

Towards a Reform of the Christian Understanding of Shona Traditional Marriages in Light of Ancient Israelite Marriages

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Abstract

As we celebrate 500 years of the great reformist, Martin Luther, among the most memorable and cherished ideas about him were his calls for a return to the Bible as well as reforms in the understanding of marriage. Departing from the traditional sacramental theology of marriage, Luther convincingly argued that since matrimony existed from the beginning of the world, and still continues even among unbelievers, there are no reasons why it should be called a sacrament of the church alone. Tapping from his reformist ideas, this paper argues for the place of Shona traditional marriages in light of celebrated traditional biblical marriages. The argument here comes against the past and current onslaught against African traditional marriages. Evaluated against the European white wedding, African traditional marriages have been rated as living in sin unless a marriage had been blessed in church. Had it been just a colonial ill-thought it could have been tolerable, but what is quite disturbing is that most pastors today continue to ridicule those who are traditionally married but not yet married in church. Engaging a pragmatic approach to the biblical text, this paper argues that if God blessed such marriages as Isaac to Rachel, Jacob to Leah and Rachel, Boaz to Ruth and others—which were contracted traditionally—there is no way His hand could be seen as short when it comes to African marriages. Since biblical marriages which were contracted traditionally were not sinful in nature, one can use such examples as a leverage to appreciate and defend Shona traditional marriages.

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Introduction

Marriage in traditional African culture has remained one of the most celebrated and cherished liminal stages. It is the cog around which life in an African society revolves, the absence of which there is no society to talk about, no reason to live for and no future to talk about. It is this most cherished institution of the traditional African society that unfortunately, with the coming of the missionaries, has seen an offensive label *kuchaya mapoto* “living in sin” being attached to it. The phrase *kuchaya mapoto* has been interpreted in various ways. Most commonly, *kuchaya mapoto* is understood in the context of the illegal cohabitation of partners, either already in marriage or not yet in marriage. Some, however, extend the meaning of *kuchaya mapoto* to marriages which were customarily sanctioned but not blessed in church. It is the latter understanding of *kuchaya mapoto* that this paper is concerned about. Using selected incidences from the Hebrew Bible, this paper seeks to challenge this perception of “unblessed” traditional African marriages as tantamount to living in sin. It is the strong conviction of this author that customary marriage arrangements are in themselves not sinful at all, as the Bible stands to prove. To underscore this argument, I shall begin by looking at how traditional Shona marriages have since time immemorial been conducted and then move to look at how selected biblical marriages were conducted. It is my assumption that a contextual understanding of biblical marriages will help towards an appreciation of traditional Shona marriages and put to rest claims that engaging or staying in “unblessed unions” is tantamount to *kuchaya mapoto* “living in sin.”

The author is quite aware that the usage of the term “Shona” to encompass the various identities of the people living in Zimbabwe is quite problematic. Numerous groups of the Shona were not and had never been clustered together in self-conscious ethnicities such as are implied today by the terms “Manyika”; “Karanga”; “Zezuru”; “Korekore” and “Ndau.” According to David N. Beach, even in the times past, when powerful states emerged, these states never pulled all their subjects together into self-conscious identities, nor did they manipulate concepts of group identity in a manner which left a lasting ethnic legacy.¹ While the case of ethnic differences

1 David Norman Beach cited in Terrence Ranger, “Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe,” in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, (1989), 121. Accessed July 28, 2017. <http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/view?doclid>.

should not be underestimated, there certainly, as Terrence Ranger would argue, existed a very wide zone of common culture, which scholars have come to call “Shona.”² It is, therefore, against this understanding of a cultural commonality that I use the generic term “Shona.” Where reference to a particular ethnic grouping is called for, that shall always be done. Since the researcher is SaManyika, an ethnic tribe of the Shona, much of his ideas about Shona traditional marriages will be drawn from interaction with his people as well as what he has come to learn from his interaction with other tribal groupings of the Shona. Using a combination of the descriptive approach and document analysis, the researcher shall begin by presenting first an understanding of Shona traditional marriages and then later move on to look at ancient Israelite marriages.

Shona Traditional Marriages

Just like almost the world over, the starting point to most marriages among the Shona is that of courtship. To reach this liminal stage, however, the Shona invest much effort to see the success of it. It actually begins with the preparation of the child itself; in particular the girl child. While a boy at a young age may be allowed to walk naked around the courtyard, the same cannot be permitted for a girl of the same age. Mothers are quick to either dress up the child or command that she be properly dressed if she is capable of it. As children grow up, girls are constantly reminded to pay attention to how they sit, bend, dress and interact with males. This finds echo in the research of Gelfand, who summarises part of the teaching for girls in Shona society as follows:

1. To use clean language.
2. To sit in a modest way.
3. When to keep aloof from males.
4. What to say and what not to say in the presence of the opposite sex.
5. How to react to courting proposals.
6. How to behave towards a boyfriend.
7. How to behave when married.
8. To avoid annoying her husband and to control her temper in general.
9. To avoid sexual intercourse until married and to avoid adultery.³

2 Terrence Ranger cited in Elizabeth MacGonagle, *Crafting Identity in Zimbabwe and Mozambique* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 11.

3 Michael Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona: Survival Values of an African Culture* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1979), 27.

