

**WOMEN'S SECURITY THROUGH HETEROSEXUAL MARRIAGE
IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: AN AFRICAN
WOMAN'S READING OF THE BOOK OF RUTH**

by

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DECLARATION

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I declare that the dissertation entitled WOMEN'S SECURITY THROUGH HETEROSEXUAL MARRIAGE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: AN AFRICAN WOMAN'S READING OF THE BOOK OF RUTH is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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ABSTRACT

In Congolese society, heterosexual marriage is a highly regarded institution that is viewed as contributing significantly to the true identities of women. In this study, I use Masenya's terminologies, "idolization of marriage" and "marriage at all costs", as springboards to re-read the story of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible in light of the experiences of Congolese women who tend to regard marriage as a norm. I have analysed and critiqued patriarchy as it has shaped the lives of biblical women (cf the Ruth character in the Hebrew Bible) as well as it continues to shape the lives of many Congolese women. Although in some sense, the Ruth character can be emulated in terms of her sense of independence, in terms of her commitment to seeking marriage at all costs though, Ruth, cannot be a helpful model to the lives of many poor Anamongo women who today trapped in poverty, continue to regard heterosexual marriage as the norm in their search for survival, security, and value.

KEY WORDS

ANAMONGO, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO, HETEROSEXUAL, IDOLIZATION OF MARRIAGE, MARRIAGE AT ALL COSTS, MARRIAGE, PATRIARCHY, POVERTY, RUTH, SECURITY, SURVIVAL, WOMEN.

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ABREVIATIONS

AIDS	<i>Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</i>
ASF	Association de Sante Familiale
CADELU	Communauté Association des Eglises Evangéliques de la Lulonga
CEv	Cahier Evangile
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GBC	Global Bible Commentary
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
JCT	Journal of Constructive Theology
JPSV	Jewish Publication Society Version
JTSA	Journal of Theology for South Africa
NGO	Non Government Organization
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OT	Old Testament
RThPh	Revue de théologie et de philosophie
SNVBG	Strategie Nationale de Lutte contre les violences basees sur le genre
UEM	United Evangelical Mission
UNAIDS	United Nations Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
WCC	World Council of Churches

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Chapter 1

ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

1. Introduction

Feminine identities, which marginalise women, in the patriarchal African context should not leave us indifferent. In Africa the family is the basic unit of society. Every family usually starts with a relationship between a man and a woman. The institution of marriage is a central feature of African people's lives. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), women are expected to get married, bear children and take care of their families. Generally speaking, in my view, women are not respected as complete human beings created in God's image. In most cases women do not have the freedom to choose what they would like to do within Congolese society. Heterosexual marriage is considered to provide all women with respect, protection, security, survival and an identity. Against this expectation of marriage, as well as the prevalence of poverty among DRC African families, girl children are marginalised by their parents when it comes to deciding which children must attend school. The African culture suggests that a woman does not belong to her own village, but rather to that of her husband. Once she is married her husband becomes her custodian and must provide for her needs.

Heterosexual marriage is central in Congolese society. In order to get married most young girls become actively engaged in sexual relationships. Sometimes these relationships become dangerous to women's health, as many are infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and/or acquire other sexually transmitted diseases. These diseases can cost them their lives.

In the context of the Hebrew Bible, Ruth takes the decision to leave her country of origin for another one although, Naomi, her mother-in-law, instructs

her to return to her own mother's house. However, Ruth resolves to follow Naomi and does so with faithfulness and dedication. This she does in accordance with the principles of the Judahite society into which she married. Ruth uses her knowledge and resources in order to meet her needs.

As Sakenfeld (1999:53) comments, in chapter one of the Book of Ruth, Naomi expresses the hope that God will provide Ruth with the security of marriage since she feels that she, Naomi, is unable to do so. Indeed, providing women with security, protection and respect through marriage, especially with a prominent and wealthy man in the community, is central to the book of Ruth. As Nadar (2001:172) observes, "Ruth emerges as a woman who takes control of her destiny and changes it. She is not a victim of circumstance waiting for a man to change her fate."

In order to understand Ruth's context when compared to the context of Congolese women, one should ask the following questions: Does a woman's security depend on being in a relationship with a man? Does marriage place women in a protected and secure environment as is usually assumed? Why do women in the DRC have no freedom to choose what they want to do with their own lives? Can one say that the character of Ruth provides a positive example for Congolese women today? How can Ruth serve as a model for establishing an identity within a society that believes that marriage secures a woman's position within the household?

In short, can African women in the modern Congolese context, a context with the tendency to idolise marriage (cf. Masenya 2004b: 89),¹ be assisted by

¹ In her interpretation of the book of Ruth in the South African Christian context in the Global Bible Commentary (2004b: 86-91), Masenya opposes a reading of the idolisation of marriage, the culture where a woman is not regarded as a full human being without being married; where marriage is viewed as the basic or sole determinant for a woman to live a meaningful life. She does not declare that marriage is not important but criticises it when it becomes the *only* redemption for women. She concludes that women can find their own ways and value in our African society outside of marriage and that God's purposes for the individual women and men can still happen apart from marriage.

Ruth's character as this is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible's Book of Ruth? Put differently, can the character of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible, with its tendency to seek marriage at all costs, or to use Masenya's terminology, to "idolize" marriage, serve as a helpful model for the affirmation of female identities in the DRC's context?

In the following paragraphs I investigate the statement of the problem of this research.

2. Statement of the problem

For many years, in our traditional patriarchal African society, the role that a woman was supposed to play in society was reduced to the duties of procreation, looking after the children and the performance of other household chores. In addition, because she was considered to be a lesser, weaker creature, she was not involved in decision-making processes especially with regard to the management of society as a whole. She was called on to be obedient and agree with everything that was proposed by men.

Viewing the situation of African women today, one can say that some women in Africa are no longer defined by their marital status. But, I agree with Raheb (2003:89) who wrote from the Palestinian context that:

Within the last few years women have made their way into different fields of employment. Yet this development does not necessarily mean that the right of women to work has become more accepted by today's society due to a change in the patriarchal structure...women working is a matter of survival rather than recognition of their right to do so or right of equality. At the same time it is important to note that although some women have made their way into previously male-dominated professions, the majority of Palestinian women who work outside the private sector today are still working in the traditionally accepted female profession such as nursing, teaching or secretarial work.

However, as mentioned above, the situation of women in Africa is changing. But if we look closer to the real role that they are playing within the

society, compared to men, they are still largely bound to the traditional structures and roles given to them by their communities.

In the Congolese context, especially for a woman from the equatorial region,² it remains a big challenge to find highly educated women working in the decision-making positions. They do not have any freedom within marriage. Once married, a woman even loses the few rights that she had possessed as a single woman, and her husband gains total control over her. As a marginalised woman in such a context she does not have a hopeful future.

Consequently patriarchy still poses a challenge for Congolese women. Marriage retains an important value in a Congolese culture, a value that, in my view, is not contrary to the biblical understanding of a marriage that is found in Genesis 2 where God is portrayed as declaring that a man and a woman are one flesh. But one would like to challenge the idolisation of marriage, that is, the view that marriage is the only way for securing women's lives and thus providing them with respect and stability. As argued by Masenya (2004b:90), young women need to be reminded that God's purpose for individual women and men can still happen apart from marriage. It is possible for a woman to find her way and live a meaningful life even outside of the marriage bond.

With regard to the identity of women, I do not agree that a woman has to be described in terms of the institution of marriage. In this regard, churches should investigate the "Good News" that liberates women from the "roof of marriage culture"; where a woman's identity is integrally linked to marriage. They also need to be empowered by society in general so that they can improve the lives of present and future generations of women. In this regard, this study

²I preferred to focus on this particular region because of my origin. I come from the African Equatorial Region and I belong to the Anamongo ethnic group where it is a must for a woman to be married. Marriage earns a woman some respect as well as security. I come from that region where the education, especially for the girl-child, does not seem to have meaning in the society. In its entire history, the Anamongo community has produced few highly educated women because it believes that the survival of a woman depends on a man. Focusing on that region is a challenge and opportunity for me to produce an original work.

would also like to find out what has been done by different scholars to improve the unequal power dynamics between women and men, girls and boys within the DRC context with a view to finding appropriate solutions.

With the preceding background about the understanding of marriage within the Congolese context the biblical story of Ruth proves relevant. On the one hand Ruth is a good example of a woman who takes decisions and shows determination in seeking a life. She is also a woman who makes sacrifices for the welfare of her family and society. On the other hand one can be very critical about Ruth's behaviour. Should her role be regarded as a model for empowering Congolese women, knowing that she can also reflect the behaviour of a woman who seems to be unable to take control of her own destiny outside of marriage?

Using my Christian background from a Congolese context where until today, marriage has to be between a man and a woman, the focus in this research will be on a heterosexual marriage bond. Heterosexual marriage is still the only form of marriage recognised by the DRC law (code de la famille 2005:11). Even if one observes other forms of relationships/partnerships being practiced today, such are not viewed as legitimate by society. They mainly take place in private.

Being part of the Congolese society, a society where the life of a woman has to be tied to that of a man, where marriage is the only way for a young girl to live a meaningful life, to deserve respect and be secure has become a challenge for me. I refer to my own experience as a woman from a church where I could not deserve respect, become an ordained minister and be accepted without being married. Moreover, in such a context, violence against women within marriage increases daily. The narrative of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible has been read by various scholars raising the same or different questions (cf. marriage, relationships, and women's identities) with different interpretations and perspectives related to their context. Those interpretations, especially among feminist scholars, have produced empowering messages for women.

Reading the Bible from an African perspective Kanyoro (1999:22) argues that,

“Critical African women theologians spend much more time on the issue in the book of Ruth. They ask questions about the validity of every move by every character in the book. They ask questions whether the women portrayed there are indeed liberated women or victims of culture. They ask whether their solidarity with each other was a result of choice or a prescription of culture. The greatest misfortune for the three widows, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, was the death of their male protectors. Was Naomi’s return to Bethlehem liberating? Whom did it liberate, and why? Did the women really have the open choices that they are credited with? Did Naomi and Ruth choose each other, or did circumstances of vulnerability put them together? Without a husband and sons, what could Naomi have done in Moab? What choices would have been available to her if she had stayed in Moab?

Rereading the Ruth narrative, with reference to the current Congolese patriarchal system which influences Congolese Christian women in the way in which they accommodate their lives to that of men within marriage, I ask the question: Does the book of Ruth have any liberating message or does it only perpetuate the patriarchal status quo? Can the text of Ruth empower Anamongo women and contribute toward their liberation? Can it help women to recover their own positive image, for instance, as that of women created in the image of God to be equal partners with men, among others that have been misconstrued by the problematic interpretation of the culture? Given the identity crisis and the situation of poverty facing Congolese women today, can the narrative of Ruth reveal a more liberating agenda for women? With regard to what is happening to the Congolese society today, a society where women often have to offer their bodies for survival, how do they interpret Ruth chapter three where she visited a man at night to ask for marriage? How can Ruth’s behaviour be interpreted in a world ravaged by an AIDS pandemic, a world where women are forced by the patriarchal system and church tradition not to say no to unprotected sex in the name of marriage? With regard to the situation of

widowed, childless and unmarried women in the Anamongo society, what can be done so that they do not have to continue to sign their own death certificates and be forced to put themselves at risk in order to survive? Where does the church stand with regard to the many cases of marital violence happening in DRC and where women and their children daily face death and some have even lost their lives because they have said yes before God? Can all positions, whether in the church or in society, be opened to women as well as men, or are women restricted from certain roles and subordinated to male authority on the basis of gender alone? Could it be possible for Congolese women today to find ways to be respected and feel secure in the society outside of marriage? If the narrative of Ruth is read from a woman's liberation perspective can women within the Congolese society, especially those from the equatorial region, read the book of Ruth and other woman's narratives with this alternate view that could liberate them from the patriarchal culture that has been inculcated in them?

These questions, among others will be dealt with in this dissertation, even as they can be consolidated into the following main question investigated by the present study: In light of the "idolization" of heterosexual marriage within the Anamongo people of the D.R. Congo, as well as the risks involved within such a view of marriage as well as the institution of marriage in our day, can the character of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible serve as a helpful model for the Anamongo women in their quest for liberative definitions of womanhood?

We now turn to the hypothesis on which this study is based.

3. Hypothesis postulation

Informed by the *bosadi* (womanhood) approach (Masenya2004a:161), I am arguing that the Bible as well as the African (Congolese) do have both

oppressive and liberative elements. Such elements also become notable from the story of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible.

On the one hand, the observation that Ruth, through the assistance of Naomi seeks marriage at all costs, makes her to fail to serve as a role model for Anamongo women today in their search of a more liberative definitions of womanhood. On the other hand, in terms of a sense of independence and her (partial) ability to hold her own in the world of men, Ruth's character can be viewed as liberative to the Anamongo women in their struggle to navigate through patriarchy and poverty.

With the above in mind, we now have a look to the methodology to be employed to this study.

4. Methodology

Research methods are viewed as the “techniques or procedures used to collate and analyze data” (Grix 2001:29). In conducting this study, the main research methods used are the narrative method and the qualitative method.

Firstly, the researcher proposes to analyse texts by combining diachronic (especially aspects of the historical-critical method) and the synchronic (narrative method) methods. As explained by Wenin (1998:2), by reading the text we can attempt to get a clearer, more in-depth understanding of the narrative. This will help us to re-read the story of Ruth with new eyes and find new treasures by using the elements provided by the narrator.

However, one should bear in mind that this analysis may not be sufficient in itself. Through the reading, if the reader cannot access the world of the narrator, the culture behind the text would escape. The time gap that separates us from the writing of biblical texts makes it necessary for our attempt to try and understand the original context of the text and the purpose of communicating it. It is significant to consider who the first recipients of the text were and their

environment. It is also the task of historical criticism to ask: Who is the author? Why has he/she written this text and when did he/she write?

Secondly, given the fact that our objective is to re-read the text from an African gender sensitive perspective, I have chosen to re-read the Ruth story in the Hebrew Bible through the employ of a *bosadi* (womanhood) approach. The Northern Sotho word *bosadi* (womanhood) is an abstract noun for the word *mosadi* which means “woman” (cf Masenya (2004a:122). It is interesting to note the resemblances in the root “*sadi*” (N. Sotho) and “*mwasi*”(Lingala). The latter, is the main language of the equatorial region. The abstract noun for womanhood is *bomwasi* (womanhood) whose noun is *mwasi* for woman. *Bomwasi* in the Ananomgo society as *bosadi* in the Northern Sotho society as explained by Masenya, describes what it means to be a woman. In my view, the *bosadi* approach is closer to enculturation hermeneutics, as such; it will hopefully enable me to reread the biblical text in question informed by my *own* context as a DR Congolese African woman. Although, having been influenced by the feminist and womanist methodological frameworks, Masenya (2004a: 119-126) decided to develop a new methodology in reading biblical texts informed by her African context in South Africa. Her decision was persuaded by the insufficiency of both feminism and womanism to deal with her particular African-South African context. Feminism, in her view, has racist origins while womanism basically addresses the concerns of African-American women. Such concerns, though closer to those of African women in South Africa, are not exactly the same. On this, Kanyoro comments (1999:22) that, “feminist and womanist hermeneutics do not share the cultural heritage of Africa, which African women share in common with African men”.

Apart from the effects of patriarchy experienced in the broader South African context, the *bosadi* approach (unlike womanism for example) critically analyses the patriarchal African culture with its subordination of women while it also affirms the positive cultural elements. While the *bosadi* concept highlights

the significance of the family within our respective African settings, it challenges any death-dealing element within the African family set-up as well as within the biblical text. The *bosadi* approach will hopefully help us in our critical re-reading of the narrative of Ruth in the context of the Congolese women today. The parallel between the Moabite Ruth and Congolese women will be considered. Similarities and dissimilarities between the two will be highlighted with a view to revealing a liberating reading of the book of Ruth particularly within the context of heterosexual marriage.

