued as the *sine qua non* of establishing valid, legitimate and lasting marriage relationships.

In all societies, before the introduction of church marriages in the thirteenth century, and of state marriage law later in the sixteenth century, the criteria for the validity of marriage were originally determined by customary practice rather than by statute law. But with the introduction of the statutory marriage law, what was valid and legitimate in each society, customary marriage began to be viewed as invalid and illegal. The definitions of the validity of marriage changed and developed over the centuries of European history. The outcome of such historical and theological debates on marriage was what mission organisations and colonial authorities imposed on Africans.

The introduction and enforcement of statutory marriage law in Africa resulted not only in confusion and conflict, but also in social, legal and moral dilemmas, especially for African Christian couples, because of the co-existence of customary marriage and civil marriage practices and procedures. The main source of confusion and conflict in African society was that, although there was nothing explicit in the legislation to prevent the incidence and practice of traditional marriages from existing side by side with a civil marriage contract, whenever a marriage was celebrated according to civil rites, the principles of African tradition were deemed no longer to apply to it, and legally and ecclesiastically, aspects of traditional marriage norms became irrelevant from the civil or church authority's point of view. On the other hand, despite the introduction of the European tradition of marriage-making, Africans have continued to look upon traditional marriage as a full, valid and legitimate marriage, and the required registration at the magistrates' court or the subsequent solemnisation of marriage in Church, as just the means of satisfying the civil or church law. In other words, to Africans traditional marriage constituted a genuine marriage contract according to their custom even though Western missionaries and colonial authorities refused to recognize it. Unfortunately, the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century official missionary attitude towards African customary marriage still remains within the mainline Christian churches in Africa despite the change in leadership from foreign missionaries to African Christians.

If we are to work out a practical solution to the ongoing moral, social and legal dilemmas that confront African Christians at marriage, we have first to evaluate the current practice of European-oriented church marriage-making within its historical and theological context. Then we can perhaps propose a paradigm shift for African Christians who still view and value their customary marriages as valid and legitimate marriage unions in the sight of God.

Development of the European Tradition of Church Marriage

In the Ancient Near East where Christianity had its roots, marriage ceremonies and celebrations were never conducted in a religious building nor

officialiated by a religious leader, priest or rabbi. Traditionally, marriage-making was more of a social undertaking than either a religious or a civil responsibility. All the same, the Old Testament narrators present God as being involved in such non-religious social marriage ceremonies and celebrations,⁴ just as Jesus socialised with people at the marriage celebration of Cana (John 2:1-12). Edward Schillebeeckx, a prominent Roman Catholic theologian, argues that the presence of Jesus at the home-based marriage reception at Cana should not be seen as a sign of the Christianisation of customary marriage.⁵ Whatever arguments Christian proponents for Church weddings, symbols and rituals may want to generate, they cannot legitimately claim the Bible as their heritage because matrimony, being a private affair of the parties and of their respective families, required no public ceremony, religious or otherwise, for its legalisation and validity. To the Jews, whose religion was at the centre of their social life, God was involved with their tradition of marriage-making, and that tradition did not belong to temple worship. In their view, every marriage, Jewish or non-Jewish, was contracted before God. There seems to be no evidence that Jews viewed their customary marriage as a universal pattern of contracting marriage to be imposed on non-Jewish converts. Unfortunately, European missionaries to Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries viewed their Christianized customary marriage - commonly referred to as the Christian marriage ceremony - as a necessary consequence of genuine African conversion to Christianity.

1. Early Church on Customary Marriage

The Apostle Paul's treatment both of illicit sex outside of marriage (*porneia* 1 Cor. 6:16-20) and of marital sex itself partially echoed Roman law on sex and marital ethics.⁶ The early Church, along with the Roman Empire under which it existed, considered that customary marriage ceremonies were private and family festivals. For example, Tertullian, a Christian writer who trained in jurisprudence at Rome before returning to his native Carthage, like Bishop John Chrysostom, did not find any fault with the customary marriage ceremony itself as the only way of entering into a valid and legitimate marriage union. He had no problem with marriages validly contracted as "ceremonies at private and family festivals."⁷ Tertullian objected, however, to any Christian bishop participating in or performing any pagan sacrifices at customary marriage

⁴ In Genesis 2, God provides a wife for Adam, in Genesis 24 God leads Abraham's delegation in search for a wife for Isaac to Rebecca, one of the daughters of Laban. In the book of Ruth, God (through "chance" and Naomi) directs Ruth to Boaz, etc. OT and NT marriages were contracted according to people's custom.

⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery*, London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1965, 109.

⁶ James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, Chicago: The University Press, 1987, 60-61.