While sexual ethics is also expected of boys, there tends to be some laxity shown towards them. The lenience shown towards boys is understood on two levels: firstly, unlike girls, they are not married into other families, hence they are less likely to bring shame on their family given that when they marry they bring their wives home. In the event that they do something shameful it can easily be contained within their father's family and outsiders might not even know about it, unlike a girl who gets exposed to the "other" family. Secondly, there is a popular opinion which drives this leniency that males are "bulls." Men are at times likened to a cock which has liberty to go after any hen. Some would therefore criticise a woman who tries to control her husband's sexual advances to other women. As reflected in the work of Hatugari, some elderly women would try to reprimand a young woman's jealousy for her husband, saying:

A, Shamurai anopenga chose. Ngaarege murume aroore uyo. Iye ndiye akachenjera anofunga kuti varume ungavakwanisa nhai. Munhu rudzii chaizvo asingazivi kuti murume ijongwe. [Ah, Shamurai is crazy. She should leave that husband marry. Does she think she is the clever one who can control men? What kind of person is she really who doesn't know that a man is a cock?]⁴

Before the advent of HIV/AIDS, men, according to Shona customs, were actually encouraged to marry several wives and sire as many children as they could.⁵ The flexible attitude in Shona culture towards men in marriage, unlike women, appears to be a shared phenomenon also with other African cultures. Writing on the Nuer people of South Sudan and Ethiopia, Evans-Pritchard notes:

Marriage is the end of a full sex life. After he is married a man settles down to care of herds and gardens, and goes less and less to dances, and ceases to take much interest in girls. I was told that should he wish to have an affair with a girl, his wife would have no objection and would probably help him in it. Women, on the other hand, once they are married, ought not to have relations with men other than their husbands.⁶

4 L. M. Hatugari, "Barika (Polygamy)", O. M. Kabweza et al. (eds.): *Pasichigare: Essays on Shona Culture in Retrospect* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1979), 67.

5 Jairos Marufu Gombe, *Tsika DzavaShona* (Harare: College Press, 1998).

6 Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer*, 1951 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 57.

Recognised Systems of Entering into Traditional Marriages among the Shona

Kutema Ugariri: “*Toiling in labour in exchange for marriage*”

Kutema ugariri is an age old recognised and legitimate system of getting married among the Shona. This is a system whereby the “to-be husband” worked for his “to-be wife” at her parents’ homestead for a certain period of time before he was given his wife. Such a form of marriage arrangement, as noted by Bourdillon, used to be the normal way in which most men got married, since cattle were scarce, but this has practically died out since most men are now able now to earn cash in wage employment.⁷

Musenga bere: “*Ambushing home a loved woman*”

Yet another recognised and legitimate system of marriage among the traditional Shona was a cultural practice called *musenga bere*. This is a custom whereby a man first had to scout for a young woman he loved. On realising, however, that he could not easily win her heart to himself after several attempts, he had to adopt a daring approach whereby he had to ambush the young woman and literally drag her to his home. If he managed to drag her home, even against her wish, that young woman automatically became his wife. Since this was recognised as a valid system of marriage, the girl’s parents did not object to the bride-price which usually followed the ambushing of their daughter. This practice has almost become extinct now, given the general awakening about women rights. Because women are now under the protection of the laws of the country, it is a criminal offense to revert to such a form of marriage. Currently in Zimbabwe, a marriage can only be valid if both parties give consent to the marriage. The Domestic Violence Act of 2007 prohibits forced marriages and identifies forced marriage as one of the harmful cultural practices that discriminate against and degrade women.⁸

Kuzvarira: “*Pledging an unborn female child for marriage*”

Added also to acceptable ways of getting married, was a system called *kuzvarira*. This was a custom whereby a starving family man could pledge to hand over a female child still in the womb to a rich man or one who had a better harvest of crops in exchange for a certain number

7 Michael F. C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to Their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1976), 44.

8 Rumbidzai Dube, “Till Death Do us Part? Marriage in Zimbabwe,” Research and Advocacy Unit. Accessed June 3, 2017. <http://researchandadvocacyunit.org/system/files/Marriage%20In%20Zimbabwe.pdf>.

of bags of maize or sorghum, so as not to starve his entire family. If the starving man had an unmarried daughter he could transact her to seal the deal. The rich man could be asked to top up a beast or two to complete the marriage transaction if the family felt what they got from the rich man did not completely equal the value of their daughter. Some scholars, the likes of Bourdillon, Enna Sukutai Gudhlanga and Godwin Makaudze, exonerate and appreciate this traditional system of marriage when they argue that no one could force the young woman to enter into the marriage contract if she happened not to like her husband and that the girl, were she to accept, earned a lot of respect from both her family and relatives for having saved them from starvation.⁹ While the girl, however, might have earned a lot of respect, the reality in most cases was that neither the mother nor the girl could object to the arrangement by the father figure of the family. Thus the husband controlled not only the sexuality of his wife but even also that of his daughters.

Kuripira ngozi: “Compensation for an avenging spirit”

Among the Shona in particular, it is a recognised tradition that if a member of the family is murdered by a stranger or a known assailant, then that person should pay for the loss of blood by handing over his daughter to be married to one of the surviving members of the deceased’s family. If the spirit of the deceased person is not appeased in this way it is believed that it will come back and cause havoc in the family of the murderer. Customarily, once a young woman has been designated to act as co-payment for the loss of blood, she is expected not to object to the decision of the male authorities but to act accordingly.

While *kuripira ngozi* has also come under the spotlight due to the awakening reality of women rights, it remains one of the problematic areas where there is a clash between traditional culture and the laws of the country. Due to the devastating effects of the *ngozi* spirit, what rules at the end of the day in most cases, is the adherence to culture. While some women may object to offering their daughters in payment of *ngozi*, most elderly women, it appears, are resigned to the fate of their traditional customs for they see it as the only way to save their families from extinction.

9 Gudhlanga Enna Sukutai S. and Makaudze Godwin, “Gender Issues in Some Traditional Shona Marriage Customs: An Africana womanist perspective,” in *Quiet Mountain Essays*, (2012). Accessed June 2, 2017. http://www.quietmountainessays.org/Gudhlanga_Makaudze.html.