The researcher will try to see the situation of Congolese women in terms of their security, respect and identity obtained through marriage and their ways of living. There are many existing positions regarding the interpretation of African cultures with the respect to the role of women. By reading available literature concerning the topic under discussion, the present researcher would like to become more informed about the women's situation and investigate it closely. I will endeavour to use this research to try to reveal the strong and weak points concerning marriage issues. I will explore the portrayal of men and women in Congolese society, especially their relationship and the role each of them has to play in the society.

5. Delimitation of the study

Creswell, Castetter and Heisler (1994:110) argue that delimitation and limitation represent another parameter of a research study that helps to establish the boundaries and expectations inherent in every study.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the third biggest country in Africa. Given its vastness, it will not be possible to study the situation of women all over that country. Therefore, the specific focus of the present research will be the equatorial region. This is the second biggest region in the DRC and is

located in the North-Eastern part of the country. What is significant for the present study is that the researcher hails from that region.

There are several different ethnic groups in that region, but this research will be based on the Anamongo people. The latter ethnic group forms part of one of the largest ethnic groups in the DRC. The study will not be generalised to all aspects of marriage. The focus of the study will be on the issue of women's security through marriage. We now look into the purpose of this study.

6. Purpose of the study

The equatorial region is the home of one of the strongest patriarchal societies in the DRC. In this region, women are limited concerning how they have to behave, to dress, what they have to eat, and so on. Although sometimes it seems that women here are basically stronger and have greater freedom of behaviour than in other parts of the DRC because, for example, a married woman can have an extra sexual relationship while still married and can have more than three children when she is still in her father's house, that is in terms of fulfilling patriarchal systemic norms. As argued by Tull, women appear and behave in relation to men and patriarchal norms (2003:53).

The institution of marriage has existed for thousands of years and continues to hold a special place within Congolese society. Heterosexual marriage is regarded as a positive institution and a sign of stability, security, good conduct, and denoting respect to women in general. It is often recommended and preferred to celibacy. Congolese society believes that through marriage, women are safe as they are protected from prostitution and other forms of sex trade (Kapinga2010:1). The prostitution and the sex trade are perceived as anti-values and those who practice them are seen as outsiders.

In considering the above, the researcher has chosen to study the story of Ruth and Naomi, two women who face a life-changing challenge in a patriarchal

society. It is a story found in both the Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions. As Fowler(2005:1) argues, one would like to encourage Congolese women today to look at the biblical tradition, not so much prescriptively as a given formula for what one ought to do and how one ought to do it, but rather, to invite women to interact with the text with a dialogical imagination. Women have to see themselves in the characters found in the text. What similarities do they share with us today? What were their struggles, and how can we as women and people, who care about women, learn from their struggles?

Indeed, many women in the Bible found family life to be a challenge, like many women do today. The Book of Ruth incorporates many issues that women in different kinds of families still experience today. Naomi, a widow without sons, ceases to have value in her patriarchal culture that defines a woman's worth through her husband's and her sons. As argues by Masenya (2004c:49):

According to her male-identified identity in a patriarchal context, Naomi then became poor also in terms of self-worth and self-identity. It may be speculated that, in that setting, widows were not only socio-economically poor as their social standing in the community was also impoverished by the lack of husbands. These women were poor because they lacked male partners to make them normative adults. This situation reminds one of the high esteem still placed on marriage by many Africans in present-day South Africa. In this contexts, single women who are socio-economically well off are regarded by society and church alike, as poor on account of an alleged important lack in their lives: husbands!

As Tull (2003:56) argues, Naomi continues to maintain that her redemption, and that of Ruth, her daughter in-law, lies in the hands of men. In her view security through heterosexual marriage becomes a woman's highest hope.

By appropriating the *bosadi* approach to the DR Congolese context, it is hoped that one will not only be able to critically engage the socio-historical background within which the women characters of book of Ruth lived, but also that one will be able to critically engage the social context of women within the

DRC equatorial region. Hopefully the outcome will lead to their liberation and empowerment.

Firstly, the challenge of the idolisation of marriage (cf. Masenya 2004b:87) is considered. Ruth is a woman living in a patriarchal society, where the life of a woman depends on the intentions of men. Without marriage a woman has no place in a patriarchal society. Given the current context where the woman is exposed and vulnerable but still doing her utmost to enter into marriage, the example of Ruth in chapter three that tells us about the night on the threshing floor is difficult to accept. According to the feminist interpretation (cf. Bradford 2010:2), Ruth's behaviour in chapter three is not to be considered favourably by women today because, "to uncover a man's feet" in today's context would be nothing less than prostitution (Bradford 2010:2).

Secondly, this researcher seeks to address the challenge of poverty. Naomi becomes an active player in the story as she helps Ruth in a scheme to seduce Boaz. Feminists also point out that Ruth's sexuality was used for her survival, something akin to what present day sex workers do. The fact that she slept under a man's feet does not serve as a model particularly for modern day female readers of this story. Accordingly in my view, Ruth would not be a role model among the Anamongo women today in a country where, because of poverty, young women are being used by their parents, especially their mothers, to go out and look for the "saviour" of the family.

Thirdly, I intend to address the challenge of identity among Congolese women today. The question "to whom does this young woman belong?"(cf. Ruth 2:5) is a question often related to a woman's identity within the Congolese context. As argued by Ruth, Ruth the Moabite woman exercised her freedom to choose. She took control of her destiny. Her sense of identity, of what she was and what mattered most, was to define herself in relationship to other people who were given to her by God (Williams2005:6). She refuses to succumb to the traditional definition of womanhood as they were prescribed by her patriarchal

status quo by challenging the traditional ideal. In our life context, Ruth could serve as a model of a person who emerges as a winner, despite the many strikes against her (Masenya 2004b:87).

Ruth, at least in the initial two chapters of the book that bears her name, overcame the pressure that marriage was the sole force defining a woman's identity as found in the oppressive patriarchal system, and other divisions of culture and religion (cf. her amazing commitment to an old woman rather than to a man in Rtl:16) . Ruth takes a lead role normally reserved to men. She commits herself to Naomi an old and poor widow. She shows her commitment to the Israelite God even though, as a Moabite, the law forbade her. As such, I agree with Williams (2005:4) that by defining their relationship beyond the limits of a patriarchal household and simultaneously using the existing system to their advantage, Naomi and Ruth provide a model for overcoming not only patriarchal family structures, but also oppressive structures based on difference of ethnicity and religion. She did not let these systems define who she was, even as she used them to empower herself. She is a woman who was able to keep her identity as a Moabite even though she was married.

It is the case with Masenya's reading of Ruth, summarised by Patte (2004:90), in the Global Bible commentary (GBC):

Masenya sets herself against a reading that idolizes marriage... The reading does not declare marriage useless but criticizes it when it becomes totalized as the only redemption for women. ...but criticizes it for affirming 'women by using them to achieve male's ends, they do not care whether the means used to achieve those ends are conventional or not (Masenya 2004: 88). The context from which Masenya reads Ruth is a context in which African women continue to experience hierarchies constructed by race, gender, class, and economy. It is a culture where women are defined by marriage, so that single women can experience the fullness of life and God's intervention in a disastrous situation. ... However, Ruth seems to play by the rules where marriage is regarded as an important institution. Masenya does not want to devalue the institution of marriage, but she argues that women can find their own value outside of marriage too.

One agrees with Masenya's reading of Ruth. Her reading is helpful for women in order not to see marriage as something that has to define them. It enables them to be free in choosing who they would like to be even if married. Congolese women have to reach the stage where the narrative of Ruth, and those of other women in the Christian Bible, have to be read critically. This can hopefully help them to find their way out of the patriarchal system even if they have to use the system to do so. Congolese women must learn that reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development in the world is based on partnership between women and men in search of a safer, more equitable place to live in.

It is high time that all barriers to political, economic, legal and cultural issues that prevent women from not only prospering, but also from participating in making decisions on the development and evolution of society be removed. Ruth made a radical choice to follow Naomi. It shows her strength of character and reveals her sense of loyalty and responsibility. It needs also to be noted that Ruth has a very serious work ethic and total fidelity to her mother-in-law as she is portrayed as working diligently in the field for the survival of both of them.

Congolese women have to become aware of the role they need to play in the society. They have to know that to obtain their rights is neither free nor easy. Nonetheless they have to be convinced that, like a bird that cannot fly without wings, men cannot live in society without women, and that no sustainable development is possible without the contribution of women. As Masenya concludes her commentary on the book of Ruth, it is only people who seek to get out of hopeless situations who will be helped by God's intervention on their behalf (2004b:91).

In order to have a better understanding of what the researcher means by marriage and security, a description of the two terms is given below.

7. Definition of terms

7.1 Marriage

Many definitions have been considered concerning the concept of “marriage”. Defining exactly what the concept entails is no longer as easy as one might think. Depending on how one interprets the history of marriage in society one can conclude that the definition of marriage has changed as history has proceeded. In order to define marriage, one needs to look not only at the historical period, but also the geographical location and cultural traditions of the individuals involved in a marriage relationship. Many cultures have legends concerning the origins of marriage. The way in which marriage is conducted has changed over time, as has the institution itself.

Accepting that the Bible was translated using the available language of the time, the word “marriage” was not used – only marriage-like situations described or presumed according to the given contexts. As Pressler (2006:202) argues, the Old Testament does not offer a specific view of the family. Biblical Hebrew does not have a noun for “marriage” or a verb “to marry”; it rarely uses terms that explicitly refer to marital status like “husband” or “wife”. Instead, the text speaks of a man “taking” or “having” a woman.

Writing about the concept of marriage in the Old Testament, Dearman(1996:53) defines marriage in these words:

Marriage is a primary social institution in any culture. In Ancient Israel it was the basis of kinship relationships; these were the building blocks of the broader society in the Ancient Near East of which Israel was a part, and the most important means by which social relations were ordered. For a proper understanding of marriage in the Old Testament, it is necessary to evaluate the institution from within its host culture(s); otherwise, one risks anachronism and misunderstanding by way of explanation.

He examined the concept of marriage using three categories:

The first category considers the topic in light of the Creation accounts in Genesis. Typically, creation stories provide part of a culture's worldview and help to define its theological self-understanding. In the Genesis accounts one finds the theological basis of marriage rooted in the complementary nature of humankind as male and female created in God's image, where the one flesh union of husband and wife is the foundation of the human community.

The second category considers marriage in the context of Israelite custom and Pentateuch instructions. Customs and legal codes preserve ordering processes for societies, and law provides for the application of justice when order fails. Israelite marriage combined patrilineal and patriarchal structures with the functions of providing familial security and community order.

The third category considers the marriage metaphor in the prophetic corpus. Here the word marriage is used to portray the relationship between the Lord and the Lord's people. In order to define marriage, one needs to look at not only the historical period, but also the geographical location and cultural traditions of the individuals involved in the marriage relationship.

According to Babcock (1961:1384), the modern English word "marriage" derives from the middle-English marriage. This in turn is derived from Old French *marier* (to marry) and ultimately Latin *marītāre* (to marry) and *marītus* (of marriage).

In the first edition of Webster's Dictionary of the English Language published in 1806, marriage was defined as "the act of joining man and woman..." But, by 2009, all major English language dictionaries dropped gender specifications, or supplemented them with secondary definitions to include gender-neutral language or same-sex unions (Antonio 2010:2).

The Oxford Dictionary of the English language (2005:1076) defines marriage as the state of being married. Marriage is the mutual relation of husband and wife. It is the institution whereby men and women are joined in a special kind of social and legal dependency for the purpose of founding and

maintaining a family. It is the formal union of a man and a woman. It is the union entered into by a man and a woman usually with the intention of having sexual relations and which entails property and inheritance rights.

Tovar (2001:1301) argues that marriage is a cultural relationship that legitimises a sexual and economic union, usually between a man and woman. She states that all national states have definitions of what constitutes a legal marriage and under what circumstances it can be lawfully dissolved; indeed, there may be as many definitions of marriage as there are cultures and legislatures. Rosenblatt (2006:4) argues that marriage is an institution which can join together people's lives in a variety of emotional and economic ways.

Keeping the above points in mind, the biblical view on marriage appears to be that it is:

- instituted by God
- a lifelong commitment between two people before God or between God and God's people
- between a man and one or more women and between a man or a woman with God
- the institution God established for complementary and sexual relations for the perpetuation of the human race
- the ideal place for raising children
- playing a central role and bringing significant stability and meaning to human relationships
- playing an important role in transferring culture and civilisation to future generations (Tubbs 2009:1).

To reiterate, people have been practicing marriage in different ways, according to the customs of their society. Next, I would like to enumerate some forms of marriage being practiced in the African society. Readers have to keep in mind that as this study is influenced by the book of Ruth from the Hebrew

Bible and the Congolese context, it will focus only on heterosexual monogamous marriages between men and women.

I have so far defined only one form of marriage, the heterosexual monogamous marriage as it is the only form of marriage recognised by Congolese law and thus the focus of this study. This form of marriage though, is not the only form of marriage among Congolese people. Traditionally polygyny is practiced (one man having more than one wife) and it is accepted by the society. Living in the twenty-first century, however, they are not the forms of marriage that are being practiced within the Congolese society today. There are other forms of marriage even if they are not recognised by the law and the society. The following section will focus on the definition of other forms of marriage.

7.2 Polygamy

A polygamous marriage is the union of one man to several women or one woman to several men. Polygamy existed all over Africa as an aspect of culture and/or religion. It was accepted by traditional African societies. Polygamous marriages had many advantages and were a sign of wealth. The more wives and children a man had, the more a man of substance and import he became. The more children a family had the more powerful it was. Thus polygamy was part of male empire building.

In social anthropology, polygamy is the practice of a person making him/herself available for two or more spouses to mate with. Polygamy can be practiced as polygyny (one man having more than one wife), or as polyandry (one woman having more than one husband).

According to Kanyoro, “the term ‘polygamy’ has become confused with ‘polygyny’, which signifies as defined above, a matrimonial situation in which there is one husband but two or more wives”(1992:88). This seems to have been

accepted and practiced by the Hebrew people. The Bible is silent on the use of the word “polygamy” even if it shows quite explicitly the practice.

Polygyny is still commonplace in Africa particularly in the DRC. It is something that has been passed down from generations. Polygynous marriages in this setting were economically advantageous because a family had huge tracts of land which needed labour. With many children and wives, a family was able to consolidate its resources and create wealth for the future. In patriarchal traditional Africa, it was every man’s ideal to increase the number of his wives and thus recapture and expand his immortality. It was believed that those who die are reborn in their children. Therefore, it was important to have children in order to perpetuate this line. Many women and children meant stronger “immortality” for that family (Wasike1992:102). Poor men were not allowed to get many wives. It was a costly affair which needed a strategy that was viable. Many African men still practice polygyny. In many instances today in the equatorial region, contrary to the tradition where poor men were not allowed to practice polygyny as mentioned above, today, it has become another way of survival for poor men. These men believe that to have more than one wife provides them with financial support. With the situation of poverty in the country, the economic viability of the family depends on small businesses – owned in most cases by women. Most polygamous men do not struggle to meet their families’ needs as each wife has to look after him, herself and her children. Women and children are placed in a position of misery and suffering. Children are being neglected, abandoned and in most cases, they do not succeed in life. Nowadays, most polygamous marriages have become places of struggle, suffering, violence among woman and children. Polygyny now has a negative implication in both poor and rich families alike, especially for women and children.