⁷ Stanley L. Greenslade, (trans.), *Early Latin Fathers: Selections from Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Jerome*, London: SCM Press Ltd. 1956, volume V, 101.

ceremonies of baptised Christians,⁸ while Chrysostom encouraged Christian couples to celebrate their customary marriages in God-honouring ways by excluding such things as drinking, dancing, and overeating from family home-based marriage festivals.⁹ Tertullian, who used the phrase *Christian marriage* in reference to the Christian experience of marriage-making itself (brought about by a Christian man and a Christian woman), suggested that Christians should sing praises, psalms and hymns to God at the celebration of their customary marriage.¹⁰ At this point in the history of the Church, the bishops did not even contemplate solemnising any marriages of Christians at church.¹¹

It is only in the fourth century that evidence of a priestly prayer or blessing is found in connection with the customary marriage of baptised Christians. A priestly marriage blessing, based on an allusion that God blessed the marriage of Adam and Eve, was probably developed from the practice of a bishop when he went to congratulate the Christian couple at their home when a marriage feast was celebrated. The domestic prayer was intended for the groom and bride, asking that they would have offspring. Hence, it was always offered in the couple's bedroom. Although Christian couples may have appreciated the presence and participation of a bishop as a guest at the end of their marriage feasts, the validity of marriage was still wholly vested in the performance of the customary ceremony and not in a priestly blessing. By the fifth century, a priestly Christian benediction was conducted *in front of the church* instead of in the home (*away from church*). However, the validity of marriage was still determined by conforming to established custom, and not by priestly participation.¹² As late as the ninth century, Pope Nicholas I referred in his *Responsum ad Bulgaros* (A.D. 866), to the validity of marriage by customary mutual consent, even if an ecclesiastical marriage blessing was lacking.

2. Medieval Roman Catholic Theology of Marriage

Politically and theologically, with its gradual establishment and influence in the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church claimed jurisdiction over the areas of doctrine, liturgy, patronage, education, charity, inheritance, oral promises, oaths, moral crimes, and marriage. It was this church's new legal and political prominence in the West that rendered the alliance of theology and law so powerful during the medieval centuries. Through its canon law, the Roman Catholic Church began to regulate marriages in Western Europe,

⁸ Greenslade, *Early Latin Fathers: Selections*, 101, 102.

⁹ Talbot W. Chambers, (trans), *The Homilies of St Chrysostom on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* in Vol. 12 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969, 69.

¹⁰ Alexander Roberts (trans.), *The Writings of Tertullian I: Ante Nicene Christian Library Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969, 279-303.

¹¹ Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery*, 254-5.

¹² Joyce, *Christian Marriage: An Historical and Doctrinal Study*, 90; Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery*, 251.

hence marriage began to be regarded in ecclesiastical rather than simply social terms. In Roman Catholic tradition, canon law refers to the assemblage of rules or laws relating to faith, morals and discipline. In carrying out its responsibilities, the Catholic Church issued a steady stream of papal *decretals*¹³ that were to prevail throughout Christendom. Most of the papal *decretals* which became part of the codified canon law were taken from the answers given by the different popes over the centuries to questions that had been put to them, usually by bishops from around the Western church. The papal *decretals* as authoritative statements provided the starting point for the theology and the regulation of marriage in the Western medieval church.

The twelfth century writings of Peter Abelard, Hugo of St Victor, Peter Lombard, and of St Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, marked a new step in Catholic theology of the sacraments. These theologians distinguished the sacraments of the Church from her other ceremonies, and defined a sacrament as a cause of grace. Even though marriage was included as one of the sacraments in the twelfth century, not all the Roman Catholic theologians agreed at first as to whether or how the sacrament of matrimony conferred grace. For example, Abelard whose list of five sacraments included baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, extreme unction and marriage objected to the idea that marriage (as a sacrament) would effect one's spiritual salvation.¹⁴ Peter Lombard, the most influential Catholic theologian before Aquinas, was the first one to list the seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, orders and matrimony) as they have since been reckoned by the Roman Catholic Church. For Lombard, a sacrament is given as a sign of God's grace; not only as a symbol of the invisible grace, but also as a cause of what it symbolizes. When dealing with the sacrament of marriage Lombard denied this sacramental grace. In his listing of the sacraments he differentiated between those he believed supplied grace, such as baptism and Eucharist, and others which he believed were only remedial, such as marriage.¹⁵

It was St Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, as contemporaries of the thirteenth century, who both agreed and argued for the sacramental nature of marriage. Thomas Aquinas in his effort to stress the holiness and goodness of marriage appealed to Ephesians 5:32 where the Latin Vulgate translates the Greek word *mysterion* (mystery) as *sacramentum*. Hence, where the English

¹³ A papal *decretal* was "a pope's letter containing a decision regarding a matter of discipline written in response to a specific question or appeal." from *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, edited by Daniel Patte, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 314.