Kutizisa mukumbo: "Elopement"

A high number of courtships in traditional Shona culture have ended up in elopement. In elopement, a young woman and boy of marriageable age may agree that the young woman, in consultation and accompaniment of her aunt, surrenders herself to the boyfriend's family usually at the dawn or dusk to evade observation by her family of the move she would be now taking. Preference for the cover of darkness is reminiscent of the age-old tradition whereby it was almost seen as an offense to take away someone's daughter for the benefit of the other family, as this was seen as short-changing her family. A young man could be beaten up for this and could even be beaten up during courtship days if he was seen hanging around with someone's sister. Due to the criminality still attached to this aspect, it became necessary therefore to use the cover of darkness and only inform her family early the next day that their daughter had been found at so and so's family. While elopement in some cases could be an agreed arrangement between the young man and the young lady, at times it could be the decision of the young lady to elope if she realised that she had been impregnated by the young man or in cases whereby she felt she could lose the boyfriend to other young ladies. Once the young lady has eloped into another family, it is usually difficult for that family to push her back to her home unless there is every proof that she faked the elopement.

The Sacrality and Legitimacy of Shona traditional marriages

Regardless of the form in which a marriage was contracted in Shona culture, once it had been sealed it was regarded as a sacral and legitimate institution that defied profanation. The qualification "sacral" is admittedly a very ambiguous notion which can be applied to marriage in different ways. The term can be understood as a way of asserting the importance of marriage. It equally implies the notion that marriage determines a real change in the transcendental order of things. One could also take it to mean that the obligations arising out of marriage have to be taken very seriously indeed. Last but not least it may also be understood as submission to the fact that in marriage human behaviour is submitted to a higher authority, which imposes otherwise unknown duties. All these understandings cannot be divorced from the way a marriage is looked at among the Shona.

There are several factors which validated and legitimised Shona traditional marriages.

Bride-wealth

Among the Shona, just like in many other patrilineal societies, payment called *pfuma* “lobola” plays a key role in the arrangement of exchanges and alliance between the two families that would have been brought together by a marrying couple. Not only is the *pfuma* seen as a compensation made for the time and trouble taken to raise a daughter who is now being sent off to live with another family, but it transfers conjugal rights to the husband and ultimately rights over the children born out of that marriage. If the woman proves to be barren or leaves before producing children, the bride-wealth has to be returned. While the charged bride-wealth is wholly important in the contracting of the marriage, there are some key parts of the *lobola* that make the marriage union among the Shona very sacral. Traditionally, a marriage was sealed through the payment of *rutsambo* “a value which is regarded as the real bride-price” and a bead of strings called *chuma*. *Rutsambo* in the days of old took the form of *badza* “a hoe.” It was not mere accidental that our elders settled for the hoe as something that defined marriage; there was rather much symbolic significance in a hoe. As noted by Munhamu Pekeshe, when the father-in-law accepted the hoe, he was reaffirming generational attachment to soil fertility, which fertility made it possible for the bride to “ripen” and be asked for her hand in marriage.¹⁰ This finds echo in Oduyoye who avers that the fertility of the woman is the biological foundation of marriage and it governs the male-female relations within a marriage.¹¹

The *chuma*, which was given in marriage and which was worn by the daughter who was being taken in marriage, symbolised not only her beauty but it carried sexual overtones as well. In accepting and wearing *chuma*, as Pekeshe further elaborates, the girl acknowledged before her father that she was ready to play her part in procreation. It was also an acknowledgment of her having been “ring-fenced” for the groom. *Rutsambo* thus, as he concludes, was a fertility conversation between father and daughter.¹² Given such a look of things, one can see that a traditional marriage was indeed a sacral union that had to be respected and cherished by all in the society.

10 Munhamu Pekeshe, “Traditional Marriage: A Spiritual and Cultural Act,” in *The Patriot*, September 11, 2014, http://www.thepatriot.co.zw/old_posts/traditional-marriage-a-spiritual-and-cultural-act.

11 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Patriarchy* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 141.

12 Pekeshe, “Traditional marriage,” 2014.

The witness of family members

Save for marriage unions contracted through *kutema ugariri*, *kuripira ngozi* and *kuzvarira*, the day when a prospective husband goes to negotiate his bride-price as well as make himself known in the family is, since time immemorial, held as a very important event of that family. It is a family gathering which brings together not just the extended family members but also distant relatives who may be called to come and witness the marriage negotiations of their daughter. Aunts, sisters, brothers, uncles, nieces, and grandmothers to the young lady being married off are usually part of the team that would be in attendance. While they may have a part or no big part to play in the marriage negotiations that would be taking place, it is usually their presence to witness the marriage negotiations which are cherished among the Shona. Once the suitor pays up his *rutsambo* to the satisfaction of his in-laws, he automatically is considered having the rights to either take along with him his wife or wait for the *vatete* “aunt to the wife” to bring over his wife to him in the shortest possible time. In the eyes of the Manyika people, the paying up of *rutsambo* and handing over of the daughter to her husband is the real marriage and the concept of a wedding ceremony as such does not exist. On the day the young lady is married off, aunts, sisters, brothers, uncles, nieces, and grandmothers in their numbers affirm the marriage of one of theirs to another family and such support is meant to assure the outgoing member that everyone, including the ancestors, approve the “new path” that the young lady would have decided to walk. This family send-off is also a sign that the family as one would not tolerate any nonsense if she were to decide otherwise tomorrow or be seen with another man outside the husband who would have come to avail himself to the family. This family support helps the couple to see their marriage bond as a sacral union that cannot be violated in any way.