An overview of marriage in the Bible indicates that polygamy was practiced in the ancient world. According to De Vaux (1998:24), the story of the

creation of the first two human beings (Genesis 2:21-24) presents monogamous marriage as the will of God. Polygamy first appears in the reprobate line of Cain, when Lamech takes two wives (Gen.4:19). Many of Israel's founders and heroes including Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, and David among others are depicted as being polygamous. Moreover, the Deuteronomic laws assume that a man might have more than one wife (Deut. 21:15-18). One would thus agree with Pressler (2006:203) that the older Testament, therefore, does not appear to present a single form of marriage as ideal. In Islam, though, liberal rules exist on this matter as a man can marry up to four wives!

According to MacArthur (2009:1), "... monogamous marriage was always God's will. But, in the Old Testament because of cultures, God allowed a certain developing process... [O]nce [polygamy] got started in the cultures of the Old Testament period; God had to allow for it to work out as the message of God's truth got into the hearts of those people. And God was patient in that area." Monogamy seems to have become standard by the Roman Era. Therefore, the Bible cannot be taken as the source for practicing polygamy.

Besides the contemporary monogamous and polygamous marriages there are various forms of marriage that can be seen as new in the Congolese context but practiced for sometime in other societies, even by church leaders. Homosexual marriage seems to have been practiced even in the Old Testament times (Genesis19:4-5) but according to the Bible, was the object of God's condemnation. The next point of discussion is gay (homosexual) marriage.

7.3 Gay marriage

Gay marriage is marriage to the same sex, a man to another man or a woman to another woman. Gay marriage is becoming more common in contemporary societies. In many countries, especially in the West, gay marriage has become legalised and people of the same sex (including church leaders) are free to marry

each other (MacArthur2009:1). Discerning what the Bible says about gay marriage has become quite contentious. For most conservative Christians, gay marriage is not God's will as they argue that it is not biblical. The principal disagreement with homosexual marriage originates from the Garden of Eden standard of one man and one woman (two opposites) joined by God to become "one flesh." (Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh (Genesis2:24), New Revised Standard Version³ (NRSV). The alleged condemnation of homosexuality in the New Testament by the apostle Paul (Rom 1:27) is usually taken as proof that the Bible stands in opposition to same-sex marriage (MacArthur 2009:1).

In African culture and that of the Old Testament, the Israelite law allowed another form of marriage called levirate for perpetuating the name of the deceased brother.

7.4 Levirate marriage

The Latin word *levir* is the equivalent of the Hebrew *yabam*, which means brother-in-law. According to a law stated in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, if brothers live together and one of them dies without issue, one of the surviving brothers takes his widow to wife, and the first-born of this new marriage is regarded, in law, as the son of the deceased(De Vaux1998:37). According to De Vaux, only two examples of levirate marriage occur in the Old Testament. They are found in the accounts of Tamar in Genesis 38 and in the Book of Ruth. The levirate marriage obliged the brother of the deceased who died without leaving a son to take as "wife" the widow and bear sons to continue his brother's name. From another point of view, "a barren woman was obliged to find a surrogate to sleep with her husband in order to produce children on her behalf" (Kanyoro1992:89-

³ Throughout all this study, the New Revised Standard Version will be the only version for biblical quotations.

90). These marriages enabled the continuation of the family line and the protection of property within the family. In the Congolese context, this custom was also allowed in order to perpetuate the lineage and prevent paying a dowry⁴ many times. Such a custom was common among the Anamongo ethnic group too. For example, my father's grand-mother was the product of this type of union; she was given to her brother in-law after the death of her first husband so that she could have more children in the name of her deceased husband.

Having given a brief description of the above forms of marriage and having highlighted my context of study as that which would foreground a heterosexual monogamous marriage bond, a general definition of marriage would include a social contract between two individuals that unites their lives legally, economically, emotionally, and socially. Marriage is an institution which can be found in every human culture. Although the forms and rules differ, marriages always involve some form of a legally legitimised sexual relationship. It is a special bond shared between two souls who promise to be companions to each other for their lifetime. It is supposed to bring significant stability and substance to human relationships, which would otherwise be incomplete.

It plays a crucial role in transferring the culture and civilisation from one generation to the other, so that the human race can prosper. The institution of marriage is beneficial to the society as a whole, because it is the foundation of the family, which in turn is the fundamental building block of society. Marriage was instituted by God. It has a powerful cultural significance carrying many layers of meaning, identity, emotion, expectations of behaviour, delineation of

⁴ A dowry called 'dot' (French) in Congo is a 'gift' of money, goods that a man gives to the bride's family during traditional marriage celebration. It is regarded as an important part of the marriage without which the union cannot be accepted by the family. Previously, a dowry was only a symbol of money or good given by the man's family to the girl's family to show his love and commitment but today, a woman has become almost like something sold at an auction; she is thus given to the one who can afford to buy her.

acceptable norms, legal consequences, social consensus or dissent. Marriage needs to be respected by the society and each one who enters into it.

8. Security

The word “security” has different definitions depending on the field of research. According to Bosley(1980:1037), security is defined as:

the state of being free from danger or injury, a defence against financial failure, financial independence, the freedom from anxiety or fear, property that one’s creditor can claim in case one default on one obligation, a department responsible for the security of the institution's property and workers, a guarantee that an obligation will be met, security system: an electrical device that sets off an alarm when someone tries to break in, measures taken as a precaution against theft or espionage or sabotage and so on .

Hiller Brand defines security as “the state of being secure, freedom from danger, life, and liberty of a person.” In addition, marriage can offer protection from economic vicissitudes (2004:1161).

According to the above definitions, security can be understood as:

- the state of feeling safe from being beaten, abused, neglected
- a solution for some financial problems and a financial support
- being free from fear of life and finding insurance for the future
- the possibility for the creditor to claim what belongs to him in case the rules were not respected
- a guarantee that one’s needs will be satisfied
- a guarantee toward having a safe and good life
- protecting and looking after one another
- proof of owning something
- a deposit made for inducing a person to fulfil an obligation
- something that gives or assures safety.

In this study, the word “security” will be used in its different meanings. According to my context of study, “security” refers to protection, benefit, identity, a place given to a woman within the D.R. Congolese society. Once married, a woman has someone who cannot fight physically to protect herself because of her being considered as a weak person. What one finds ironic though, is that in many instances, a married woman is abused by her “protector”. As a married woman, she finds economic support from her husband even as marriage tends to give her meaning in life. Being married can also make her vulnerable to the possibility of sexually transmitted diseases and prostitution even though it is supposed to protect her from the possibility of engaging in sex work. Usually, however, marriage provides the woman with an opportunity to earn respect from her community on account of the value still placed on marriage by our communities. The outline of the study follows.

9. Outline of the study

This study is divided into five chapters. Each chapter builds on the previous one and leads onto the next chapter. Chapter one will serve as an introduction to the research approach done in the present dissertation. It will include the introduction, the delimitations and limitation of the study, the methodology, the purpose of the study, the problem statement, the hypothesis postulation, and the definition of terms and the outline of the study.

In chapter two, a background to the Democratic Republic of Congo is given and particular attention is given to the situation of Congolese women and their way of life in general and to those of women in the equatorial region in particular. The researcher will focus on the problem of women’s security in marriage. An in-depth analysis of issues pertaining to marriage will be given. This will hopefully help us in determining whether or not marriage really provides safety or security for the average Congolese woman.

Chapter three will be a study the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible. The focus will be on Ruth's situation and behaviour particularly as these relate to her apparent capacity to seek security through marriage.

In order to get a better understanding of the situation of women in the Congo, and suggest possible solutions, the researcher will attempt in chapter four to compare Ruth's situation and character to that of Congolese women today. In this regard, it will be advisable to determine whether or not Ruth is a model for Congolese women today. This will open the way to an identification of ways by which Congolese women can be empowered to improve their situation. Chapter five will give concluding remarks as well as the findings.

Chapter 2

MARRIAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF WOMEN IN THE DRC EQUATORIAL REGION: AN OVERVIEW

1. Historical background

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with a surface of 2,345,000 sq. km is located in central Africa. It includes the greater Congo River basin, which covers an area of one million square kilometres (400.000 sq. mi.). The DRC is on the equator, with one-third of the country to the north and two-thirds to the south. The climate is hot and humid in the river basin and cool and dry in the southern highlands. South of the equator rainfall is fairly regular throughout the year.

The population of the DRC was estimated at 58 million in 2004. As many as 250 ethnic groups have been identified and named. Some of the larger ethnic groups are the Kongo, Unda, and Anamongo. Although 700 local languages and dialects are spoken, the linguistic variety is bridged both by the use of French and the intermediary languages of Kikongo, Tshiluba, Swahili, and Lingala.

Located in the North-Western part of the DRC, the equatorial region borders the Republic of Congo to the west, the Central African Republic to the north and the Eastern Province to the east. Its capital Mbandaka is located at the confluence of the Congo River and Ruki and Ikelemba.

The DRC possesses the largest land area in Africa after Nigeria and Sudan. It is rich in natural and human resources, including the second largest rain forest in the world, fertile soils, ample rainfall, as well as considerable and varied mineral deposits. According to Bosale (2009:25), the DRC is a country of vast potential in terms of natural resources and mineral wealth. Nevertheless, it

is one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita annual income of approximately US\$98 (Mines2006:5). This is a result of mismanagement, corruption and war among others.

The equatorial region is located in the middle of the equatorial forest through which flows the Congo River. The inhabitants depend on agriculture, fishing and hunting. The population is mainly composed of three ethnic groups namely: Bangala, Anamongo and Pygmies. The population is estimated at 8,668,666 inhabitants. Lingala is the first language of the region and the most spoken one in the whole country.

Poverty is the prevailing condition. Three out of every four families do not have an income. Because of the lack of employment, most Congolese families live by “faith” without knowing exactly what will happen tomorrow in terms of survival. They are unable to satisfy elementary needs such as food, habitation, health and education. This crisis has reduced parental responsibility and increased prostitution in many families. It is no wonder that in such a setting, marriage becomes the only way for women to lead a respectable life. This discrimination against women is also rooted in the patriarchal status quo that typifies the DR Congolese setting in general and the equatorial region in particular. Later I will return to this matter.

2. Culture and customs

Similarly to the rest of Africa, there are customs and traditions in the DRC that give adult men and boy children a higher status than women and girl-children. As already stated in the first chapter, the equatorial region is home to a strong patriarchal society. It practices patrilineal succession by which inheritance is passed through the fathers’ side of the family. Women are dominated by this culture that marginalises them. But I agree with Buakasa quoted by Rukata

(2010:2) that the custom also contains positive values that release and protect women.

Musimbi Kanyoro (2001:159), argues that,

Women in Africa are the custodians of cultural practices. For generation, African women have guarded cultural prescriptions that are strictly governed by the fear of breaking taboos. Many aspects that diminish women continue to be practiced to various degrees, often making women objects of cultural preservation. Harmful traditional practices are passed on as “cultural value” and therefore are not to be discussed, challenged or changed. In guise of culture, harmful practices and traditions are perpetuated. Practices such as female genital mutilation (Efua1994), early betrothals and marriages, and the stigmatisation of single women, barren women and widows hinder the liberation of women. Yet, in fact, it is women who sustain these practices. Such a state of affairs illustrates the reality of women’s powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of cultural prescriptions.

First, a woman is seen as a wife, mother and worker. Her whole life is spent in the service of men within her family or in her home. Although women from the equatorial region sometimes seem to be stronger and freer in their ways than in other parts of the DRC, it is mainly because they fulfil the patriarchal system’s expectations. Tull argues that even when women appear, they generally appear in relation to men (2003:53).

In general, our ancestral societies had their organisation, worldview, civilisation and the environment allowing a division of tasks. Depending on the family, there were women with leading positions such as those of queens or princesses. Though a woman could enjoy some privileges the status of boys over girls was ever present. This is still seen when the birth of a baby boy is celebrated with more excitement than that of a girl. From childhood, boy children were separated from girl children who were obliged to be educated by their mothers. The above behaviour still happens in some families even today. As such, the authority of the boy was over all women. Behaviour in marriage is

learned from early childhood and like other patterns of behaviour, it is passed on from one generation to another and from parent to child (Dzobo 1975:11).

Secondly, a woman is considered to be a man's property. Single women in the equatorial region belong to their fathers, and, upon marriage, their ownership is transferred to their husbands. The man's father gave gifts such as knives, food, or slaves to the new wife's father, in exchange for his loss of precious labour and kinship. Nowadays outside influences have caused things to change. The father's family is expected to make a list of goods, clothes and an amount of money according to the value of their daughter especially if she has been well educated. Such a situation increases the power of a man over his wife. The girl is rarely consulted as her consent does not matter. The consequence to this situation is that most young girls are married against their will, almost sold, and that reduces their status within marriage. As argued by Goxo (1997:81),

It is assumed by most men that marrying a woman gives them an absolute right of ownership. Their "freedom" to choose a wife and the "paying" of lobola makes them think that a human being can be regarded as a commodity, hence they speak of "buying" a woman. Because a woman was chosen among many (as a man with many women is regarded as a real man), a woman is expected to appreciate that and be obedient to her husband; also because waldeka (he spent money) he deserves to be owner.

Women then are generally confined to a secondary position. The ancestors did not see a woman as having the same opportunities in social life and the same role or rights as a man. Several examples illustrate this. Women could not parley with men; some foods were exclusively reserved for men; women could not participate in some decisions concerning the management of society. The girl was given in marriage without her consent and often against her will and so on.

During the colonial era, when a girl child reached puberty, she was expected to leave school and get married. Girl children were also separated from boy children at school; as such they were not prepared for graduation, as

evidenced by the school programme even after independence. As Buakasa quoted by Rukata (2010:3) argues, school was not necessarily a departure from discrimination and marginalisation of women. Lack of education, laws, customs and traditions, political education, poverty and religious behaviour did not allow the emancipation of women. Also the poverty that affects the country is a further constraint to the education of girl children, especially in rural areas.

Discriminatory doctrines and teachings within the society and even in church concerning women influenced the family. The father and “his” son are chief whilst the mother and “her” daughter are considered as subalterns. It has to be noted that the boy was the father’s son only for as long as his conduct was good. Faced with the choice between a boy and a girl in order to meet the cost of schooling, a poor family usually opts for the boy who is regarded as the hope for the future. The girl is considered anyhow to belong to her (future) husband (Shapiro 2003:39).

Legally in the DRC, as reported by Bolie quoted by Rukata (2009:26), there are still not only discriminatory laws concerning women, but also the difficulties to implement those that liberate and empower them. In my view, the list on the customs that violate women's rights putting them in a position of discrimination can go on and on. Nevertheless what is imperative is to seek for solutions that can liberate women.

Let us now have a look at the new family law in DRC promulgated in 2004 with special regard to the rights of women within heterosexual marriage.

3. The family law

Concerning marriage, the DRC family law is clear when it recognises that everyone (men and women) have the right to marry a person of their choice and of the opposite sex (Code de la famille 2005:11). This made sense to the common understanding of the institution of marriage. The DRC law seems to

have been influenced by the Hebrew Bible creation stories (Genesis1-2) where marriage is portrayed as the first sacred institution. There is strong evidence of partnership between men and women in the creation of any society.

Despite the first impression gained concerning gender equality, the Congolese Family law contains special provisions that discriminate against women within marriage. The law, something that should protect people, is formulated to endorse discrimination. I have selected some articles in the family law (code de la famille 2005) which, in my view, are discriminatory and do not contribute to gender justice as these laws, in effect, reduce women's rights within marriage.

Among them are:

- Article 352 which imposes 15 years as the minimum age for girls to be married and 18 years for men.
- Article 444 gives the husband authority over his wife in the household. He must protect her; she thus owes him obedience.
- Article 445 states that spouses contribute to the moral and material direction of a household, but under the ultimate direction of a husband.

According to the article 454, only a husband has the power to determine the domicile or residence for the couple after marriage. On account of poverty and non-employment though, the reality proves the opposite. In most cases today, women are the breadwinners of the family.

Section 467 discriminates in regard to adultery. Whilst a husband is punished only in certain circumstances, a woman is punished in all circumstances.