¹⁴ Friedrich Heinrich Rheinwald (trans.), *Epitome theologiae christianae: ex codicibus Monasterii S. Emmeramni Ratisbonensis, in bibliotheca aulica monacensi asservatis*, 28: *Patrologia Latina*, 178, col. 1738. Berlin: F.A. Herbig, 1835.

¹⁵ Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Sententiarum*, IV (2), 1, *Patrologia Latina*, CXCII, column 842, Paris, 1844-1864.

translation reads: "it [marriage] is a great mystery", the Latin reads: "*sacramentum hoc magnum est*". The answer to the question: 'Is marriage a sacrament?'¹⁶ depended on how Roman Catholic theologians like Aquinas understood the term *sacramentum* as incorrectly translated by Jerome in the Latin Vulgate version of Ephesians 5:32, and its occurrences in patristic writings with indeterminate sense.¹⁷ Excluding Ephesians 5:32, which Jerome applied to marriage, in not one of the other fifteen cases can *sacramentum* possibly mean a sacrament in any sense employed by Thomas Aquinas. To him, and subsequently to the Roman Catholic Church tradition, the sacred things signified by the sacraments (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, orders and matrimony) are the spiritual and intelligible goods by means of which man is sanctified. A person, according to Aquinas, is incorporated with Christ through these sacraments.¹⁸ Is this the same understanding of some evangelical writers and pastors when they refer to the Lord's Supper or Communion as 'a sacrament'?

Roman Catholic Medieval canonists and theologians explained that marriage was a spiritual matter and a holy thing, which only the Church was entitled to conduct, so it was only fitting that the Roman Catholic Church as the custodian of spiritual things (as it believed) should handle it.¹⁹ In Catholic tradition, because of its understanding of marriage as a sacrament, the church can and must regulate it, according to the mind of the church and the role of marriage in the church. What Aquinas thus taught became the perfect exposition of the doctrine of marriage within the Roman Catholic Church, and four centuries later the Council of Trent 1563-4 endorsed and confirmed it to be an absolute truth of faith. Since the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church does not recognize customary and civil forms of marriage.

3. Reformation on Marriage-making

In response to the medieval Catholic theology of marriage, there was a resounding rejection of its sacramental nature by the Protestant Reformers of

¹⁶ *Sacrament* is sometimes narrowly used to speak of all the ordinances in which an inward and spiritual energy is connected with an outward and spiritual sign or the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Here grace speaks of the grace of the Holy Spirit accorded to Christians. It can also be used broadly to refer to things like the tree of life and the bronze serpent of the Old Testament. In the Vulgate and in the writings of the early Fathers the word sacrament is also used in a loose sense to include any mystery of Faith. Cf. O.D. Watkins, *Holy Matrimony: A Treatise on The Divine Laws of Marriage*, London: Rivington, Percival and Co. 1895, 137-142.

¹⁷ For example, we read in the Vulgate (where the term *sacramentum* occurs sixteen times) of the sacramentum of godliness (1 Tim 3:16), the sacramentum of the seven stars (Rev 1:20), the sacramentum of the woman and the beast (Rev 17:7).

¹⁸ Fathers of the English Dominican Province (trans). *The Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, Part III (QQQ LX-LXXXIII) - Sacraments. London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1914, 30.

¹⁹ James T. Hammick, *The Marriage Law of England*, London: Shaw & Sons, 1887, 3.

the sixteenth century (e.g. Martin Luther, John Calvin, etc.). The Protestant challenge to and rejection of the sacramental theology of marriage inevitably created a legal vacuum which made developing a new court system a matter of urgency. Continental and English Protestant theologians produced many ideas that eventually contributed to the development of civil marriage in the Western world. This presented reformed territories and states with the opportunity to develop and produce “a new code of marriage laws.”²⁰

Although Reformation theologians spoke with one voice against the Catholic doctrine of marriage, they did not have a uniform policy on models of marriage and practice among themselves. Because of his view of the state, Luther taught that marriage was a social estate of the earthly kingdom of creation, not a sacred estate of the heavenly kingdom of redemption. He argued that since matrimony had existed from the beginning of the world, and still continues even among unbelievers, there were no reasons why it should be called a sacrament of ‘a new law’ and of the church alone.²¹ In his view, although marriage as an institution was divinely ordained, the marriage-making itself as a social activity was subject to the state, rather than to the church.²² As far as he was concerned, marriage was directed primarily to human ends - “the fulfilling of uses in the lives of the individual and of society”²³ and the restriction of prostitution, promiscuity, and other public sexual sins.²⁴

Today in Lutheran Germany and other continental European countries like the Netherlands, it is the civil marriage ceremony that is recognized as an acceptable method of establishing a valid and legal marriage union, and not a church marriage ceremony.