Union between families

What further made traditional marriages a respected and sacral union was that a legitimately contracted marriage was not just a union of the two who had entered the contractual obligation but it involved everyone, both the living and the dead of both families of the couple. From the moment the union was sealed through the payment of *rutsambo*, a sacred bond was created between relations of the male side with those of the female side. Just as in most cases, they may have never known each other but from the moment a marriage has been sealed, they begin to invite each other for family occasions of either side. As noted by Van Velsen: “Marriage is the most important factor integrating otherwise independent groups of kinsmen: it provides a

link between them with a common interest.”¹³ The dead too have a part to share in this union, as evidenced by one key part of the lobola payments called *mombe yeumai* (mother’s cow). This is a cow which is dedicated to the motherly side of the married woman. Failure to pay this beast is believed to incur curses upon the young family and can even be fatal in some cases since the ancestors may have been provoked by this lack of respect for the motherly side of one’s wife. The ancestors too—of either side—may be invoked or placated if there is a case of affliction in the young family. This intervention by ancestors of either side among the Manyika people appears to be a shared phenomenon by most African societies. This finds echo in the words of Middleton who, in writing about the Lugbara of Uganda, argues that:

A wife does not change her lineage at marriage but remains a member of it and under the care of its ancestors all her life. Sacrifices on her behalf are generally made by her father or brothers to their ghosts, but it is thought that she can also be made sick by the ghosts of her husband’s lineage, and in that case her husband’s people sacrifice for her. She remains predominantly under her own ancestor’s care, and when those of her husband affect her, they do so because she is a mother of their descendants rather than because she is a wife. Her position is thus ambivalent: although she never relinquishes her affiliation to her natal lineage and its ghosts, in everyday affairs she is under the authority of the senior men of her husband’s group, and her natal family and her own ancestors do not intrude so long as she is well treated and content.¹⁴

An important element to note also from the above quote is that though marriage creates a very strong bond between couples, it does not overcome the descent affiliation, which remains supreme. While the bride or bridegroom joins the family of his or her spouse, he/she retains the affiliation to the family of origin. What this shows is that marriage bonds are significantly less important than the bonds with the family of origin. Since time immemorial, these customary marriage-making practices and procedures of the Shona people have been viewed and valued as the *sine qua non* of establishing valid, legitimate and lasting marriage relationships. As rightly pointed out by Ngundu, despite the introduction of the colonial statutory marriage law, 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

13 J. Van Velsen, *The Politics of Kinship* (Manchester U.P., 1964), 79.

14 J. Middleton, *The Lugbara of Uganda* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 28

subsequent solemnisation of marriage in church, as just the means of satisfying the civil or church law.¹⁵

Shona Traditional Marriages in the Eyes of Missionaries

Since the arrival of the early European explorers on the African soil, Africa has been characterised by all sorts of “suffering” terms such as a divided continent, a sick continent, a fragmented continent. John Baur summarises well the Westerners’ perception of the sons and daughters of the African soil when he says that Africans were viewed as: “savages” to be civilised; “cursed sons of Ham” to be saved; “big children” to be educated, for in their eyes there existed no African culture; only tribal customs; no religion, save foolish superstitions and devilish cults.¹⁶ Early missionaries to the African continent who had been fed by the reports of early European explorers simply assumed the attitude and perception of their kith and kin. Newcomers, for example to the mission field south of the Zambezi, were informed, “here we do not shake hands with Africans.”¹⁷

While the Shona had a high regard for their traditional marriage systems, most of what they cherished was viewed as not measuring up to the mark of what a marriage should be. Unless a pastor had solemnised their marriages, their traditional unions were viewed as sinful acts—hence in need of a redress. Those who were already in marriage unions were asked to immediately have their marriages blessed; and young men and women who were freshly entering into such unions without the pastor’s blessings were considered to be not yet married but just engaged in *kuchaya mapoto*, despite them having followed through what their traditional culture required of them.

Such a clash between traditional culture and the expectations of the missionaries became a disturbing factor to the understanding of marriage among the Shona. The lack of recognition of traditional forms of marriage by mission churches has resulted in numerous dilemmas over marriage. The ambiguity around marriage, as highlighted by Ngundu, has resulted in legal, social and moral problems for nearly all African Christian couples.¹⁸ It becomes a significant

15 Onesimus A. Ngundu, “Mission Churches and African Customary Marriage: A History of Church Marriages and a Case for an African Christian Customary Marriage Ceremony,” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, (2011): 37. Accessed June 1, 2017. https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ajet/30-1_035.pdf.

16 John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1998), 422

17 John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, 422.

18 Onesimus A. Ngundu, “Mission Churches,” 37.

problem when, for example, a Christianised son-in-law (after paying off his bride-price) is in good conscience given his wife and assigned a single bedroom by his traditional father-in-law. The expectation of course would be that they consummate their marriage as husband and wife, since there would no longer be any barrier on the traditional side. Can the son-in-law afford to spend the night in his pyjamas and wait for the church ceremony first or go by what traditional culture has long ordained? While the pastor may expect the young man to prove his real identity as a Christian, surely exposing one in such a scenario would be like what the Shona put as *kuera nyoka negavi*: “trying to measure a live snake with a barcode” meaning, exposing one to a known risk or engaging into something which one would not dare.