According to the Law on the Congolese nationality, although Article 5 of Law (Law No. 004/24 of 2004) allows women to get Congolese citizenship by descent the same way as men, article 30 provides that women cannot keep their Congolese nationality when married to a foreigner.

A married woman must have her husband's permission to open a bank account, accept a job, obtain a commercial license, rent or sell real estate. Article 45 of the civil code, specifies that the husband has rights to his wife's goods, even if their marriage contract states that each spouse separately owns his or her own goods. Since 2004, the law has made some changes according to this article allowing women to be employed without their husbands' authorisation but husbands have the right to oppose any related decisions by women.

In addition, sections 198 and 200 dealing with the absence of a father do not recognise the mother alone as representative of parental authority. She must be joined by a male member of her husband's family who can be his brother, father or even his uncle. They replace the latter when it comes to the decision-making.

In the family the care and the security of the household is effectively the woman's responsibility. She has to organise herself between familial and professional obligations. What then of the obligation of the woman to follow her husband everywhere he decides to stay? This obligation sometimes destroys the woman's career.

The legal articles above clearly show that in the DRC, women have curtailed rights within marriage. They do not yet have equal rights to their male partners. In my opinion, the security that DRC society should give women in marriage still involves a long struggle. It appears that Congolese law is based on a patriarchal tradition and does not give women the same opportunity as men within marriage. Can it be revised? We now turn to the theme of "women and marriage" as we continue with the present investigation.

4. Women and marriage

Though other ethnic groups in the Congo practice matrilineal succession, in which inheritance is passed through the mother's side of the family, women are

regarded as lower than men in the scale of social hierarchy. There is a high degree of societal pressure placed upon young women to marry, even as urban single woman who never married, may be suspected of being a prostitute, that, regardless of her professional status.

Marriage is considered important in the religious, social, economic and political mainstream of the Anamongo society. As argued by Frimpong (2006:94), the Anamongo consider marriage as something that creates room for the husband and wife who have agreed to cohabit to have children to perpetuate the lineage. It is claimed that children from such a union will stabilise it. Also, children are expected to serve as insurance for their parents in future against old age and want.

Whether celebrating marriage as a civil ceremony or as a religious institution, marriage remains legal and socially legitimate when a man and woman unite formally to form one flesh (cf. Genesis 2:24).

Particular aspects need to be highlighted. Firstly, on the moral level, marriage is a sign of stability and commitment to be taken seriously. A girl child who has thus committed herself shows good conduct and so gains a good reputation. Her marriage becomes an honour for her and her family.

On the social level, marriage conveys some status to a woman. Congolese society believes that a woman can only become a real woman after marriage. Once married, a woman is given respect and value in society. Marriage provides security for women. The Anamongo people would agree with Frimpog (2006: 94) when he says:

Once married, sexual harassment is minimized, because men know the serious consequences of seducing a married woman. An unmarried woman may be prone to proposal from all sorts of men, which could demean her social standing while there is ideally an aura of respect surrounding a married woman, which should automatically accord her certain immunities and privileges in the society. Marriage also confers social maturity on a man who takes a wife and it is a basis for a successful adult life. It is expected that he can return home to good food and rely on his wife for chores to be performed.

The above understanding reduces a woman to a seductive object, and a house-girl, that is, someone paid to do housework. However in the Anamongo context today, the reality in the daily lives of the people indicates the opposite. Many different cases in which women shift from one marriage to another may indicate that they have been seduced while they were still married to their former husbands. In general, men seem to prefer to have relationships with married women as they are seen to be more confident and mature compared to unmarried women. A married woman is not as secure from the outside world as the society wants to believe.

Economically, a married woman, who would probably be otherwise destitute, gets someone to fully support her and her family. In return, she will meet all his basic needs for food, clothing, medical care and such like. Married, a woman becomes the husband's responsibility. The legal status of a married woman creates certain rights, in particular to bear the name of her husband and enjoy the benefits of his status as his wife (Tuttle 1986:128).

Marriage is relegated to the place where sex is allowed, especially for the purposes of procreation and male sexual pleasure. This focus reduces marriage to a little more than a place for sex and the continuation of the human race – the replication of the parents. Marriage is viewed as a place for bringing up children. This is a variation on the procreation theme, although a little richer in its application, because marriage is still an ideal situation for raising children.

According to the report of ASF (Association de Santé Familiale), there is a problem of marriage without consent of the person concerned (woman) almost in all the ethnic groups of the DRC. With regard to the equatorial region, even though there can be some case of marriage by arrangement of parents, the Anamongo women are free to marry at any age, the latter observation implies that there is no minimum age for marriage! Virginity is not a pre-requisite for marriage. A woman can thus have up to three children without being married

and with different men. In marriage, such children traditionally automatically belong to her husband and inherit his property like his biological children do.

Indeed, early marriage is found in significant proportion in families where parents have a low level of education. Their lack of education does not enable the parents to perceive the importance of schooling and the problems caused by an early marriage. In most poor families, girls are considered as a financial burden compelled to leave their family earlier so that they can contribute to the survival of the family and as well as their own by having a husband. Parents and the community are honoured to give their daughters in marriage. In some cases, when the marriage is delayed, the girl becomes pregnant so as to coerce the man to marry her. This indicates the necessity of marriage within the family especially for a young woman. A woman's life has meaning only within marriage and her capacity of bearing children for her husband.

Marriages are regarded as status symbols in African societies. A man is not considered a man in Africa unless he has a woman beside him. "A home without a woman is looked down upon and often ridiculed by the society. The home is shunned by people because it is considered unblessed hence cursed" (Manona 1997:38).

The latter quotation seems to value a woman's place according to the African tradition, portraying a man as useless without a woman on his side. However, I agree with Manona (1997:112), that such a status is more positive for men than women. In the traditional society, even today, marriage places the husband in authority and status over his wife.

4. The situation of women: role and place in the society

The equatorial region, like other regions in DRC, is by its demographics dominated by women who represent 52 per cent of its population. Gender parity

in the workplace has not reached the levels required by law even though an effort has been made by provincial authorities for women to assume senior positions. In 2006, during the second democratic elections, only one woman was elected as deputy minister in the Provincial Assembly and one as minister in the Provincial Executive whilst others in the public administration were mostly appointed as secretaries. According to Martey (1996:203), the political implications of the subordination of women have had effects not only on traditional societies, but also on the politics and economics of modern African states as they emerged out of the colonial era. What is even more devastating is that contemporary African leaders have not realised that the root of most of the continent's problems have arisen from the domination of women.

In general, the situation of women leaves much to be desired. Indeed, there are more boys than girls in schools. Poverty is being feminised and this is due to the poor access women have to basic services, goods and resources and to decision-making spheres. The patriarchal system's norms within which she is compelled to operate compounds all these factors. I agree with Helen (2008:198), that although women made tremendous gains in entering traditionally male dominated professions during the twentieth century, gender differences have persisted in adult occupational pursuits.

The position of women in traditional marriage can best be analysed and understood in terms of the system of production which forms the base of all social relations. Therefore to gain an insight into how marriage in traditional society makes the African woman suffer humiliation and subjection, we must first grasp the productive relations that exist between the male and the female genders (Martey 1996:203).

Even in this twenty-first century, women in the equatorial region have not attained a position of full equality with men. Although the Mobutu regime (1965-1997) paid lip service to the important role of women in society and although women enjoy some legal rights, like owning property and participating

in the economic and political sectors, custom and legal constraints still limit their opportunities. Witz (1986:114) considers the extent to which patriarchal power may be identified as a key resource in strategies of occupation control in the labour market and argues that a patriarchal workplace or occupational organisations have played a key role in the structuring of sexual divisions in paid employment.

The inferiority of women was embedded in the patriarchal indigenous social system and re-emphasised in the colonial era. Adult women who stayed in the city were considered as legitimate if they were wives, widows, or elderly. Otherwise they are presumed to be *femmes libres* (sex worker) and are taxed as income-earning sex workers whether they are or not. Traditional societies tend to put woman firmly in her place, that is, the home. This is according to the natural biological differences and the patriarchal division of labour. The division of labour, according to sex, is often explained as a natural result of physiological and psychological differences between men and women. However, apart from the obvious case of childbearing, there are extremely few convincing examples of sex differences between men and women (Boserup 1976:1).

Opportunities for wage labour jobs and professional positions remain rare for women. The educational opportunities for girl children remain constricted compared with those available for boy children. By the nineteenth century, women had made strides in the professional world, and a growing number of women now work in the professions, government service, the military, and the universities. But they remain under represented in the formal work force, especially in high-level jobs, and generally earn less than their male counterparts in the same job positions. Even when male-female roles approach some kind of balance or equality in their relative contributions, and where social stratification by sex is least pronounced, at least some male activities are always recognised as predominantly important. Women seem always to be considered in some way, inferior to men (Meyers1996:494).

Women in the equatorial region, especially the Anamongo, were condemned to activities considered as appropriate to women because they were considered unable to do something else. Frequently, women accept that they are inferior. Being first of all a mother and wife, the only two roles that value a woman in the patriarchal society, the woman is born to serve, submit and procreate. According to society, a woman's professional activity does not allow her to perform her proper female task. When it goes beyond this framework, she is guilty, overwhelmed by the double or even triple duty professional and domestic policy. When she is unsuccessful because of multiple activities, she gives a just cause to the patriarchal division of labour. If she succeeds, she is regarded by the society as a man. Carl (1989:181), who describes this phenomenon in terms of conflict between domestic role and occupational choice, argues that:

Married women entering the labour force today face a challenge their ancestors seldom encountered: how to reconcile the conflicting demands of family and career. Either set of demands can be enormously time-consuming, energy-depleting, and emotion-draining; and when women take on both assignments they soon discover that there simply are not enough hours in the day, not enough resiliency in the body, not enough flexibility of the mind to do both jobs properly. Superwomen, perhaps can juggle successfully the demands of family and career, of employers who require complete commitment to the job, of husbands who insist on the service of a wife, of children who want total attention to their needs, without wrenching physical and emotional costs. No doubt such women exist, but ordinary women, torn by conflicting demands and desires, often end exhausted, nerve-wracked, and guilt-ridden.

All her life, she works in the field for the survival of the family. Even when men and women work together in the field, they typically perform tasks assigned to them according to the gender division of labour. Because the economy has deteriorated, women's labour has generally increased. Women are responsible for the majority of the survival tasks, such as cutting wood for cooking fires, hauling on their heads large buckets of water for cooking,

cleaning clothes, reaping, sowing, and harvesting the fields, collecting palm nuts, cooking, pounding, and sifting the local cassava root, cleaning house, helping care for domestic animals, working in the field, bearing children, child-care, training the children in acceptable conduct and making baskets and pottery for sale at local markets. In short, women have to carry the life of their families upon their shoulders. They have to follow the example of the Woman of Worth (see Proverbs 31:10-31) as it has been taught to them by the church tradition. One can affirm that in some families men help with the housework and the care of children but they are considered by the society as not living according to the accepted norms and of being dominated by their wives. They are described as weak; few men have the courage or the desire to expose themselves to mockery by deviating from their traditional gender role. Even when male producers turn to cultivating food crops, the household does not necessarily profit nutritionally. Food needed for household consumption is frequently sold for money needed to pay for daily necessities, clothes, school fees, taxes, and so on. Higher-priced and nutritionally superior food crops, such as, sorghum are frequently sold by producers who eat only their cheaper, less nutritious food crops such as cassava. As a result children are frequently malnourished.

The phenomenon of globalisation has a negative impact on the life of rural communities. With the urban influence, rural people believe that eating sardines, bread, cooking with too many spices, having a small radio, applying lightning lotion, and so on, are synonym for the good life. They sell everything they produce so that they can be in possession of such material goods. Meat and fish or vegetables that children require are given away in exchange for “white people’s food” leaving children with a piece of non-nourishing bread and soup.

Traditionally Anamongo men went off hunting or fishing for several days using traps and spears. Now there are fewer animals to hunt and this increases the work of women. In fact the responsibility of the household falls more solidly on their shoulders as the society becomes ever more dependent on

farming. Many women have recently flocked to urban areas in the hopes of selling their handiwork, becoming hairstylists, or participating in the underground economy. The underground economy here refers to legal activities where taxes are not withheld and paid. Often the woman is the family's principal breadwinner. Many have hopes that their children will advance out of poverty, and they are therefore burdened with the additional responsibility of paying their school fees. Male children typically advance further in school than their female counterparts, since men are traditionally considered the heads of the household and make the financial decisions on behalf of the entire family and will, it is thought, benefit more from education.

Most political, economic, and religious institutions have male leadership. Historically, Congolese men have been treated with respect and have been given positions of authority more often than Congolese women. The way a woman is treated in the Congo depends on her immediate environment and ethnic background. It has been argued that lower-class urban women enjoy fewer freedoms than their rural counterparts. Because women in cities are often more dependent on their husbands and other males for their livelihoods, the rural lifestyle may sound appealing to some; rural women find some independence through gardening, preparing meals, and generating small crafts for sale. However, these women spend so much time with their daily work that they have little opportunity to mobilise for social change. Women living in the city are more able to form groups that collectively challenge the notion of male superiority.

Practically, the family is economically in the hands of women rather than men. Nevertheless men retain the role of decision-making. Women's salaries are lower even though the law supposedly promotes equality. In order to adapt to this situation women have exploited commercial opportunities in the informal economic sector outside of men's control. They generally conduct business without accounting records, and without reporting all of their commerce. In

many cases, married women must detail everything they purchase to their husbands. However, in the informal sector they usually do not have to account for their own expenses. Bakweseghe, according to Njoki (1997:133), argues that, in the African traditional society, wives have always been under the strict control of husbands. Even where a wife independently grows some cash crops, when the yield is sold, the husband has the prerogative to keep the money obtained from these crops, and appropriate it for domestic use even though this may mean the wife is not getting a single cent for her efforts. The husband often NB: squanders this money on buying strong drink but the wife is not supposed to complain. The goal is to keep women dependent on and subservient to men.

The effective role of a woman in society and marriage remains a challenge. Anamongo women are still enduring humiliating, discriminatory practices just because they are women. They have to carry with them the whole oppression of society, the family and the church as well as the responsibility for the survival of their families.

With the above background in mind the question arises, is marriage the only way for women to find security within the Anamongo society? I will focus on this issue in the following section.

6. The issue of women's security through marriage

6.1 Within society

As already mentioned, society believes that the security of a woman depends on her being in relationship with a man within marriage. She is shown respect and honour within the society only if she belongs to a man. In the Anamongo society, marriage was, and still is, treated as an affair of great concern for the society, the family and especially for the woman. This gives a certain status to a woman.

It is also believed that marriage ensures security for a woman. However, the possibility of incurring sexually transmitted diseases has been reported in many studies that affirm that most married women are vulnerable to and/or have been infected with the Human Immune-Deficiency Virus (HIV) by their husbands. Marriage is also supposed to protect spouses from sex work but in effect there are cases of married women who practice prostitution for the economic survival of their families. In such instances, marriage as a sign of stability and responsibility then becomes questionable.

Politically, living in the twenty-first century, a time of women's liberation and emancipation, the difference between liberation and emancipation need to be examined. A Congolese woman has to be married so she can accede to certain responsibilities. I would agree with Moore and Sawhill (1978:203) that even in our present times in a partially liberated culture the most important decision a young woman faces is likely to be the choice of whom to marry. Unlike her male counterpart, she must bear in mind that her social and economic standing may depend much more on the outcome of this decision than on her education, family background, or occupational prospects. To be sure, these other factors help determine whom she associates with and eventually marries, but it is the marriage itself that secures her position in the social system.

Within the changing socio-cultural situation of DRC, women are today no longer so dependent on a marital tie. Nonetheless I agree that marriage is a fundamental institution that unites family and men and women who have freely decided to share their life and live in harmony.