On the other hand, John Calvin, the French Reformer who had been trained in law, developed a covenantal model of marriage that, in fact, confirmed many of the Lutheran theological and legal reforms but cast them in a new ensemble. In the first place, Calvin, like Luther, taught that marriage was not a sacramental institution of the church. However, he argued that marriage-making was a *covenantal association* of the entire community. In Calvin’s view, a variety of parties participated in the formation of this covenant. The groom and the bride²⁵ themselves made their vows to each other and

²⁰ Donald Logan, “The Henrician Canons,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 48 (1974), 99-103.

²¹ Henry Wace (trans.), *Luther's Primary Works: Together with his Shorter and Larger Catechisms*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904, 377.

²² Wace, *Luther's Primary Works*, 377-387.

²³ Wace, *Luther's Primary Works*, 387.

²⁴ Wace, *Luther's Primary Works*, 387.

²⁵ In ancient Rome, the friends of both the groom and the bride would meet at the home of the woman’s father to settle the marriage contract. This contract was called a ‘*sponsalia*’, that is, an espousal which was either a marriage or betrothal. The groom

before God, rendering all marriages tripartite agreements, with God as third-party witness, participant and judge. The couple's parents, as God's lieutenants for children, gave their consent to the union. Two friends, as God's priests to their peers, served as witnesses to the marriage. The minister, holding God's spiritual power of the Word, blessed the couple and admonished them in their spiritual duties. The civil magistrate, holding God's temporal power as a government official, registered the couple and protected them in their person and property.²⁶ Each of these parties was considered essential to the legitimacy of the marriage, for they each represented a different dimension of God's involvement in the covenant. To omit any such party was, in effect, to omit God from the marriage covenant.²⁷ According to Calvin, the marriage courts of the state learned and administered "a new marriage law, scrupulously based on Scriptural texts".²⁸ In theory, Calvin denounced the sacramentality of marriage, but in practice he embraced the medieval Catholic form of Church marriages.

One can conclude that the medieval canon law on marriage was a watershed in the history of Western marriage law. The main argument for the Roman Catholic theologians for church marriages was that marriage was considered to be a sacrament which could only be conducted in church by church leaders, whereas for the Protestant churches, contracting and conducting marriage in church was purely an effort to stop clandestine unions by promoting public unions. Clandestine unions prevailed generally in Holland, Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and England.²⁹ A puzzling and disastrous antagonism between *legality* and *validity* was thus created. The Catholic and Protestant views of marriage-making would become distinctive attitudes and doctrines of Western Christianity which missionaries imposed on Africans who converted to Christianity but still lived in African society. Instead of reflecting the cultures of respective African communities among whom they planted churches, missionaries insisted on the Western model of Christian marriage ceremony, practice, and procedures in the name of biblical Christianity. What we question here is whether ecclesiastical and civil marriage legislation passed in Europe to meet specific European marital and social problems in different cultural generations can justifiably be extended to African Christians in Africa (and the rest of the non-Western world).

was known as the *sponsus*, and the bride as the *sponsa*. The English word spouse, which means the one who has promised, comes from the Latin *sponsus*.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1961, 4.20.1-8.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.19.34-36.

²⁸ Thomas A. Lacey, *Marriage in Church and State*, London: SPCK, 1947, 148.

²⁹ Harold C.N. Williams, *20th Century Cathedral*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1964:13f.

If the approach to Christian marriage-making that was initially brought to sub-Saharan Africa was almost wholly Western,³⁰ then the need for an evaluation of the missionary tradition of Christian marriage-making in Africa is not simply an intellectual quest,³¹ but a matter of urgency in African pastoral praxis.³² The outcome of the pursuit of a culturally meaningful and relevant approach to an African Christian marriage ceremony “will almost certainly be, in many respects, very different indeed from what European Christians know in the West³³ in terms of how it is contracted and celebrated.³⁴ Hastings made the sensible recommendation that the African Church should *recognise* and *register* customary marriage for the purposes of government.³⁵ However, he did not tell us *how* African churches should go about it. Here we propose a paradigm shift in African Christian marriage-making which meets all the essential requirements for a customary and church (civil) marriage in sub-Saharan African nation-states. The proposed approach will also be an answer to the current social and moral dilemmas that confront African Christians at marriage.

³⁰ Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa: being a report commissioned by the Archbishops of Cape Town, Central Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda*. London: SPCK, 1973, 66-72.