While the need to express their views and aspirations was indeed always felt by many among the Shona, it was often overshadowed by fear emanating from the subjugation following the suppression of the First Chimurenga Uprising (1896) as well as by a hidden desire to exploit what they had come to conceive as the benefits of encountering the whites. Generally, it can be noted that the presence of the white missionary at this period was considered as unwelcome. This is well reflected in the words of the editor to the *Zambezi Mission Record* who says:

When he first settles among these natives, the missionary is regarded with suspicion and dislike. He has come—so they think—to rob them of their deeply-cherished customs; to upset their social economy; to turn the hearts of the children against their fathers, and of fathers against their children; and worst of all, to fetter them with the creed of the hated whites.¹⁹

It is unfortunate that the opposing voice of the Africans in many matters was often kept from the missionary. The question which has always been asked by many, and for which no satisfactory answer has ever been provided, is: What is really sinful about traditional marriage arrangements? In earlier times when the black man was not yet able to read and write, he was made to believe that marrying traditionally without a church wedding is going against biblical injunctions, hence should be abhorred as a sinful act. Only the white man’s “white wedding” was regarded as the model of what was ordained by God and what all peoples and cultures should follow. While the Bible was often used as a silencing tool for the black man, what was

19 Editor of the *Zambezi Mission Record* cited in Chengetai, M. J. Zvobgo, *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe 1890–1939* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996), 91.

really going on was that some missionaries, especially Catholic ones, presented a theology and practice that was not based solely on the Bible but also on Catholic tradition, in which marriage had come to be viewed as a sacrament. This gave marriage a serious status, since a sacrament could only be performed by an ordained priest.

Perception of Shona Traditional Marriages in the Contemporary Church

What is lamentable is that even today in this 21st century, the missionary attitude towards Shona traditional marriages has barely shifted an inch within the mainline Christian churches, despite the change in leadership from foreign missionaries to African sons and daughters of the soil who are now leading these churches. While the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, for example, has made some inroads in trying to inculturate the gospel, much of the work has been confined to the area of liturgy. There has been hardly any serious attempt to inculturate the area of traditional marriages, except for just some cosmetic overtures like recognition of the role of the aunt “vatete” and at times following the couple to their homestead after the marriage ceremony at church and partaking in some of the traditional celebrations. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, for example, continues to uphold the need for marriages to be celebrated in church and before a priest or deacon. Paragraph 1663 of the Catechism upholds that:

Since marriage establishes the couple in a public state of life in the church, it is fitting that its celebration be public, in the framework of a liturgical celebration, before the priest (or a witness authorised by the church), the witnesses, and the assembly of the faithful.²⁰

The situation is even worse when it comes to Pentecostal churches, as they regard anything traditional as devilish. As argued by Biri, African traditional religions are condemned by Pentecostals as demonic so, as they would argue, a “born-again” Christian needs a “total break from the past,” supposedly achieved through its denunciation.²¹ Such denunciations in some Pentecostal churches may include even one’s own biological parents and a belittling of them once they are perceived as not “born-again.” Writing about a Zimbabwean pastor who was based in Scotland, Walter Masocha of the Agape for All Nations Ministries (but arrested in

20 Catechism of the Catholic Church, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c3a7.htm.

21 Biri, K. 2012. “Silent Echoing Voice: Aspects of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism and the Quest for Power, Healings and Miracles.” *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae Vol, 38 Supplement: 37–55*.

2014 for alleged charges of sexual abuse), an alleged victim Jean Gasho had this to say: “I struggled initially to call him Daddy but he kept calling me his beloved daughter, and in the end I could not stop calling him Daddy and I even saw him as a father figure in my life, more important than my own biological father.”²² It is such attachment to spiritual fathers in some Pentecostal churches that leads congregants to be “spiritually brainwashed” to the point of even substituting one’s biological father or mother with a so-called “spiritual father or mother” at their weddings in church.

The Bible was used to silence the black man, but what is interesting is that those who interpreted it to the Africans failed to distinguish the text from the cultural lenses they were using to interpret it. While missionaries, for example, stressed monogamy as a biblical imperative, translation of the Bible into vernacular languages ushered in a momentous change. Africans were now able to differentiate between scriptures and missionary culture. Among the things they discovered was that monogamy was not a biblical injunction as such, but rather a Western norm influenced by Western culture itself. In order to fully disentangle the biases of missionaries and hermeneutically arrive at God’s designs for humanity when he ordained the institution of marriage, it warrants one to look at how some prominent biblical figures, who were blessed by God, contracted their own marriages.

Rebekah’s Marriage to Isaac

According to Genesis 24:1ff we hear that when Abraham had reached a ripe old age, he made his servant swear that he would not procure a wife for his son Isaac from among the daughters of Canaan but would go to Abraham’s kindred and get a wife for Isaac. As had been arranged by Abraham, the servant indeed found his way to Nahor, Abraham’s brother (Gen 24:15) who lived in Aram Naharaim and there found a wife for his master.

To appreciate the story, there is need to understand it within its Ancient Near Eastern context, for the city of Nahor in Aram Naharaim fell within the region of ancient Babylon. The narrative proceedings of the story reflect the culture and customs of the people of that region as well as the times they lived in.

22 Stephen Ogongo, “Speak up and Report Abuses in Church, Jean Gasho Advises Women,” in Afronews, (2014). Accessed 7/25/17. <http://thefronews.eu/black-community/community/speak-up-and-report-abuses-in-church-jean-gasho-advises-women>.

Marriage Customs in the Ancient Near East

Though a full picture of how marriages were conducted in the Ancient Near East may be quite challenging to obtain, the scanty information that can be gleaned from ancient texts shows that there appears to have been some formal set of rites and procedures that accompanied a marriage alliance. From what can be gleaned from ancient Babylonian customs, a betrothal arrangement started off with preliminary contacts between the family of the groom and that of the bride. The groom's family appointed their representative who visited the bride's family to make a formal request, asking the prospective bride's father or guardian for consent to the betrothal. The Laws of Eshnunna provide clear proof of the need for parental consent at this first critical step of the marriage arrangement. According to these laws, no marriage could be recognised unless the groom had asked "her father and mother and had settled a *kirrum* and contract with her father and mother."²³ (A *kirrum*, though it originally refers to an earthenware vessel used to contain beer, the concept was applied also to the public ceremony in which the announcement of the agreement was made).