6.2 Within the family

Anamongo people believe that children are a blessing. In the traditional society, having boy children was more appreciated than having girl children. A girl was given in marriage even before birth. Marriage was her destiny where she

ultimately belongs. Marriage is significant for the family. As already pointed out, it gives honour and respect to the family to give their daughter in marriage.

Because of poverty, young women are forced to go out and seek ways to enable their families' survival. They are forced into marriage especially to wealthy men to ensure that their families can survive through life. It does not matter whether they are a second or third wife, what matters is that they belong to a man with *libenga molai*⁵ who can provide for her needs and that of her family. Another significant factor is the dowry that has to be collected by the woman's family. The money that will be given by the future husband can help the family to start a small business, the only activity in most instances of earning a living in the DRC. In the rural areas, it is preferable to give a girl in marriage to a fisherman or hunter because the groom's family will always provide the bride's family with food.

Most young women today are married without love as they face the choice between a wealthy and poor man for a husband. This increases adultery and divorce. Because the young woman would rather follow the man she loves. The mother has become the one in whom the daughter confides. She can thus choose a man for her daughter without regard to the age and risk of both the man and the girl being infected with the HI-virus. She is expected to arrange the reception and appointment for the latter so that the wedding can take place.

Forced to find a husband, a young woman is placed in a position of bearing children with different men. Every child is a source of money because the father will be forced to look after his child by providing food and money. The girl, as the breadwinner of the family, often agrees to have unprotected sex for a little more money. Nowadays, it is commonplace to see an old man, twice or even three times her age, engaging in sexual relationship with a young girl.

⁵ *Libenga molai* (long pocket) refers to rich men. It means the opposite to *libenga etobuka* (pocket with a hole), a poor man. They have enough money to support a woman and her family. Most are polygamous.

Despite her educational status and job position, even the money the woman can provide to support her family does not carry the same status as marriage which is placed above all because through marriage the family is honoured.

Apart from the cultural norms and taboos that hold a woman in subjection, there are also certain biblical passages in the predominantly male church ministries and institutions which hold sway, as argued by Ekeya and quoted by Martey (1996:202). This brings us to the next point, the Church.

6.3 Within the church

Writing about marriage in the Old Testament, De Vaux (1998:26) argues that:

Just as the unmarried woman was under the authority of her father, so the married woman was under the authority of her husband. The Decalogue (Ex 20:17) lists a wife among a man's possessions, along with his servants and maids, his ox and his ass. The husband is called the ba 'al or 'master' of his wife, just as he is the ba 'al of a house or a field (Exodus 21:3, 22; 2 S 11:26; Proverbs 12: 4 and so on); a married woman is therefore the 'possession' of her ba 'al (Genesis 20:3; Deuteronomy 22:22). Indeed, to marry a wife 'is expressed by the verb ba 'al, the root meaning of which is 'to become master' (Deuteronomy 21:13; 24:1).

De Vaux poses the question: is the wife really considered as her husband's property? Has she been bought by him?

Considering what is happening in the DRC society, especially in the urban areas today, my answer would be yes. The dowry obtained by a poor family is similar to selling a diamond. The future husband has to pay back all the expenses of the girl. The church approves it in silence; report showing evidence that the dowry was given and approved by the bride's family is given to the pastor before the church blesses the couple.

As they approach a certain age, most young adult Christian women become desperate to find a husband and spend most of their time in the church

praying and fasting. Their own efforts hold no hope for them; God is believed to be the only one to provide a husband.

Since the advent of Christianity in Africa, there has been the tendency to claim that the Judaeo-Christian tradition has in fact valued women in the church (Martey1996:200). But, what about the letters of the apostle Paul that seems to confirm the authority of men over women? Firstly, the Bible advocates the subjection of wife to her husband (Ephesians5:24-25), puts women at the service of men (Proverbs 31 :11-18 and Corinthians 11: 9) who dominate by establishing a hierarchy from God to a man, with a woman being at the bottom rung of the ladder.

One is inclined to agree with Kanyoro (2001:164) that “it is in the church that the dilemma persists of how African women should live as Christians and people who belong to a specific culture. The status of women within their church is microcosm of their status within the society of which the church is a part. Even when the rights of women are enshrined within the law, custom, and tradition, popular attitudes and values lag far behind and continue to oppress women”.

Church has become a place for the combination of patriarchal structures and biblical norms brought by missionaries. Within the church, marriage is regarded as the most important institution authenticated by God. There are tasks reserved only for married women. In my church for example, women can neither be elders nor deaconesses. Neither can they be ordained as ministers without being married. In short, a woman cannot succeed to occupy a leading position without being married.

Marriage imparts to a woman some considerations and a sense of responsibility. It is a sign of the good conduct of a woman because Christians believe that marriage protects a woman from committing the “sin” of being in relation with another man (adultery) outside of the marriage bond. What is now happening in most churches is that some married women are engaged in

relationships with married men including church leaders. They argue that married women have the capacity to keep a secret and they will not be suspected by other members of the church. Therefore even in the church married women are not secure. The church, a place where the gospel is preached, the message of liberation, is no longer a shelter for women.

We now turn to the subject of women in sex work and HIV and AIDS.

6.4 Women's behaviour in the HIV and AIDS context

Can we say that women's rights are respected throughout the DRC and particularly in the equatorial region? Indeed, in the case of the poverty-stricken DRC, women seek to have at least a minimum of access to food, medical services, education, training, employment opportunities and other needs. However, in most cases to access and get such opportunities, they have to provide sexual satisfaction to men. In the process, they become violated. Sex is considered as the solution to the happiness and well-being of women.

As the Anamongo women have certain sexual freedoms, they are portrayed as and deemed to lead in the practice of prostitution in DRC. They are engaged in informal sex work. Quoted by Adomako (2006:142), Fowlkes' argument that sexual exchanges and the way they are negotiated underscore the importance of options as a basis of power. For most women their experiences of sexual encounters are grounded in questions of gender relations and power. Indeed, the hierarchies of power and money, and the organisation of social and sexual networks, all affect sexual conduct at the individual level.

In the context of the equatorial region, it is difficult to find high class sex workers. High class sex workers refer to those women who generally dress in a sophisticated manner and are more likely to have wealthy and/or expatriate clients. "Although they may also "roam" around hotels and attend social functions, these tend to be "up-market" places, which do not generally

acknowledge that “commercial sex” takes place on their premises” (Adomako 2006:144). Most women practice prostitution in order to survive. Some may have a little education, mainly primary and secondary, but some have no education at all.

Women’s bodies have become big business. Most women argue that they are engaged in sex work because they could not find another job to help them to earn money. Their bodies have become a means for earning income for their life-time. In the process, society and the family do not support them but condemn them. As Adomako (2006:142) says, women who bargain sex for material gains may find it difficult to propose sexual behaviour changes. For these women, the dilemma they face may be one of choosing between economic survival and “unsafe” sex.

Even in the field of education and training, often teachers in schools and universities, make use of sex to promote success or failure in the school life of a girl child. Increasing numbers of young girls lose their virginity with adult males being the main perpetrators. Paedophilia thus occurs with impunity throughout the DRC. The use of sex by young girls enables them to purchase clothing, shoes, jewellery, or simply food.

Young women, whether married or not, who seek employment, and even those engaged in the public service by government or private enterprise, sometimes undergo constant sexual solicitations by their superiors. Many of them are intimidated in the working place because the pursuits of employment or work positions depend on the sexual satisfaction of the boss. Research has shown that there are many cases of women who are victims of sexual harassment by their bosses (Rapport du Ministère du genre, de la et famille et de l’enfant 2009:5). Often secretaries are victims and become mistresses.

Although the sex advances are frequently initiated by men, in certain cases women are responsible for such advances. To succeed to a high position without money or by having a relationship to a powerful person has become a

complicated matter in the DRC today. Some young girls and women capitalise on most of these procedures and use them to gain a position of power and influence not because of their workplace skills but because of their bodies and sexual skills. In fact, a perception exists among certain young girls and women that the female body is not only about beauty, it must also become an object of profitability, something that can provide money.

Since 1986, many cases of HIV and AIDS have been reported by the health Department of Congo. These have increased on account of the many changes to sexual behaviour which came about as a result of war. The changes resulted from increased sexual relationships with the many different refugees from Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and Zimbabwe who flocked into the country. Preventative measures were few and ineffective. Despite several campaigns presenting methods for prevention, many young people still do not believe in the existence of the pandemic. They still believe that it is a punishment from God for sinners. The numbers of partners of a man or a woman including the custom where the husband of the older sister belongs to all the family increases the level of infection by HIV.

Women are more vulnerable to the HIV infection than men because of biological, socio-cultural and economic reasons. Women are not well placed to negotiate terms of sexual engagement, even when they are the ones who agree, they have no right to say no or to insist on condom use. The higher their relative income and the greater their alternatives, the greater the likelihood that women will be able to define the form their sexual relationships take and direct them according to their own health goals.

In the equatorial region, the man's virility is measured by the number of women with whom he has had sexual intercourse. This kind of behaviour leads to a high level of HIV infections and other sexually transmitted diseases.

With the above behaviours in mind, it is difficult to promote the fight against HIV and AIDS. Men and women must discipline their sexual instincts to

protect each others' lives and the future generation. The fight against HIV and AIDS has to be part of the effort of all people to promote life as a fundamental value. Learning to respect the rights of others will emphasise this value. The right of a woman as a full human being must be taken into consideration, by ending the exploitation of women through sex. In this way, sexuality can be practiced in love where people respect each other, with a commitment to serve each other. In that way, the suffering caused by AIDS can be avoided. I now go on to consider “*yaka tovanda*” in this regard; the meaning of which is explained below.

6.5 The system of “*yaka tovanda*”

The system “*yaka tovanda*” (cohabitation in English) means two people who have agreed to live together without being married. Nowadays, to marry a woman and organise a wedding ceremony has become difficult and too costly for young men mostly without work. In some cases engagement can last ten years or more.

To overcome such a situation young women and men have agreed to move in together. However this is not appreciated by society in general. Falling pregnant without being officially married is seen as a sin and shame for some families and the girl is chased away from her father's household to go and stay with the man's family. Sometimes young women and men use such opportunities towards marriage of their choice. With the above in mind, we now take a look at women and marital violence.

6.6 Women and marital violence

Marital violence against women seems to be perceived by large sectors of society as acceptable. In the equatorial region and elsewhere, violence against

women often occurs in the home environment and occurs mostly between husband and wife and/or parent and children. Some types of violent behaviour are generally experienced by all women, while others are specific. In the category of general, the most common are beating and wounding, infidelity, assault, the unpaid dowry, premarital pregnancy; too frequent pregnancies, unfavourable customary practices, abortion, prostitution, and purification rites. Harassment and rape fall into the category of the specific. Marital violence which is commonplace among the Anamongo people. There is a belief that a woman never grows up and thus she is regarded as a child who needs to be disciplined throughout her life. Subjection to the man in marriage is emphasised by the church. On this issue, as quoted by Martey 1996:202, Ekeya wrote:

The church's emphasis on the subjection of the wife to her husband in marriage has given many men an excuse of being tyrannical to their wives, even to the extent of physically assaulting them...In marriage, as the church presented it to our people, woman is the subject who can and often must be...disciplined.

One would like to note that in the patriarchal equatorial region, there are also many cases of 'violence' against men. In some families, men are being beaten by their wives. Nonetheless the persistence of customs and some religious beliefs under the pretext of saving family honour and dignity of women increases the cases of violence against women.

Noteworthy is the absence or inadequacy of the structures of support for women who are victims of violence and the laxity of justice where cases of violence are rarely criticised in official reports unless they end in death. The perpetrators are rarely punished as existing legal provisions still discriminate against women.

The majority of women admit that culture is the main cause of violence. Awareness of the role of culture varies with the level of education. The lower a woman's educational status, the more she accepts violence.

Concerning violence against women, a report states that 11 types of cases predominate in the DRC. These are insults (53%, mainly in the region of Kasai Oriental), prostitution (40%, mainly in the region of the equator), assault and battering (39%, mainly in Katanga), failure-dowry deaths (32%), customary practices (27%), forced abortion (23%), marital authorisation (20%), forced marriage (17%), sexual harassment (16%), rape (14%) and refusal to pay benefits to women workers (8%). The report goes on to say that all this violence to women often leads to psychological consequences, such as frustration and psychosomatic illnesses (Rukata 2010:4).

Apart from the forms of marital violence enumerated above, polygyny is also a practice that discriminates against women in the Congo especially in the equatorial region. As quoted by Martey(1996:204), Mbiti says:

Marriage fulfils the obligation, the duty and the custom that every normal woman should ...bear children. The supreme purpose of marriage according to African peoples is to bear children, to build up a family, to extend life, and to hand down the living torch of human existence. For that reason, a marriage becomes fully so only when one or more children have been born. It is a tragic thing when no children come out of marriage. The people do not consider it to be truly a marriage, and other arrangements are made to obtain children in the family.

A barren woman has no place in the Anamongo society. She is an object of mockery by the family and society. She can easily be divorced.

Kanyoro (2001:173) and others perceive polygamy as an institution oppressive to women. Polygamy thrives in patriarchal cultures that uphold the superiority of males. In such societies men may own not only property; they may also own women and their productive powers. Polygamy has been the basis of the abuse of women and children by exploiting their labour. Polygamy justifies these as a means of enhancing the husband's/father's material output. It reduces women's capacity to cope with physical concerns such as barrenness. In the equatorial region a man is never the one at fault when it comes to sterility.

When it comes that the man is proved to be sterile, only some discrete whispers are sometimes heard. The barren woman is the tragic figure. In some cases when sterility has to deal with a woman being from a descent family, there can be divorce but always, the church opposes. Both in the biblical and African cultures, women who do not give birth or give birth only to girl children are esteemed as lesser women than their fertile, son-bearing counterparts. This outlook helps to perpetuate polygamy.

Writing about polygamy Makanzu (1983:205) states that:

When we talk about polygamy, we are simply talking about women. We can never understand why our ancestors were polygamous till we thoroughly grasp the status of women in traditional society. This is because marriage, in all its diverse forms, is always closely and to the place they were occupying in the minds and hearts of men.

It is not surprising that most African societies favour polygamy. The kind of polygamy practised was always polygyny and not polyandry (Martey 1996:205).

Since biblical times, (cf.1Samuel 1:1-6; Genesis 16: 4-5; 30:1 and 29:30-31; et cetera), polygyny has created conflicts between the women involved. Women are abusing themselves because of men. Marriage has to be among the most respectable institutions in the society as it is believed to be instituted by God. We now turn to the next point, marriage as God institution.

6.7 Marriage as God's institution

Marriage is fundamental to human nature because, and as Christians believe, it was created by God and reflects the alliance concluded between God and God's people, established on mutual love between husband and wife and basically aimed at procreation. Christians believe that on account of the original sin (human beings' disobedience to God) patriarchy and polygamy developed and continue to dominate within many a marriage setting. After the exile,

monogamy evolves and has become the ecclesiastic model. The Old Testament authors, especially that of the Song of Songs, consider the interaction between husband and wife as akin to the communion between God and man; the model for the design of marriage in the Old Testament

Marriage is an essential institution. The basic purpose of marriage is mutual support. The biblical support for this comes from Genesis 2 where the Hebrew Bible tells us that the woman was created to be the “*ezer kenegdo* Kindly verify the correctness of the transliteration” – “helper”. The second major issue that emerges from this passage is the idea that a woman is a “helper” (Genesis 2:18). Somehow this has also been taken to mean that women are in some way inferior to men, but the Hebrew words used to describe this helper is “*ezer kenegdo*”. The concordance shows us that that in the Hebrew Bible the Hebrew word “*ezer*” means not just aid, but a significant kind of help. For example, in Isaiah 30:5, the word is used in the sense of seeking military help from the king of Egypt. It is also used in the same way in the Book of Ezekiel. Military help can hardly be described as an inferior role! In many instances, it is God who comes to rescue God’s people. “*Ezer kenegdo*” that is, a woman is bones of bones, flesh of flesh. She is identical and consubstantial to man. She is his partner.