³¹ Andrew F. Walls, “Africa and Christian Identity”, *Mission Focus*, 7 (November 1978), 13.

³² P. Gundani, ‘Teaching Christian History from an African Perspective,’ *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 6, No.2, December 2003, 45.

³³ Martin Jarrett-Kerr, *The Secular Promise; Christian presence and contemporary humanism*, London: SCM, 1964, 8-9.

³⁴ The Pope, in his closing speech, referred to the form of Christianity in Africa as having its African identity: “The expression, that is, the language and mode of manifesting this one Faith may be manifold, hence it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius and the culture of the one who professes this one Faith. From this point of view, certain pluralism is not only legitimate, but desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favoured by the Church...And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity. Indeed you possess human values and characteristic forms of culture which can rise up to perfection so as to find in Christianity, and for Christianity, a true superior fullness and prove to be capable of a richness of expression all its own, and genuinely African”. See Pope Paul VI, 1969, “Closing Discourse to All-Africa Symposium”, Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* London: Chapman, 1975, 20. The following year, at the Second All-African Episcopal Symposium in Ivory Coast, the Hall of the University of Abidjan was decorated with a huge banner bearing the words: “YOU MAY, AND YOU MUST, HAVE AN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY”. That showed how Africa had taken the phrase to heart. Cf. Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* 1975, 20.

³⁵ Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, 72, and footnote 1.

A Practical Approach to African Christian Marriage-making

If Africans consider customary marriage as the *sine qua non* of a valid and legitimate life union between a man and a woman even in contemporary African society, then I suggest that an explicit invocation of divine blessing should form an integral part of customary marriage for African Christians just as it should do in any culture that acknowledges God as the source of life. At present, for any African couple to receive a blessing upon their husband-wife union, they either have to qualify for a church wedding or go for a church blessing subsequent to a civil marriage ceremony.

In Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12 Jesus gives us principles of the biblical theology of marriage-making that are essential for any (Christian) marriage anywhere in the world today. In his teaching on the ideal marriage, Jesus often referred his audiences to the Hebrew Scriptures on marriage. In the first place, Jesus pointed out that in the one-man and one-woman marriage relationship that God first designed as the ideal marriage, the man takes the initiative in creating a marriage relationship, and the woman must give her free consent to the proposal. Second, according to Jesus quoting Genesis 2:24, marriage-making is to be viewed and respected first and foremost as a life binding covenant in which one man and one woman become one flesh. At marriage, 'a man leaves, cleaves, and he and his wife become one flesh.' Such a union of one man and one woman in marriage was not to be broken apart by human beings, even by the spouses themselves. Christian marriage-making, which should reflect and maintain all those universal essentials, can be entered into culturally while acknowledging and honouring God through a customary marriage ceremony. African Christians too can enter into a Christian marriage that acknowledges and honours God through culturally meaningful marriage artefacts, just as the established ecclesiastical marriage laws in the European tradition of church marriages endorsed the customary practices of the pre-Christian Greek, Roman, and later the German, Frankish and Celtic cultures (e.g. the engagement ring, the wedding ring, bridal white gown, bridal veil, marriage vows,³⁶ inclusion of children in a bridal party, candle lighting, etc.).

³⁶ Before the invention of coins, an Egyptian man would carry and display his wealth by having gold rings on his fingers. On the wedding day, he would give one of the gold rings to his bride. While putting the gold ring on her finger he would be making a promise (vow) saying, "With this ring all my worldly goods I thee endow." By so doing, the husband was symbolically conferring his worldly goods upon her. When the Romans came on the scene as the dominant world power, they adopted the use of the Egyptian ring as a marriage pledge. To them the ring became a symbol of the cycle of life. Unlike the Egyptians, they would give an engagement ring instead of a wedding ring as a token of a pledge or commitment for a future marriage. It was the Germanic tribes, during the Middle Ages, who resumed the ancient Egyptian use of the wedding ring. A groom would give his bride a marriage ring on the wedding day itself. Later, the

1. An African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony

If most of the moral difficulties encountered by African Christian couples at marriage arise from lack of the recognition of customary marriages by mission-founded churches in African society, then the modern church in sub-Saharan Africa needs to reconcile the two marriage systems. A consequence of the current approach to either civil or church marriage is that the wedding is regarded by most African participants as a duplication of an earlier marriage ceremony. The suggested paradigm shift in African Christian marriage-making, which we may call an *African Christian customary marriage ceremony*, has the following features: 1) the recognition and registration of customary marriage; 2) expressing covenantal faithfulness in marriage; and 3) invoking God's blessing on marriage.