Once consent had been given, it became the duty of the groom's family to deliver the bride-price to the bride's household. The gift was presented on a tray or table and included clothing, jewellery and some food. When the bride-price had been paid, the father, in the Ancient Near Eastern customs, had the right to keep the bride-payment and to use it for himself.²⁴ Be that as it may, it was almost a common practice as early as the Old Babylonian period and in the Nuzi texts to return a part of the bride-payment to the bride as her dowry.²⁵

The tendered bride-price, as noted by Matthews, insured the groom's "right to the marriage and also protected her from sexual advance or abuse during the betrothal period."²⁶ Acceptance of the gift or bride-price by the bride's household served a two-fold function: firstly, its acceptance was tantamount to marriage under the law, whether the physical consummation was to occur within days or was to be delayed for months or years, and; secondly, it became the basis of the bride's transfer from the legal control of her household to that of her husband's

23 Reuven Yaron cited in Victor H. Matthews, "Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, edited by Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 8.

24 Reuven Yaron cited in Victor H. Matthews, "Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East," 9.

25 John Van Seters, "Jacob's Marriages and Ancient Near East Customs: A Re-examination," in *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4: 377–395 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 392. Accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509284>.

26 Victor H. Matthews, "Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, edited by Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 8.

household and the commonly used term for this was “to take in marriage.” While its acceptance did not necessarily imply an immediate physical move of the bride or sexual intercourse with the groom, it did bind the parties to the contract to a set of legal constraints that restricted all sexual rights from that moment to the bridegroom. Any infringement of these rights by other men once the marriage had been consummated, constituted an act of adultery or rape.²⁷

The contractual agreement included also some prenuptial agreements regarding potential withdrawal or divorce of either party. Guarantees were put in place regarding the bride-price requiring that it be forfeited if the bridegroom chose to revoke the promise to marry. In the event that it was the bride’s father/guardian who decided to give his daughter away to another man after the bride-price had already been paid, he was required to refund twice the amount.

As a completion to the marriage transaction, rituals involving a status change of the bride from a child to an adult were performed. According to ancient Babylonian customs, these ceremonies began with the giving of gifts by the groom’s family. An official called *susapinnu* was appointed and it was he who brought these gifts on a tray. The *susapinnu* also functioned as a guarantor to the chastity of the bride as well as the guardian of the wedding night with a sword in hand to ward off demons from the couple. Demons were feared either to kidnap or disrupt the couple from consummating their marriage on the wedding night.²⁸ In consummating their marriage, both parties to the contractual agreement fulfilled the oral arrangements and legal technicalities that had been set by their representatives, thus changing their legal status and social standing within the community into married individuals.

Cultural Overtones in Isaac and Rebekah Marriage Narrative

Given that Rebekah’s marriage took place in a Babylonian context, one can easily see the culture of the time pervasive in the narrative. The first cultural tinge that one’s eyes are drawn to is the swearing ritual that Abraham’s servant is asked to make. Abraham is presented saying to the servant: “Put your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the Lord...” (Gen 24:2–3). The euphemistic utterance by Abraham “put you hand under my thigh” can be traced back to an old Hebrew custom of touching the privates and calling upon God the source of life to witness the swearing. As noted by Zinkuratire, it was believed that a man who swore in this

27 Victor H. Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East,” 10.

28 Victor H. Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East,” 11.

way had to fulfil his promise under the pain of bringing a curse of sterility upon himself if he failed to execute his promise.²⁹

The second aspect in the story that has some cultural overtones is that of the father initiating the marriage proceedings for his son. The author carefully places words into the mouth of Abraham to show that he was really the one who presided over the marriage of his son when he says to his servant, swear by the Lord that “you will not procure a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites ... but you will go to my own land and to my kindred to get a wife for my son Isaac” (Gen 24:3–4). As reflected in the story, it is not the son who determines when to get married, but rather the father; and the kind of wife that the son was supposed to get married to is also determined by the father, as the narrative shows. In the Ancient Near East culture, a household was called *bayit ab* “house of the father.” What this meant was that it was the father who determined everything for his household. As noted by Matthews, the head of the household or *paterfamilias* had complete charge of the household’s property, represented the household in court and was responsible for maintaining its prosperity and credibility within the community.³⁰ The need to keep the family’s credibility thus forms the background against which we need to understand Abraham being wary, and asking his servant to swear that he would not touch the daughters of the Canaanites but rather choose among Abraham’s kindred a wife for his son Isaac. In Isaac’s case, even if he may have loved some Canaanite daughters whom he stayed with, it was not his prerogative to choose a wife for himself but customarily he had to wait for his father to choose that wife for him.

Abraham also, on his part, is shown to be tied down to culture whereby he had to choose a wife for his son among his own kindred. Marriage among one’s kindred was not so much based on commonality of a people’s faith, but rather it was done to preserve inheritance as well as possessions within the family.

Just like in the Ancient Near East customs, what secures Rebekah into the hands of Isaac was the payment of the bride-price that Abraham’s servant had to pay in the form of objects of silver and gold and articles of clothing as well as the costly presents he gave to Rebekah’s brother and mother (Gen 24:53). While the Bible preserves no finer details of the steps followed by Abraham’s servant to secure Rebekah, the merry-making after the presentation of the bride-

29 Victor Zinkuratire, ed. et al, *The African Bible* (Nairobi: Paulist Press, 1991), 53.

30 Victor H. Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East,” 2.

price, just as in the Near East customs, also proves that the marriage had indeed been officially contracted (Gen 24:54).