Marriage is a place where men and women are intended to find happiness, joy, and share the goodness of life whilst living a complementary life. A life where there is no discrimination. Kline (1979:27) affirms that marriage for help and support is really exposing the character of mutual and self-giving love.

While much of the Congolese population lives in a particularly worrying economic situation, women are more vulnerable to economic problems in a society which values patriarchal norms and values that are deeply-rooted in society. It affects their roles and responsibilities. However, many Congolese women are beginning to liberate themselves from ignorance. The number of women registering at universities is growing. This additional enrolment of girl

children in the DRC education sector, contributes to the increase in the number of the Congolese women's sensitivity to the affirmation of their rights. The fight continues although there is still a long way to go. With the preceding analysis of the Anamango women's experiences in mind, we now turn to a re-reading of the main text of our investigation, that is, the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible

Chapter 3

REREADING THE BOOK OF RUTH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE CANON

1. Introduction

For millenniums the book of Ruth has charmed readers by its narrative beauty. It is one of the shorter books in the Old Testament and canonically, the book comes after the book of Judges and before the books of Samuel in the Christian Bibles following the Greek and Latin manuscripts. The book of Ruth is the only biblical book which bears the name of a gentile (LaCocque 2004b:1). The book is designated by Meyers as “the women’s book of the Hebrew Bible” (1993: 92). Ruth is the leading character in this book which takes her name. Meyers (1993: 85) notes that:

As one of the two biblical books bearing a woman’s name, the book of Ruth has attracted considerable attention from feminist biblical scholars and also from women seeking to reclaim their biblical foremothers. Clearly Ruth deserves such attention. Unlike Esther, the other book with a woman’s name, Ruth is almost entirely a woman’s tale. Esther as heroine shares the limelight to a certain extent with Mordecai; and King Ahasuerus as well as his vizier Haman have prominent roles. Males enjoy no such foregrounding in Ruth.

The book of Ruth tells us the story of two heroines, that is, Ruth and Naomi who were childless widows. The reader of the book is also introduced to the reciprocal love between them. It is a feminine book from the beginning to the end (LaCocque 2004:2).

The book is written as a family narrative. It is a story that was passed down from generation to generation, thus keeping the family history alive. It is a beautiful book on the life of a young Moabite woman faced with hardship and

different problems but who uses her humble character to navigate through her difficult times.

1. The biblical story of Ruth

In the time of the judges a famine arose in the land of Israel. Consequently, Elimelech, Naomi his wife and their two sons emigrated from Bethlehem of Judea to the land of Moab. The first verse of the book introduces the reader to a woman with three men. First of all, one notes, Naomi is presented as Elimelech's wife, a definition of a woman's identity in a patriarchal society. Her sons are married to Moabite women named Ruth and Orpah. It happened that Naomi's husband and sons die. She then decided to return to Bethlehem in Judah (Ruth1:1-7) after Elimelech's death, Mahlon and Chilion, his two sons died without producing children. As there were no men left within Naomi's family, the story's focus turns to Naomi. Having heard that God has blessed God's people, as the famine in Bethlehem had ended, Naomi, husbandless and childless, decides to leave Moab for Bethlehem. First though she decides to send both Ruth and Orpah back to their respective mothers' houses. In doing this, Naomi is re-defining the women's home from a female viewpoint contrary to the common expression of "fathers' house" (Meyers1993:100-102) as used in patriarchal societies.

She then blesses them by wishing them a happy and safe life such as, in her view, could only be found in their husbands' houses. Naomi, as a woman who lives in a patriarchal society, seems to have the traditional concept according to which a woman only gains "fulfilment and social security" in her husband's house (Fisher1999:27). In Ruth 1, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' houses, Naomi says, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husband's? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to

have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” (Ruth1:11-13)

In exhorting her daughters-in-law, knowing that she can no longer give birth, Naomi reduces the chances for a levirate marriage for her two daughters-in-law. In her view the two widows have more chance to marry among their own people. Orpah decides to listen to her and probably returns to her mother’s house while Ruth refuses to do so. Instead, she commits herself to her mother-in-law, Naomi.

On perusing the second chapter of the Book of Ruth, after their arrival in Bethlehem, the reader observes that Naomi becomes passive. She did not give any information to Ruth concerning kinsmen who would be descendents of Naomi’s dead husband. Being unable to work, maybe because of her age, Ruth instead becomes active in the field so that she can provide food for herself and her mother-in-law to survive on. In this chapter, Boaz, the kinsman appears and shows a special concern for Ruth (2:1-23).

In Ruth 3, Ruth’s visit to the threshing floor is presented. After Naomi discovers that Ruth was temporarily working in Boaz’ field to secure their sustenance, she decided to find a “long-term solution” (Sakenfeld 2004:32). In her willingness to find a new husband for her daughter-in-law, Naomi hatches a plot; she suggests that Ruth visits Boaz during the night at the threshing floor. Ruth obeyed the directions which Naomi, her mother-in-law, gives her. On the advice of Naomi, Ruth waits until Boaz falls asleep. She then lies down at his feet. When Boaz awakes Ruth expresses her desire to marry him according to the custom of the kinsman-redeemer.

Finally, in chapter four, there is a discussion at the city gate (4:1-12). After a nearer kinsman has solemnly renounced his prior right, Boaz marries Ruth who bears him Obed, the grandfather of David. The “levirate” custom and the act of redemption were carried out simultaneously. For Naomi, Ruth was then better than not only her two sons, but seven sons! The narrative ends with Naomi’s joy and happiness after the birth of a son by Ruth who, by this marriage, becomes the great ancestor of King David (4:13-18).

“Ruth is about economic survival and about loyalty and about accepting foreigners and about the loyalty of one woman to another” (Pressler 2002:264).

The story is unusually woman-centred both in language and in plot. Ruth is rich with drama like, women debating in a public road, a chance meeting in a grain field, a romantic meeting on a threshing floor, a legal case argued at the city gates. The story focuses on women supporting women carrying on after the deaths of their respective spouses, taking the initiative in difficult times and calling upon others to fulfil their duty. The story of Ruth is a story that begins in emptiness and which ends in abundance.

2. Question of date

The book of Ruth does not specifically name its author. Traditionally, it is considered that the book of Ruth was written by the prophet Samuel, but this ascription of Ruth to Samuel is now almost universally rejected. The exact date on which the book of Ruth was written is uncertain. The book of Ruth is anonymous, for the name which it bears as its title has never been regarded otherwise than that of the chief actor in the events recorded.

There is a recent hypothesis reported by LaCocque (2004b:13) that the book of Ruth was written by a member of the royal family. In this regard, he says that:

If the book of Ruth had been written as an apologia for David, one could have conceived of an author recruited from the members of the royal court. One scholar has even proposed the prophet Nathan. (Gow, M.D. 1992:207) but the goal of Ruth is quite different, and its author is probably a woman, a cultivated poet, on a par with the contemporaneous prophetess Noadiah, at the time of the governors accredited by the Persians (fifty century; see Nehemiah 6:14).

Bledstein (1993:132) suggests considering Tamar, the daughter of David and grand-daughter of Ruth, as author in the early years of Solomon's reign.

Secondly, it is hypothesised that the book of Ruth was written in the pre-exilic period. The work, however, was most likely written before the Babylonian exile. On the one hand, there is nothing in its contents that would compel one to consider its origin at a later date; and, on the other hand, the comparative purity of the book's style stamps it as a pre-exilic composition. The numerous critics who hold a different view overrate the significance of its isolated Aramaisms which are best accounted for by the use of a spoken patois plainly independent of the actual developments of literary Hebrew. But while the internal data supplied by the Book of Ruth points to its pre-exilic origin, they remain indecisive with regard to the precise date of its composition, as clearly appears from the conflicting inferences which have been drawn by recent Catholic scholars.

The first chapter of the book of Ruth opens with an explanation of the situation. It was the time of the Judges. If we recall that the latter book directly comes before Ruth in the Christian canon, we also know the book of Judges ends stating the situation as occurring "in those days." Also, the name of David in the genealogy, at the end of the book of Ruth, is an indication that the author wrote in a time after the book of Judges was written (Richman2010:2).

Thirdly, the book of Ruth was written in the post-exilic period. There is only one adequate explanation for this argument, the occurrence of both early and late Hebrew usage in Ruth can be an affirmation that the author was a late

writer who was consciously archaising and using colloquial speech in order to give an antique flavour to his narrative, which he set in the period of the Judges. Substantive considerations agree with the linguistic evidence for a post-exilic date for Ruth. The author finds it necessary, from the vantage point of a later period to explain the use of the *sandal* meaning "the restoration of an object to its primal condition" for the transfer of rights and obligations as it is explained by Jouon (1978:12).

As with most books in the Hebrew Bible, it is not easy to establish a date for the Book of Ruth. Scholars have tried to show therefore that the book was probably written at the end of the period of Judges, but no one has been really certain about its date.

In my opinion, considering that the only information that the book gives about the date is that, the book was written at the time of the Judges (Ruth 1:1), the latter needs to be kept in view. Also, the evident interest of the author in the marriage of a Judahite man with a Moabite woman suggests that the book is a response to the law against mixed marriages that appeared in the post-exilic era (Ezra9-10; Nehemiah10:30). The author of Ruth was thus a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah and wrote the book to stand against their opposition to foreign marriages (Gow1992:206).

Although Driver (2010:1) argues that the general beauty and purity of style of Ruth indicate a pre-exilic date, bearing in mind that the Davidic genealogy at the end is probably a later addition –when David had become the ideal of the nation– the post-exilic origin of Ruth seems to be confirmed by its position among the "*Ketubim*" in the third part of the book. The post-exilic period, in my view, makes more sense. As reasoned by Nadar (2006:70), "whether we can establish a date for the book or not, the important point I would like you to remember is the idea of ancestry, and bearing male sons. This is an important theme that runs throughout the book, and it is certainly an important one to remember in order to interpret the book in its context".

We now turn to the gender of the author of the book of Ruth.

3. The Gender of the Author of Ruth

Bearing in mind that our re-reading of the book of Ruth also has to do with the situation of women with regard to their gender, race, ethnicity and social class, it is reasonable to engage the question of gender in relation to the book's authorship. The question of the gender of the author is significant, in our context, as it will enable readers to understand the background of the story and that the purpose could have been influenced by the author's point view depending on whether he/her was male or female. According to Bauckham (2002:2), it is believed that the author was an Israelite who used women's characters and perspectives to write the narrative.

In order to support this opinion, Fuchs, quoted by Bauckham (2002:5), states that:

The author reveals himself as a male and -one might have to say- undermined the authority of the female voice he has adopted as narrator of the story. His concern is patrilineal descent, and he has adopted a female perspective in order to persuade his readers that the patriarchal laws and conventions that function to secure it in cases where it might otherwise be lost work in the interest of women as well as men. In this way, the genealogical conclusion could support that minority of feminist critics who pass a negative verdict on Ruth arguing that the actions of Ruth and Naomi, though seemingly courageous and independent, function to secure male interest. A male author has adopted a female voice in order to hold up for admiration and imitation women who are "paradigmatic upholder of patriarchal ideology".

As a part of the Christian canon where almost all the books have male authorship, "Ruth has rarely, even by feminist critics heralding it as a woman's story, been seen as the work of a woman writer" (Meyers 1993:89).

Campbell even suggests that the author could be "located among country Levites, one of whose functions was to teach and edify, among wise women"

(Campbell 1995:21). Recent scholarship, according to Meyers (1993: 89), “has convincingly reserved the notion that the production of literature in the biblical antiquity was almost entirely the result of the compositional activities of men”.

According to Brenner (1993b:143), although it cannot be proved that the author of Ruth is male that is also no reason to privilege its supposed authorship by a male. The possibility of a female writer is merely suggested because there is no strong evidence of the author of Ruth being a female. Even if the existence of female authors for certain biblical books can be accepted, the idea of a female author of the book of Ruth seems problematic.

I tend to agree with Brenner, as quoted by Meyers (1993:89) that, “it is better to focus on the gender perspective of a given passage rather than on the gender identity of its author”. It the text’s authority that have to be gendered than its authorship. The question of author, as argued by Brenner, “must be shifted to definitions of authority and voice, which are intrinsic to it. From the perspective of authority, the dominant voices reconstructed in the text appear to be F (female/ feminine). In that sense, the scroll is an expression of women’s culture and women’s concerns”.

Having commented on the date and author, we now turn to the question of its historicity and place in the canon.

4. Historicity and the place of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible canon

There is no problem concerning the canonicity of the book of Ruth. For LaCocque, the only problem is its location in the order of the Bible. The book of Ruth begins with the phrase “in the days of the” and ends with the name of “David”, thus serving as an especially appropriate link between the book of Judges (which recounts precisely the time in which the main action of the book of Ruth is set) and the book of Samuel (which relates the rise of the reign of David).

Many sources place Ruth between two other books that is, the Septuagint and most modern English versions of the Bible such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). But Jewish canonical lists and modern Jewish translations, such as the Jewish Publication Society Version (JPSV), place the book among the writings of the third section of the Hebrew Bible.

According to LaCocque, the book of Ruth, like the book of Jonah, is not historic. Ruth the Moabite is not historical but a midrashic fiction built on the basis of Samuel chapter 22. Also, in regard to the historicity of Ruth, one would agree with Juoun that some commentators use the names of Mahlon, Chilion and Orpah to deny the historicity of Ruth. But even if they are not historic names, this can never take away the historicity of the book of Ruth. Probably the author of the book of Ruth ignored the name of the real person of the narrative. The other names Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are historic. The fact that these principal characters are historic (4:17) tends to validate the historicity of the book especially as it also tells us about David, Ruth's mother-in-law's ancestor (Juoun 1986:7).

The next aspect to examine is the purpose of the book of Ruth.

5. The purpose of the Book of Ruth

The precise object of the Book of Ruth is not expressly given either in the book itself or in accepted tradition. According to many, who lay special stress on the genealogy of David in the second part of the book, the chief aim of the author is to throw light upon the origin of David, the great King of Israel as well as the royal ancestor of the Messiah. Had this, however, been the main purpose of the writer, it seems that he would have given it greater prominence in his work. Besides, the genealogy at the close of the book is only loosely connected with the preceding contents, so it is probably an appendix added to the book by a later hand.

According to Juoun (1986:15), the moral teaching of the book of Ruth is not difficult to understand. Some aspects need to be pointed out. The three main persons, Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, give the readers some lessons of virtue.

Different scholars argue that, the principal aim of the author was to narrate how, in opposition to Deuteronomy 23:3, which forbids the reception of Moabites into Yahweh's assembly, the Moabitess Ruth was incorporated with Yahweh's people, and eventually became the ancestress of the founder of the Hebrew monarchy (Gigot 2010:6).

Some have regarded this short book as a kind of protest against Nehemiah's and Ezra's efforts to suppress intermarriage with women of foreign birth. The book has been described as a tract against their campaign to exclude mixed marriages within the post-exilic Jewish community. But this is plainly an inference, not from the contents of the book, but from the assumed late date of its composition.

Finally, others, and indeed with greater probability, have maintained that the author's purpose was to tell an edifying story as an example to his own community giving an interesting sketch of the past. He did this by recording the exemplary conduct of the main characters who act as simple, kind, God-fearing people ought to have acted in Israel (Baret 2010:2).

Argued by Masenya (1998:85), "some feminist scholars view the Naomi-Ruth story as a weapon used by men to achieve their own ends". According to Levine quoted by Masenya (1998:85), "the book of Ruth offers no prescriptions for changing the circumstances in which women, either native or foreign, find themselves impoverished and unprotected. Women have a voice in the community, but that is all. Their fates are determined by men: their husband and sons and the town elders".