One feature of the African Christian customary marriage ceremony should be the recognition and registration of customary marriage. As a public recognition of the African customary marriage ceremony, marriage banns³⁷ leading to the customary marriage day should be read or published in church

Western culture started to make use of both the engagement ring (like the ancient Romans) and wedding ring (like ancient Egyptians and Germanic tribes). At an engagement ceremony, a fiancé would give his fiancée an engagement ring as a pledge for a potential marriage. Then, on the actual wedding day, the bridegroom would give his bride a wedding ring as a pledge to a life-time commitment. Historically, the wedding ring became part of the Church marriage ceremony pledge in 1549. Initially, only the groom would give his bride a wedding ring while pledging, "With this ring I do thee wed." And the wearing of wedding rings especially by married women gradually became almost a universal expectation and practice. Married couples would wear it on the third finger of the left hand since it was believed that a nerve in that finger went straight to the heart. It was the English who first referred to the ring-finger as the *gold finger* because of the gold value in the ring. Hence, the modern use of marriage vows, cakes, and marriage rings in Church marriage ceremonies and celebrations can be traced back to pre-Christian Egyptian, Roman and Celtic cultures. Cf. Dunstan Davies, *Why Do We ... At Weddings?* Nuneaton, Warwickshire, England: M.D. & P. Davies Book Services, 1996.

³⁷ 'Banns' comes from the Latin '*bannum*' meaning edict or proclamation. Hence the calling of banns is a proclamation of intent that certain people intend to get married. In England, either banns or a licence are the necessary formality before the wedding can take place, and are indicative of society's approval by no objections being received. By law a marriage ceremony can only take place after the calling of the banns (any three Sundays in the three-month period prior to the wedding) in either of the parish churches of the parishes where the couple reside, and between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. (Marriage Act 1949 s.4) - or in the church on whose Electoral Roll one or other belongs if the banns have been called there. There was a time when the Anglican Church was the only place where a marriage could take place, but this is no longer true. People can now get married in other licensed buildings. However, wherever the ceremony is to take place the legal formalities have to be observed. Cf. Charles Hutchins, *Liturgy For Marriage: Some Guidelines With Reference to the Series 3 Service*. The Grove Worship Series, No. 47. Nottingham: Grove Books, 1976, 9.

for three consecutive Sundays³⁸ before the *lobolo* transactions take place in accordance with the current laws of the land. The church pastor should regularly meet with the couple for pre-marital counselling, and with family representatives of the couple to be married. During these sessions, the pastor, who would need to be a marriage officer, would explain his role and responsibility in the marriage ceremony if such a marriage union is to be recognised and registered by the church and state. On the day arranged for the customary marriage contract, the pastor and some of his church leaders should accompany the groom and some of his relatives to the bride's village home, where *lobolo* transactions normally take place. The editors of *African Christian Marriage*³⁹ are right in suggesting that, at a marriage, the church in Africa should go and participate in the celebration of the African Christian marriage-making, for church and government purposes, within the community of the people instead of inviting the couple and their parents to a church building.⁴⁰ The day of *lobolo* transactions is the focal point of African marriage. An African valid customary marriage is contracted and considered legitimate only when the *lobolo* negotiations and transactions between the members of the *lobolo*-giving family and the *lobolo*-receiving family are entered into or completed.⁴¹ Studies of African marriage agree that *lobolo* is the central piece of customary marriage.⁴² Unfortunately, due to human greed in the cash economies of modern Africa, *lobolo* has been commercialised.

Another feature of the *African Christian customary marriage* ceremony should be the expression of covenantal faithfulness in marriage. After the *lobolo* transactions and other related customary marriage ceremony rituals, the pastor should ask both sets of families and the couple themselves to make

³⁸ According to the Marriage Act, patterned after the Marriage Act of England, found in all former colonies.

³⁹ This is a final report of a five year programme of research into sociology and theology of marriage in Africa from a Roman Catholic perspective. Most of the findings of the Churches' Research on Marriage in Africa (CROMA) are similar to those of the Hastings' Report, *Christian Marriage in Africa*.

⁴⁰ B. Kitembo, L. Magesa, & A. Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1977, 45.

⁴¹ G.L. Chavhunduka, "Social change in a Shona Ward", *Occasional Paper 4*, Salisbury, Rhodesia: University of Rhodesia, (1970), 5.