Jacob's Marriages

The Jacob, Leah and Rachel narrative presents another interesting dimension to how one could culturally contract a marriage bond in the ancient world. The story starts with Jacob who, after tricking Esau, earns his brother's enmity and so finds it expedient to leave Canaan and go to his uncle Laban, where he stays for a while (Gen 27:41–46). It was during this period of his stay at Laban's house that he fell in love with Rachel. In our contemporary times that would have sounded a taboo—to see one falling in love with the daughter of one's uncle—but in those ancient biblical times it appears to have been well received. Marriage among one's kindred, as pointed out earlier, was not so much based on commonality of a people's faith but rather it was done to preserve inheritance as well as possessions within the family. In addition to that, as noted by Susan Ackermann, concerns regarding the integrity of the father's lineage, especially its ethnic integrity, lie behind the Bible's preference for endogamous marriage.³¹ This explains why in most texts, such as Deut 7:3; Ezra 9:12, 19:2 and other passages, marriage to foreign wives is strongly condemned.

Jacob agreed to serve Laban for seven years so that, in return, he could take Rachel in marriage. When the seven years were over, Laban deceived Jacob and gave him the elder daughter, Leah instead. While this did not go well with Jacob, he committed himself again to work for another seven years in order to get his Rachel. What the text reveals is that instead of the customary bride-price, there was provision in the marriage norms of the time that the groom could render some kind of service in exchange for a wife (Josh 15:16; 1 Sam 17:25; 18:17). While ancient Israelite marriage customs sternly prohibited certain degrees of kinship in the "father's house" (Lev 18:20), one could contract a marriage within the kinship of the clan. Marriage within the kinship of the clan was actually obligatory when it came to daughters who, in the absence of sibling brothers, had inherited the land of their father (Numbers 36).

The text also highlights another customary practice which was critical to observe when making marriage arrangements. It was prohibited for a younger daughter to be married before the older

31 Susan Ackerman, *Women in Ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible, Biblical Studies, Christianity, Judaism and Jewish Studies*, Online Publication Date: Apr 2016, DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.45.

one; and this is furnished as the reason why Laban saw it fit to trick Jacob on the night when his marriage to Rachel was supposed to be consummated.

Boaz's marriage to Ruth (Ruth 4:1–12)

The story of Ruth's marriage to Boaz is embedded in an ancient custom of levirate marriage, a tradition not founded upon a divine command as such, but upon an ancient tradition, originating probably in Chaldea.³² This custom, which appears to have prevailed quite universally at the time and later reflected in the biblical laws, maintained that: "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger, her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her" (Dt 25:5).

The story of this marriage is cast in such a way that one cannot be blind to the cultural dynamics that are at play. The narrative initially sets off with Naomi making a customary arrangement of Ruth's marriage to Boaz (Ruth 3:1–6). Keeping to an ancient oriental custom (Ez 16:8), Ruth tells Boaz: "Spread the corner of your cloak over me, for you are my next of kin" (Ruth 3:9). Such words from Ruth were a practical invitation to Boaz to marry her.

While Boaz initially resisted because there was yet a nearer kinsman than he, he eventually had to assume the role of the husband to Ruth when the nearer kinsman declined to redeem the land of Naomi, when it turned out that he would have to marry Ruth as a condition to that inheritance. Boaz's contrasting willingness to inherit both the land and Ruth is consequently seen by the biblical narrator as even more praiseworthy and as such the two were blessed by God. Just like Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his wives were abundantly blessed by God, and Ruth and Boaz too having married traditionally received God's favour such that the names of these couples are even mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1–12).

An Advocacy of Shona Traditional Marriages

While African traditional marriage systems have come so much under attack, an honest re-look at the issue is called for. The moment one brings the biblical text to the discussion table, it becomes almost appalling to continue labelling marriages—which were contracted according

32 Cecil Clement Crawford, "The Incident of Tamar and Judah in Genesis Commentary," *College Press*, 485. Accessed June 2, 2017, <http://www.abiblecommentary.com/biblecommentaryongenesiscrawford.htm>.

to African traditional customs—as *kuchaya mapoto*, or living in sin. In view of the above exposition, the Bible is replete with examples of marriages which were contracted traditionally. Can one say those marriages were also sinful? If God blessed those couples as shown earlier, why would his hand be short when it comes to African marriages? It is my conviction that no one can reasonably argue that biblical marriages which were contracted traditionally are sinful in nature. Therefore, one can use such examples as leverage to appreciate Shona traditional marriages.

Indeed, there was no priest when Abraham’s servant visited Rebekah’s household; no pastor when Jacob went in for Leah to consummate his marriage, thinking it was Rachel; and no sign of any priest as well when Boaz received the sandal as attestation before the elders that he was willing to perform the duties of a levirate over Ruth. If there were no priests/pastors in all these marriages, and yet they were richly blessed, why should it now be a condition for a marriage to be recognised? I fully concur with Ngundu who argues: “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.”³³ A survey of the abovementioned biblical marriages shows that such stories are primarily descriptive, not normative. There is no way they can be regarded as calling for any particular marriage custom to be imposed. The writer of these stories used them as existing models to deliver lessons about God’s involvement in human affairs. It is clear that the marriage customs as well as family structures, as they existed in Israel, were not established in answer to God’s directives, but should rather be seen as a direct consequence of the conditions of existence in their given area and at that particular time. Looking at the pragmatic dimension of these biblical stories, one can say that they help humanity in their diverse socio-religious and political backgrounds to appreciate and acknowledge the hand of God in their day-to-day social interactions and in this particular case, in their customary marriage arrangements. Even when we look at the founder of Christianity himself, Jesus Christ when he was invited to the wedding at Cana, there is nowhere we see him imposing a new order of how that marriage was to be celebrated.