However, the purpose of the book could be to give a pattern for women acting on their own, women making decisions, taking initiative and co-operating

with one another so that they can survive in a world where the “women’s economic welfare” is dependent on men (Sakenfeld 2003:37).

Ruth’s story is that of “women who would even risk availing their bodies for male abuse as a coping strategy.” She notes, furthermore, that “in a world where women are not expected to have control over their bodies, it is common place to find women availing their bodies, whether willingly or not, as a coping mechanism to survive through marriage” (Masenya 2004c:58).

The book of Ruth can be seen as portraying a woman who “does not challenge heterosexual marriage”, Kwok (2004:140) says:

...a widow can only find economic security through remarriage; marrying a man with some means (no matter the age difference) guarantees financial gains; giving birth to a son is the greatest responsibility of women; a male child is more valuable than a female child; and the authority of the mother-in-law is over the daughter-in-law.

According to my context, and that of most African countries, where the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law become sometimes that of two rivals, the story of Ruth and Naomi gives the image of a mother and daughter-in-law who are able to co-operate rather than to compete for their survival and that of the future generation.

The relationship of Naomi and Ruth, as it is presented in the book of Ruth, is an example of female love, mutual respect, and bonding. It describes how women, particularly mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, should behave, especially in an African-South African context. Their story reminds women of all races, classes, and cultures that they should be united and should work together against all forces that inhibit the full experience of their God-given potential Masenya (1998:90).

Levine (1992:79) maintains that, Ruth is strong with an independent character. The book of Ruth gives us an example of an independent woman able to take a decision on how to manage her welfare and that of another woman. She

is “an example of a devoted daughter-in-law who risks her life by venturing into an uncertain future, not for the sake of her husband but because of her commitment to a widowed, old mother-in-law” (Weems 1988:26).

Some scholars see in Ruth a positive story for women. One of them is Masenya. She reads the book in the context of post-apartheid South Africa with its legacy of white superiority that severely damaged African self-identity (Masenya 2004b:86). According to her context, she argues that, the story of Ruth the Moabite is one that reminds “all of us, particularly the powerful, that God is not partial to any person... Therefore, what is important to God is not how we are defined on the basis of race or gender, but our availability as agents of God’s transforming *hesed* in the lives of our neighbours,” where the Hebrew word *hesed* means “kindness, loving-kindness, faithfulness, or loyalty” (Masenya 2004b:89).

Even though the book of Ruth can be read in a positive way, as argued by Masenya, in the context of this work for women from the equatorial region, Ruth is a model of a woman who looks for a “short-term solution”, that is, marriage as the only career open for her so that she can survive in her particular patriarchal society.

Whatever the purpose and however different scholars interpret the book of Ruth, what is significant is that by reading the book of Ruth, everyone can find an exemplar through Ruth or Naomi’s positive character that can empower and liberate them.

With the preceding brief background to the book of Ruth, we now take a look at the first chapter of the book of Ruth.

6. Ruth chapter one: The bond between Ruth and Naomi

In chapter one, the book of Ruth portrays Naomi and Ruth facing a difficult stage of their lives. Naomi has lost her husband and both her sons. She is left

empty and alone. Nothing at that moment could prevail upon her to stay in Moab and so she decides to go back to her home country. Maybe there, she will find some support from her people.

On her journey back to Bethlehem, Naomi realises that she cannot provide for her daughters-in-law's survival, especially with regard to husbands who would be their security. Naomi urges them to return to the respective houses of their mothers where, in her view, they would have a chance to get married. They have to return because they cannot find happiness without men. She also laments that she is too old to have children, and even if she could, it would not do them any good because they would have to wait until they were adults in order to marry them. Naomi's lamentation has reference to Levirate marriage law. She assumes that her daughters-in-law understand what she is talking about when she says that she has no more sons for them (Nadar 2007:72).

The Levirate marriage law was indeed a practice in ancient times. Its purpose, besides providing male heirs to continue the name of the dead man, was also to take care of the widows who had no other form of economic survival in a patriarchal society.

Patriarchy refers to a social structural system. In extreme patriarchy, husbands make critical and final decisions, and wives willingly submit to the husband's authority (Kalswick 2004:449). Simply it means the "rule of the father", or as it is loosely used in those days for "male dominance", when women very rarely worked outside of the home or provided for their own or their children's economic well-being (Nadar 2007:71). This is why the Levirate marriage law was needed.

Naomi talks about "security (בטחון) and rest" (מנוחה) in Ruth 1:9 which, for the modern reader, is rather unexpected in this context. Nowadays, some women have proved that their security does not depend on having a man to support them. In developing countries for example, women can work on their

own, they feel free in taking decisions concerning their lives. However, nowadays the prevailing condition in many a home is violence, talking about “security and “rest” within marriage does not seem to make sense in these contexts. The security for Ruth and Orpah, that Naomi talked about, could not come from women. “It would come from the attachment to men as husbands” (Masenya 2004c:50). Such security is no longer a problem for certain women who are in some cases the ones supporting and giving rest to their families, including their men (fathers or husbands). The way women conceive marriage is changing given the fact that women have become more independent and active in the economic sphere of societies. They are refusing to be bound to men through the institution of marriage.

Naomi releases Ruth and Orpah from the obligation of belonging to the man’s family or village even after the death of their husbands by telling them to seek security in a home of a new husband. She does not want them to live in widowhood, but instead to remarry, have children and start new lives.

One daughter-in-law, Orpah, decides to go back to her mother’s house, as suggested by Naomi, but Ruth persists in her desire to follow Naomi to Judea. Her words are among the most famous in the Bible, “For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die...” (Ruth 1:16).

These lines are frequently used in some marriage liturgies to strengthen the attachment of a wife to her husband. I agree with Anderson (2008:4), that Ruth does not speak of her attachment to a spouse, but to Naomi her mother-in-law.

Ruth decided not to go by committing herself to her mother-in-law. Ruth knew that Naomi had nothing to offer. She had no riches, no more sons for her but nevertheless she decided to stay with Naomi and to show her loyalty. She told Naomi, where “you go I will go” (Ruth 1:8). Ruth took the decision to leave her country for a faraway place which was not familiar to her. She was not

making a good decision considering the historical persisting conflict between Israel and Moab.

Commenting on Ruth's commitment to her mother-in-law, Nadar (2007:72) says:

In this regard, there is another change in terms of Ruth's character especially in respect to the word '*davak*' which is translated as 'cling' or 'cleave.' In Ruth 1:14, the narrator says that Orpah turned around and left, but Ruth 'clung' to her mother-in-law. Some scholars have asserted that the word '*davak*' in the Hebrew Bible is most often used in relation to God, but when it is used in relation to humans, it nowhere else describes a woman's act. In Genesis 2:24 ("A man shall leave his mother and his father and cling ('*davak*') to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."), 'clinging' refers to love and to marriage, and also possibly to sexual relations. The important point that to note is that '*davak*' refers to the male role in initiating marriage. Therefore, when Ruth clings to Naomi, Ruth takes the male role in initiating a relationship of formal commitment, similar to that in marriage.

There have been suggestions of a homosexual relationship between Naomi and Ruth, but, whether this argument hold any merit or not, does not interest us here. Here our focus is on how Ruth takes on what was considered to be a role reserved for men in that time – namely as provider or breadwinner. Ruth has taken on a male role of "clinging" to Naomi as a husband and as a provider, as described in chapter two of the Book of Ruth (Nadar 2007:71).

Beyond the limits of her commitment to Naomi, Ruth makes a big and difficult choice, that is, she commits herself to the God of Israel, "your God will be my God."(1:16) As such, Naomi does not argue, she takes her along.

The figure of Orpah attracts the attention of modern feminist critics who occasionally take the role of advocates on her behalf. Orpah and Ruth are compared to contemporary immigrants, and Orpah is taken as a model of those who do not deny their origin (Honig, as quoted by LaCocque 2004:34).

Considering Orpah as a model of a woman who does not accept the loss of her culture, her family or land, Anderson (2007:9) states, “ Orpah, the other Moabite daughter-in-law in the narrative, the one who does return to her mother’s house, as Naomi suggests (1:6-14), becomes more important as a model for colonised populations. Because Orpah, unlike Ruth, symbolises the preservation of indigenous cultures for native women”.

In Ruth we see a young woman who displays loyalty and love towards her mother-in-law. LaCocque (2004:4) compares Ruth and Naomi to another pair of same-gender characters: “David and Jonathan even if the parallel is only partially valid. In David’s story, there is no sense of emptiness or bitterness, even if the end of their friendship is tragic. In the case of Ruth and Naomi, the affection is between two women and more (since) the two women are of a very different age. And their mutual devotion breaks all the social taboos”. Brenner (1997:284) comments:

The story about Naomi and Ruth offers a marked contrast to the stereotypic biblical image of women as rivals, as seen in the cases of Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, and Hannah and Peninnah. Since Naomi and Ruth also form a pair, they have the potential to act in binary opposition; however, they are a model of cooperation and mutual respect. They support each other instead of competing and, in this way, they reveal in an exemplary fashion how fruitful the cooperation between women can become.

Naomi and Ruth were in a hopeless situation in a world dominated by men. They were without protection and their survival was in peril. Ruth was willing to go to a land that was not her own, and to care of Naomi. She made this commitment without looking for anything in return; nor seeking material gain. Between the choice to go back to her “mother’s house” and get a second chance to marry, she chose to show her love to Naomi. She is an example of caring and devotion. When Ruth decided to accompany Naomi in order to take care of her, she in fact became a “husband” for Naomi, before becoming a

surrogate mother for her. Not that Ruth loses any of her femininity or her personality in doing so.

Ruth is an example of a woman making a decision for her future destiny. She shows us her freedom of choice, whether gaining marriage or not, her ability to decide on her own as a free human being. “Ruth’s own decision to cling to Naomi was basically her decision to address their (not men’s) undesirable situation.” This she did in a world where women were not allowed to experience their full identity as persons in their own right apart from men (Masenya 2004c:47).

According to Masenya, Ruth is an “independent thinker”. Ruth is viewed as a woman who did not hide herself in the patriarchal system of her time, she felt free to decide her own destiny. Having impressed Masenya (1998:90), Masenya maintains, “... she herself makes the decision to follow Naomi. It is a voluntary move. She is not dictated to by the requirements of the status quo of the time. She decides on her own, contrary to her mother-in-laws contractive advice. She appears to be an independent thinker.”

Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to “your mother’s house,” rather than the usual reference to the father’s house (1:8). She is unable to provide security for her daughters-in-law. She blesses them in the name of God, “The Lord grants that you may find security, each of you, in the house of your husband” (Ruth 1:9). In 3:1 she says to Ruth: “my daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.” From Naomi’s words, it can thus be argued that in that context and adult female without a legitimate male in her life could be doomed to the life of poverty for the rest of her life (Masenya 2004c:49).

Naomi releases Ruth and Orpah from obligation to the memory of her sons by telling them to go and seek “security in the home of a new husband”. By doing so, she does not want the young women to live as widows, but to remarry, have children, and begin a new life. However, Ruth opposes.

Naomi exhorts Ruth and Orpah to go back to their mother's house, "Go back each of you, to your mother's house!" (1:8). It is interesting that Naomi exhorted her daughters-in-law to return to their "mother's house". Naomi implies so many things by pleading with her daughters-in-laws to return to their original homes. Fewell (1990:143) wrote accordingly that:

On her way back to her country of origin, Naomi advises Ruth and Orpah to do the same. She emphasizes the importance of a female support during times of sorrow by telling her daughters-in-law to return to their mother's homes. Traditionally, a widow or a woman who failed to perform the proper wifely duties was sent back to her father's house as a sign of disgrace. Naomi advises Ruth and Orpah to return home without the customary stigma, thus making reference to a matriarchal system. She does not send them back to their fathers to be treated as possessions, but to their mothers to seek solace and refuge.

Commenting in the African perspective, Masenya says that in Naomi's speech, in saying so "perhaps, she speculated that their mothers more than their fathers, could cope with the shame of the return of their daughters better than fathers. Perhaps the narrator wished to reveal the important role which the mothers, in particular, play in the upbringing of their daughters." (2004c:50). Bringing up her South African patriarchal context, Masenya (2004c:51), she argues:

In the African-South African patriarchal culture, although the phrase "mother's house" would strike readers as not fitting, a deeper meaning making sense to this cultural context could be sought. In this context, although the house is, in principal, believed to belong to the father, in essence, it is the woman manages the household affairs. ... As a matter of fact, everyday life, women are better able to handle pressure than men. : Naomi didn't mean physical rest, which is obviously more available in a mother's house. Rather she refers to "inner peace" which a woman experiences more fully when she has a family.

The mother's house has a special place in the life of a family. It is a place of comfort, a place of shelter, a place of learning to be a mother. The "mother's house" has a very important interpretation in African culture. In polygamous

homes the mother's house is a shelter for the children. Whatever happens in the life of a child it centres on the mother. The place where one finds nurture and nourishment is in the "mother's house".

Despite Naomi's words that were intended to liberate, Ruth objected going back. According to Arrah (2008:4):

She found something profound in Naomi that she "clings" to her. Moreover Ruth sees the "mother's house she is to return to as a rejection of what she believes. "And fitting because the "mother's house" to which Ruth refuses to return to represents the culture of conventional expectations that Ruth rejects." The same qualities of motherhood and nourishment that any young woman will find in an elderly woman were found in Naomi. She could not separate herself from that which is valuable.

The two women are a perfect team. Naomi has the strategy and Ruth has the strength. In their relationship, the opposites of youth and age, wisdom and beauty, native and stranger are unified. Differences disappear because Ruth and Naomi share the same goal. Their partnership relationship ensures their success (Caspi 1996:147).

Once she has arrived in Bethlehem, Ruth shows her commitment to Naomi, an old woman unable to work. No matter that she is a widow, a woman without sons and a foreigner, Ruth becomes her breadwinner. It seems to me that Ruth had a plan for her life and no obstacle could stop her from achieving that plan.

This leads us on to chapter two where Ruth is portrayed as the breadwinner of the family. We now take a look at that aspect of their relationship.

7. Ruth chapter two: Ruth the breadwinner

In my view, the key words in chapter two of Ruth are "gleaning" (ללקיטה) and "finding favour" (מצִיאָת) or finding grace (Ruth 2:2). Ruth, like her mother-in-law, is a widow and childless; a woman without a son in a patriarchal society, but a foreigner who, at the same time, has to work for her survival and that of

her mother-in-law. She chooses not to stay at home even though she is sojourner in a foreign land. Ruth is well aware that she will be the one who provides for both Naomi and herself since Naomi cannot work because of her advanced age, nor can she remarry because she is also too old to bear children.

As prescribed in Israelite law gleaning was a primary means of support for the destitute. One finds the basic prescriptions in Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22, and Deuteronomy 24:19-22. The edges of the field were not to be harvested. What the bundlers of the grain-stalks (gleaners) did not pick up in the first pass, was to be left for the alien, the poor, the orphan and the widow. As a poor non-Israelite widow, Ruth engaged in this means of survival designated by Israelite law (Sakenfeld 1999:39).

In chapter 2, Ruth is presented as the breadwinner who goes out to glean in order to provide food for herself and Naomi. Gleaning was a means by which those who lived on the margins of society could survive. As farmers reaped their crops, the workers were instructed to leave the corners of their fields unharvested. Anything that fell to the ground was left for the poor, who gleaned what was dropped behind the reapers. This is what Ruth was going to do. She was going to the fields to glean. However, we see just how resourceful Ruth was by her actions in the fields.

Ruth, the Moabite woman, provides bread by gleaning for her mother-in-law and herself. She does this even though the older woman still has social contacts that would probably supply solidarity and support. She is a woman who utilises her own strength by supporting both her and her mother-in-law. She claims the right to legal aid, namely to glean, according to which widows and orphans were entitled to (cf. Deuteronomy 24:19; Fischer 1999:36).