⁴² Joan May, *Changing People, Changing Laws*. Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1987, 41; M.F.C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: an ethnography of the contemporary Shona, with special reference to their religion*, Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1982; A.K.H. Weinrich, *African Marriage in Zimbabwe and the Impact of Christianity*. Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1982; Michael Gelfand, *African Background: the traditional culture of the Shona-speaking people* Juta, 1965; J.F. Holleman, *Shona Customary Law: With Reference to Kinship, Marriage, the Family and the Estate*, Manchester University Press, 1952; G.L. Chavhunduka, "Social change in a Shona Ward", *Occasional paper 4*, Salisbury, Rhodesia: University of Rhodesia, 1970; Aeneas S. Chigwedere, *Lobolo - Pros and Cons*, Harare: Books for Africa, 1982.

a public declaration. Because the principles of marriage expounded in Genesis 2:18-24 indicate that the unity of husband and wife is somehow stronger than that of a man and his kindred, it will be essential for the parents or representatives of the groom's family to make a public declaration releasing their son (the man) to a new relationship with his wife, the bride. Perhaps the greatest challenge of the Bible to an African society lies just here, but it has once again to be said that it lay here too in regard to European society in the past. For many Christians of every age the husband-wife relationship has in many ways continued to take second place to that of the man and his lineage group.⁴³ We believe that the marriage ceremony service does more for 'public relations' on behalf of the Christian church than any other. Not only are the two people themselves very much concerned over the words that are used, but all those present are confronted by the teaching of the church on marriage.⁴⁴

A suggested statement of declaration by the groom's parents is as follows:

We, as parents (family) of A.B. (groom), publicly declare in your presence (bride and her relatives, groom and his relatives, church representatives, etc.) as witnesses that in recognition of our son's new relationship with his bride, we joyfully release him to enter into a husband-wife relationship with our daughter-in-law. That unique and special relationship requires him "to leave his father and mother and join himself to his wife, and become one flesh." Therefore, we now publicly release him to that exclusive husband-wife relationship. It is our desire not to interfere with the new marriage relationship of these two. We publicly accept, C.D, the bride, as our daughter-in-law.

Son, we publicly wish you well as you go into this husband-wife relationship with your bride. Through your marriage to your bride, C.D., we have gained a wonderful daughter-in-law. We welcome her into our family.

This will also be a public assurance to the bride that she is being accepted into the groom's family as the couple start their own life as husband and wife. In response to the parents' public declaration, the pastor may ask the groom and bride to make their personal and public declarations that could read something like this:

I, A. B. (groom) would like you witnesses present to know that when I approached C.D. (according to African courtship procedures) for marriage she accepted my proposal after seeking God's guidance and family advice. I am also grateful to my in-laws for allowing me to enter into an exclusive marriage relationship with their daughter, C.D. By their acceptance of the *lobolo* transactions as a token of my deep appreciation for their part and role in the upbringing of C.D., they gave me permission to marry their daughter. I would like to also publicly thank my parents for their support and consent to my marriage to C.D. As a Christian groom, I would like to make a public commitment in your presence as witnesses to the exclusive covenantal faithfulness relationship that I am entering with C.D.

⁴³ Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, 63-4.

⁴⁴ Hutchins, *Liturgy for Marriage: Some Guidelines*, 4.

Now to you, C.D: Our courtship was a private matter, though it was in full view of God and our key respective relatives were aware of it. Today, I, A.B. publicly take you to be my lawful wedded wife, to live together according to divine instruction on marriage within our cultural context. My loyal love and companionship will be to you, forsaking all others. It is my commitment to be faithful to you so long as we both shall live. So, help me God!

Then, the bride, at the invitation of the pastor, would also make a public declaration:

I, C. D. (bride) would like you witnesses present to know that when A.B. first approached me (according to African courtship procedures) for marriage, I sought God's guidance and family advice on the matter. I would like to publicly thank my parents for their support since my birth, and for their consent to my marriage to A.B. My parents' acceptance of A.B.'s token of appreciation in the form of the *lobolo* transactions is an indication that the two families are in agreement to this union. As a Christian bride, I would like to make a public commitment in your presence as witnesses to the exclusive covenantal faithfulness relationship that I am entering with A.B.

Now to you, A.B, today, I, C.D. publicly take you to be my lawful wedded husband, to live together according to divine instruction on marriage within our cultural context. My loyal love and companionship will be to you, forsaking all others. It is my commitment to be faithful to you so long as we both shall live. So, help me God!

Then the groom and bride would make a joint statement to members of the community present. The statement could take the following form:

We, A.B. and C.D, ask you all present, as witnesses to our marriage commitment, to pray for us. As we start our new home, we are both thankful to our parents who brought us up and groomed us for adulthood. As a young couple, there will be times when we need your wise advice and counsel on issues of life. As a Christian couple, we submit ourselves to God's instruction on marriage, through our leaders of the church and family members. So, help us God!"