33 Ngundu, “Mission Churches,” 38.

What is often forgotten by men of the cloth is that the institution of marriage does not belong to the church but fundamentally belongs to the family. Down the corridors of history, marriages have always been a social activity and hence subject to those who held temporal powers. In other words, one might say that before the church was, marriages always were. In parts around the Mediterranean in countries like Syria and others, where the church first grew, marriage was generally regulated by Roman law and Christians quite naturally followed its regulations.³⁴ Martin Luther was quite correct when he taught that while marriage is a divinely ordained institution, the contracting of the marriage itself as a social activity is subject to the state, rather than to the church. For him, since matrimony existed from the beginning of the world, and still continues even among unbelievers, there are no reasons why it should be called a sacrament of “a new law” and of the church alone.³⁵ As has been argued already, marriage is not a creation of the church. It exists as a social institution, and as such is shaped and regulated by cultural factors hence the church should not be seen standing in the way of the recognition of the value of traditional marriages by labelling such marriages as *kuchaya mapoto*.

Priests, in Christian tradition, only came to be associated with marriages at a later stage. Affirming the non-involvement of the church in earlier times, Joseph Martos has this to say: “It is a matter of historical record that the institutional church did not get involved in marital matters before the early Middle Ages.”³⁶ During those times couples could exchange marriage vows without witness and without public record. It was unfortunate, however, that some women who entered into such clandestine marriages were later abandoned by their husbands and were left without legal recourse, since there was nothing written to prove that they were indeed married. As a way to curb such abuses, priests by virtue that they were the learned ones at that time, were employed by the state foremost to help in the recording of the marriages that were taking place and not necessarily that they function as the officiating principals without whom no marriage could go on. It is a pity that due to adherence to traditional teachings of their churches, some men of the cloth still overlook traditional marriages and insist that unless one has a white wedding in church, he/she has not wedded. Much of this influence, especially in the Catholic Church, goes back to the Council of Trent. As part of its response to Martin Luther who was validly calling for the entrusting of civil society with marriages as had been the case before, the Council of Trent declared:

34 Razi A. Diab Esq, “Religion and the law in Syria,” in ACIHL, https://www.acihl.org/articles.htm?article_id=26.

35 Martin Luther cited in Ngundu, “Mission Churches,” 42.

36 Joseph Martos, *The Sacraments: An Interdisciplinary and Interactive study* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996), 205.

The Holy Synod now renders incapable of marriage any who may attempt to contract marriage otherwise than in the presence of the parish priest or another priest, with the permission of the parish priest or the ordinary, and two or three witnesses; and it decrees that such contracts are null and invalid, and renders them so by this decree.³⁷

Care needs to be made when interpreting the teachings of Trent in this contemporary period. It needs to be considered that Trent's decisions were indeed largely determined by the conditions of the time. They are not to be read as timeless dogmatic declarations, otherwise one runs into more theological problems. Trent dealt with specific problems, and proposed solutions in view of the challenges of that time. To interpret Trent properly, one has to place it in the larger context of the history of Western Christianity.

If one is to take the teachings of Trent as timeless dogmatic declarations then one may need to soberly reflect and respond to such questions: What is godly about white weddings? Is there anything godly in the rice that is thrown at a wedding couple, except just remnants of ancient Roman culture whereby rice symbolised fertility,³⁸ hence also wishing fertility to the couple? There is too nothing Christian about a wedding ring except an adoption of an ancient Egyptian practice whereby a man would carry and display his wealth by having gold rings on his fingers and on his wedding day, he would put one of the gold rings on the finger of his bride promising her by saying: "With this ring all my worldly goods I thee endow." By so doing, he symbolically conferred his worldly goods upon her. Historically, according to Ngundu, the wedding ring became part of the church marriage ceremony pledge in 1549.³⁹

Given that even the church itself is well aware that it did not create marriage but that it has long existed as a social institution and as such shaped and regulated by cultural factors, there is need for an effective way of addressing the ambiguity around marriage which has remained a disturbing factor to the understanding of marriage—not only among the Shona, but for nearly all African Christian peoples. Since the Christian church acknowledges the sacredness of natural marriage, a simple way out perhaps was just the need for the church to openly

37 Council of Trent, "Canons on the reform of marriage." In *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, edited by N.P. Tanner, vol. II, (London, Sheed and Ward, Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 1990), 755–756.

38 The Origin Of Throwing Rice At Weddings, <https://curiosity.com/topics/the-origin-of-throwing-rice-at-weddings>.

39 Ngundu, "Mission Churches," 46.

acknowledge traditional marriages not only as valid marriages, but as valid forms of Christian marriage. Since traditional marriage ceremonies are viewed as not constitutive of the sacramental dimension of marriage, there is a need for finding ways of incorporating them in the celebration of Christian marriage. A continued disdain of such traditional ceremonies goes fully against the common conviction and experience of African peoples, and shows a lack of respect for their traditions.

Conclusion

As long as Shona keep considering the traditional systems of contracting marriages as the *sine qua non* of establishing a valid and legitimate union between a man and a woman, there is no way church leaders can afford to deny this critical part of their followers. It is in light of such a reality that the call for a reform to missionary perceptions about traditional marriage systems indeed becomes a justified one. Given that the African church is now largely in the hands of black Africans who were born and bred in African culture, there should be an end of an old era and we should embrace a new era in which we no longer see African couples being subjected to unnecessary and humiliating public discipline for having consummated their marriage before a church wedding, but after having met the requirements of traditional customs. In most mainline churches like Catholic Church, Anglican, Methodist and others, unwedded couples are barred from receiving communion and cannot occupy critical posts in church leadership. Recognition of customary marriage-making should be an issue that churches need to take seriously, as there is nothing wrong or sinful about them. Church leaders should not continue trying to hide behind the Bible in order to dismiss traditional forms of marriage when the Bible itself does not show a religious functionary officiating any marriage, but rather contains clear evidence of traditionally contracted marriages which were abundantly blessed by God. If God blessed those traditional marriages, surely his hand cannot be short when it comes to African traditional marriages.

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