At the end of a *Christian customary* marriage ceremony, the groom and bride would sign an official marriage certificate. According to the expressed wish of our female questionnaire informants, the couple would like to see their parents or relatives and pastor sign the marriage certificate as witnesses. The date on the marriage certificate would reflect the exact date of the couple's marriage. Up to now, marriage certificates issued at civil (church) marriage ceremonies in independent African nation-states do not reflect the actual date of the customary marriage. It is well acknowledged that in pre-colonial Africa, traditional marriages were never registered.

Another feature of an African Christian customary marriage ceremony should be that of seeking God's blessing on a marriage, either for offspring, as the main motive in the early church, or on a couple as in modern times. This would provide a practical recognition that marriage is a divine institution established by God. It was a common practice from the beginning of the early

history of Israel to acknowledge God as the one who bestows blessings. In an African context, a church blessing on a customary marriage should be more than a pastoral prayer on the couple and their marriage. It should be preceded by a brief address from the Bible on Christian marriage and the importance of covenantal faithfulness in Christian marriage. In modern pastoral theology and practice, a marriage blessing refers to a private service whereby a minister or priest prays for the couple who have contracted their marriage *elsewhere* (at the civil court) where no Christian prayer is offered. It is important that the pastor pray God's blessings on the couple and their marriage as a public testimony and recognition that marriage is a divine institution.

At the end of the *Christian customary marriage ceremony*, the relatives and couple can proceed with some of the cultural rituals (for example, the cultural handing over of the bride) towards the consummation of their marriage before returning to their urban local church. In some ways, the handing over proceedings are like the beginning of a honeymoon in Western society. Upon returning to their urban local church after the celebration of customary marriage (which usually includes days or weeks at the groom's village), the pastor should introduce the couple to the rest of the congregation as Mr. and Mrs. If the couple want to have a marriage reception, which is often the case, weeks or even months after their *Christian customary* marriage ceremony, it should be made clear to the church and all concerned that it will be a *marriage reception* for friends, relatives and the church members (John 2:1-12) and **not** a marriage ceremony. It is hoped African Christian couples will seek to honour God in how they go about their marriage receptions. The couple may decide to put on their wedding attire at the wedding reception. Nearly all African women respondents in our marriage questionnaire indicated that they would like to put on a white wedding gown at their marriage. Since it is easier to wear a white wedding gown in an urban building than in rural mostly undeveloped areas, it is suggested here that a bride can put on her wedding dress for the reception. The pastor should, in light of the already conducted *Christian customary marriage ceremony*, make a clear distinction between a *marriage ceremony* and a *marriage reception*.

Concluding Remarks

Before the introduction of church marriage each ethnic group determined the requirements for a valid and legitimate marriage union. In African society, where people consider customary marriage-making the *sine qua non* of establishing a valid and legitimate union between a man and a woman, the introduction and enforcement of statutory marriage which did not recognise African customary marriage-making practice and procedures resulted in social and moral dilemmas.

The *Christian customary marriage ceremony* approach to African Christian marriage-making in African society has several advantages. First, while maintaining customary marriage as the essence of a valid and legitimate

marriage in African society, it also takes seriously the centrality and significance of divine blessing, and the state's laws on marriage by involving the church minister in the village context where most customary marriages are contracted. Second, the date which appears on the marriage certificate will be the same as the actual date of marriage, and names of witnesses on the marriage certificate will be those of the couple's parents and relatives and their pastor as our survey respondents indicated. Third, there will be no need for the church to discipline African Christian couples who consummate their marriage after the customary ceremonies but before a church wedding. In the current system of the European-oriented Christian marriage practice in Africa, many an African Christian couple has been subjected to unnecessary and humiliating public discipline for having consummated their marriage after the customary marriage celebration but before a church wedding. Since Central Baptist Church in Harare, Zimbabwe, has adopted this approach to marriage-making, there have not been any incidents of church discipline related to the time of marriage consummation. Fourth, this approach places less economic pressure on the couple than the current system that was introduced to African Christian churches by missionaries when they first established Christian churches in sub-Saharan Africa. Expensive and elaborate weddings and celebrations resulted not only from watching and imitating the Europeans, but also from the input of missionaries, who would often bake cakes, provide expensive wedding clothes and help their African Christian workers financially, in order to make it possible for such attractive weddings to take place for all to see.⁴⁵ The *Christian customary marriage ceremony* will reduce the social pressure for expensive marriage ceremonies and celebrations.

Therefore, from a biblical, theological, cultural, legal and pastoral perspective, this proposed approach to Christian marriage-making in modern Africa provides a much-needed answer to the current moral challenges facing African Christians at marriage.

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⁴⁵ TAG (Theological Advisory Group). *A Biblical Approach to Marriage and Family in Africa*, Machakos, Kenya: Scott Theological College, 1994, 110.

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