Nadar has written what is sure to become a major reference on the character of Ruth. Writing from a context of a fourth-generation South African Indian Christian, Nadar sees Ruth as anything but “docile and dependent” (2001:161). “Ruth’s character is independent, autonomous, strong-willed and

even subversive”. In sections that correspond to the chapters in the book of Ruth, Nadar views Ruth as taking the male role of provider in her relationship with Naomi; Ruth provides for Naomi in the innovative way of going among the gleaners in Boaz’s field.

LaCocque (2004:66) argues that Ruth does not claim a right but asks for a favour. This favour is quite extraordinary: “instead of gleaning what was left by the harvesters, Ruth asks permission to glean ‘among the sheaves’ that is what was put in piles by the workers for winnowing. Ruth’s request was beyond what ordinarily was granted”.

In Ruth chapter 2:4, Boaz appears on the scene for the first time. He is presented as a prominent and rich man. Boaz requests information about this young woman asking, “To whom does this young woman belong?” “(refer to Genesis 32:18 and 1 Samuel30:13 regarding persons of humble origins belonging to a master). In Genesis, the story refers to Jacob’s servant and in 1 Samuel; it refers to an Egyptian, a slave of an Amalekite. In both cases, the question is asked concerning a servant and a slave. The aim was to identify the authority under which the person served, the master or owner. Through that, the questioner could discover with whom to engage. In relation to Genesis and Samuel, the identity of such persons matters little (LaCocque 2004:65).

“Three times in the narrative her identity is questioned. Boaz asks, “Who is this young woman?” (2:5). In chapter 3, on the threshing floor, he asks the young woman, “Who are you?” (3:9). Finally, as LaCocque (2004:3) argues, “Naomi puts exactly the same question (literally in 3:16, “Who are you my daughter?” (cf. Hebrew King James Version). Caspi (1996:181) argues that the question of Naomi is different from that of Boaz. Did she not recognize her daughter-in-law? This could very well be, for when Ruth returned to Naomi, it may still have been dark. The question, though, may also mean that Naomi was inquiring about Ruth’s possible new identity. Naomi here wanted to hear about the night story rather than the identity of Ruth. As customary in a patriarchal

society, addressing such a question to a woman, Boaz wanted to know the father or the husband of the young woman because the life of a woman had to be related to that of a man. Immediately, an answer is given by his servant, “She is a young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the field of Moab”. The answer to Boaz’ question is not only that this is a Moabite woman but could also be, as argued by Linafelt (1999:31), “A young Moabite woman who does not belong to a man”. Ruth was recognised in the Israelite society as a “Moabite woman”; she kept her identity of not being recognised as under the authority of a man. Even today, in Congolese traditional society, Ruth would be named after her dead husband “*mwasi ya pauvre Machlon ...*” meaning the wife of the dead Machlon. Even after the death of the man, the wife still is his “property”. Nevertheless Ruth appears to be an example of a woman whose identity is not tied to that of a man. She is recognised in her own right, at least up to this point in the narration.

“Ruth is foreign to Israel because she is Moabite; foreign to patriarchal expectations because she was neither attached to a father nor a husband” (Masenya 2004c:54). Commenting on the point, Masenya (2004c:54) asserts:

A young (woman) in Israel derived her identity from men to whom she was attached; either as an unmarried woman in the house of her father, or as a married woman in the house of her husband. Such an identity, as we have already noted, also determined a woman’s socio-economic position. At that point in time, Ruth belonged to no man. Her identity was not only problematized by her foreign status in Bethlehem, (now and again the narrator refers to this “foreign” status of Ruth; 1:22; 2:2; 21), as belonging to no man is also problematic.

In Ruth 2:16, we read that Boaz looked at Ruth with favour. Sakenfeld (2003:32) raises the question as to whether that occurred because of Ruth’s attractiveness or because of his admiration of her loyalty to Naomi. If one has to answer to this question, I would say, when comparing to the Congolese culture, that Boaz’ admiration of Ruth was rather by attraction than by her loyalty to

Naomi. Firstly, according to Caspi (1996:170), “calling her ‘Ruth the Moabite’ may indicate a certain kind of beauty in the same way that the phrases ‘French woman’ or ‘California girl’ operates as description”. It refers to her origin as a Moabite woman. In the context of women from the equatorial region, who are identified as “*Bangala*”⁶, they are mostly attractive and seductive. Given the actual situation of poverty, the situation of a woman finding favour because of her intelligence and good behaviour does not really exist. From school to the working place, in her home or in the public places, women are objects of attraction for men’s pleasure.

Boaz did not only speak kindly to her, he made sure that Ruth had a large enough share during mealtime. Boaz even went to the extent of instructing his servants to allow Ruth to glean “...even among the standing sheaves” (2:16). The “empty” foreign widow has been “discovered” by the “full” prominent man of Bethlehem. She went home “full”, and with enough barley for the family (Masenya 2004c:55). Caspi (1996:81) says that, Ruth went to town heavy with provisions; the gift of barley lends to Ruth the image of a prostitute. Ruth found favour in Boaz’s eyes. Masenya (2004c:54-55) comments:

He immediately embraced her as one of his “daughters” and gave some measures to ensure her safety in the world in which women were viewed, amongst others, as objects for the satisfaction of male lust. The word “molest,” as used in this context, carries such a meaning. The object of molestation in this regard is always a woman who is likely to be abused by the male subject. Such a warm reception from a man of power, the rich Israelite man of standing, could only humble the poor widow to lie prostrate in appreciation of the recognition she received from Boaz.

⁶ Being identified through their language, “*lingala*”, “*bangala*” women are known all over the country as being good in sexual encounters. From an early age, “*bangala*” women especially “*mongo*” are trained to perform well in sexual activities for the purpose of satisfying their future husbands so that they will not follow other women. Today, it does not have a good connotation because it refers to prostitute women in big cities.

Ruth being embraced as one of Boaz's daughters in today's context is akin to a "sugar daddy"⁷ relationship. I will discuss this further in the next chapter.

Boaz is in a position of power over Ruth. He questions the identity of Ruth (2:5) to be sure that she is not someone's possession and then calls her "daughter" (2:8). Then, Boaz takes security measures for Ruth (2:9). By taking such measures, Rosen sees a danger to other gleaners, women who had no social standing, because they did not have a man to speak for them. Also, the workers could have done whatever they wanted with these women, and those who survived the victimization would have had no recourse. In Rosen's view, this is a very disturbing part of the story that readers often overlook (Rosen1994:29).

Judging from the amount of grain Ruth brought home every day, Naomi suspected that the man Boaz rather liked her daughter-in law. She reckoned, however, that a man of his standing was not likely to risk his prestige in abusing a young woman and then not marrying her. Boaz gave Ruth an opportunity that was not available to other gleaners. As stated by Linafelt (199:31):

the connotations of sexuality are present due to the fact that the feminine form of the word most often connotes not just a young woman, but a young woman of marriageable age and situation (see Genesis 24:14;16;Deuteronomy 22:15,16). Moreover, sexual overtones are clearly present in Boaz's instructions to his "young men" not to molest Ruth (2:9; 16) and in Naomi's instructions to Ruth to stay close to the young women rather than the young men while she is working in the field.

Taking up a similar theme, Sakenfeld wrote that, "the harvesters include both women and men, and the risks of gleaning are made apparent as Boaz urges Ruth to stick near the women and keep her eyes down, and as he orders the

⁷ "Sugar daddy" is a phenomenon that is found in contemporary society. Being unable to satisfy their material needs, young girls engage in relationships with men three or four times their age. Such relationships do not have marriage as a purpose. For the girl, she has found someone able to support her, pay her school fees, buy clothes, food etc. in exchange for sexual satisfaction. The young girl has become his possession, an object of his satisfaction as he now has financial power over her.

young men not to ‘bother’ Ruth” (Sakenfeld 2003:33). One can thus say that Boaz indirectly warns the male reapers not to bother Ruth.

According to Masenya (2010:10), in the Hebrew text, the word “bother”, when used in the context in which the object of the act of bothering is a female person, implies sexual molestation. The same advice was given by Naomi who advised Ruth to stay with Boaz’ young women as she might be “...bothered in another field” (Ruth 2:23). “It would appear though, that in her relentless efforts to seek marriage/security for Ruth at all costs, Naomi did not ‘bother’ if her daughter-in-law were to be bothered by Boaz” Masenya (2010:10).

In reference to Numbers 25:1-3, even the seemingly sexual solicitations in chapter 3 are a way for Ruth to redeem her forebears. The story of Ruth is a story of fertility. Despite her situation, Ruth is a model for women who work hard to gain meaning in life. Her work in the field provides enough food for her and her mother-in-law. But the provision of grain is “a short term solution” (Sakenfeld 2003:32). Ruth and Naomi have still not found a reliable way to provide for themselves. The plot advances in chapter two with the movement from emptiness to fullness but this is still not enough. More has to be done so that they can be permanently secure.

Knowing that the harvesting is seasonal; Ruth needed to find another solution to hunger and poverty. In chapter two of the book of Ruth, we read how Ruth works hard to gain recognition, and she finds that an attempt at integration through marriage is the best way to achieve this. Marriage also helps to guard her reputation (Boer 1999:164). This brings us to the next point in chapter three about Ruth’s visit to the threshing floor.

8. Ruth chapter three: The encounter at the threshing floor

This is the second meeting of Ruth and Boaz. Tribble (1978:183) says that “the two meetings between Ruth and Boaz hardly resemble one another. The first

meeting was by chance; the second is by choice. The first was in the fields; the second at the threshing floor. The first was public; the second private. Yet both of them hold the potential for life and death.”

Some time elapses and Boaz has not yet fulfilled his obligation as redeemer, Naomi decides to rely on her “sign”, the favour that Ruth found in Boaz’ eyes, a sign that the man would accept acting as redeemer for Ruth. Naomi actively pursues the matter. Naomi is grateful to Ruth for support and she still keeps to her decision to seek a new marriage for her daughter-in-law (see Ruth1: 8-13). This is also the only way for Naomi to find happiness and security in life (Fewell 1990:49). Because Boaz was not acting to finish what he started, Naomi suggests to Ruth that she pays him a visit at night in order to move this kinsman (3:2) to marry her. Fischer (1999:29) maintains:

This is an ambiguous proposal through and through. This time, Ruth not go in her working clothes but bathed and anointed, in her cloak. She should wait until he has finished eating and drinking and has lain down. Then she shall uncover his legs, lie down (3.4) and do as Boaz tells her. This instruction of the mother-in-law, who shortly before has been worried that Ruth could have been molested by men, is unreasonable demand for the young widow. If Ruth did this she would risk her good reputation, the supreme asset of women in patriarchal society. If this is not an instruction to seduce the man, it is at least a plan to give Boaz the opportunity to seduce Ruth.

In chapter one, Naomi’s commitment to seek security through marriage for Ruth and Orpah (see Ruth1:6-14) and for Ruth (implicitly in Ruth 2:20) is revealed. In Ruth 3:1, the reader observes that she is pursuing her objective of providing security for her daughter-in-law through marriage. It looks as if Naomi was preparing Ruth for an illicit relationship with Boaz. She assumes that, after eating and drinking, Boaz would be unable to restrain himself upon discovering a beautiful woman lying at his feet in the middle of the night and with nobody around to witness the event. She may have been convinced that

after the meeting at the threshing floor events would possibly lead to marriage (Ruth 3: 18).

Naomi thought about the possibility of seduction. If Ruth were to appear by his side in the middle of night, after he'd had plenty to drink, would he really ask any questions? He would have to justify himself in the eyes of the community without waiting to be questioned. An important man like Boaz would never let such a scandal stand. He would have to marry her or at least pay her off (Fewell 1990:50).

Naomi's future was tied to that of Ruth. As asserted by Fewell (1990:51), "if Ruth acquired a home, Naomi would have one too. If Ruth found a man to take care of her, Naomi would have one too. If Ruth had a son, that son would sustain Naomi as well."

Ruth, in responding to Naomi's plan, says, "I will do everything you tell me" (Ruth 3:5). "She went to the threshing floor, in obedience to her mother-in-law, so that she could find security. As Boaz treated her kindly the first time they met, she believes that it will be the same again even though she has no guarantee that Boaz will marry her. No matter what happens at the threshing floor, she does just as her mother-in-law has instructed her (Ruth 3:6). This time, Ruth has accurately played according to the rules of the patriarchal game" (Masenya 2004c:56).

Beyond her commitment to Naomi, Ruth is driven by the will to perpetuate the name of the deceased and rebuild Naomi's family (Ruth 3:9). Just as Naomi's primary goal was Ruth's security, so Ruth's objective is to find security for her mother-in-law as well by rebuilding her family.

The scenario in the threshing floor is almost parallel to the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 28. It is not directly a form of levirate marriage. The goal for Naomi would be to obtain security for the two women.

According to LaCocque (2004:82):

Naomi's approach in this matter is still troubling. It would even be if the story had not taken the approach from the start that the perspective is the obedience to the Torah. Of course, the exegete cannot mitigate the roles of Naomi and Ruth in this matter. This scene is risqué as the one described in Genesis 38. It would nevertheless be an error to conclude that, for the author, the end justifies the means. For the action of the two women, just like that of Tamar, is justified not only theologically, but already in its intention. It is not a matter of Ruth prostituting herself, or of Naomi playing the procurer, but taking the direction of the events that "must result" in the continuation of Elimilek's line (just like that of Judah with Tamar).

Both in Ruth and Genesis 38, it is a dangerous action taken by the two women. One may lose her reputation (Ruth) or her life (Tamar). Naomi could possibly have sent her daughter-in-law to her destruction. Ruth was going to act like a prostitute. LaCocque(2004:83) argues that "Boaz could take advantage of Ruth's offer without risking any consequences, even if she became pregnant by him. In short, Ruth placed herself in extreme danger, so that if there was a trap on her part, it will snap shut more surely on her than on Boaz. Sakenfeld(2003:37) maintains:

Ruth in fact took a huge risk in approaching Boaz at night. His response, so far as we can discern it from the narrative, was ideal and honourable. But he might have made other choices: to have sex with her and then deny the relationship; or, to tell the whole village that she had inappropriately initiated contact with him in the night. Either of these actions would be humiliating and ruinous to Ruth's already precarious future.

The scene on the threshing floor is punctuated with innuendo. Ruth tells Boaz to spread his "wing" over her (Ruth3:9). "Now this term can just like the Hebrew word 'feet'(Ruth3:4, 7), designate the penis (see 1 Samuel 24:4-12). Ruth was offering herself to Boaz who would be simply an object of manipulation" (LaCocque 2004:84).

In her commentary of Ruth 3, Linafelt (1999:49), confirms the sexual meaning of the verb "to lie down" and "to know" in the Hebrew Bible. The verb

“lie down” that occurs eight times in Ruth 3 and the verb “to know” which appears six times have the meaning of “engaging in sexual intercourse”. Any of the action done in the middle of night, alone behind a pile of grain would imply an offer of sexual encounter.

Before the reader tries to decide what Naomi wants to happen on the threshing floor, some attention must be given to the secondary weight these words must have carried in the minds of a Hebrew-speaking audience. As it is argued above, Naomi tells Ruth to uncover Boaz’s “feet” that can be also commonly used as a euphemism meaning “private parts” (Croucher 2010:1).

Whatever the word feet can mean, one agrees with Masenya (2010:267) that “the narrator of Ruth employs language which is highly suggestive of a sexual encounter between Boaz and Ruth”. Finding words with such meaning in the Bible may not be helpful for the modern reader in regard to the actual context, a context where the Bible has become the standard for peoples’ behaviour.

Naomi advises Ruth to “dress up”, anoint herself and go to the threshing floor. Ruth has to wait until Boaz has eaten and drunk, then watch where he would sleep, “When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.”(Ruth 3:6) Naomi’s advice to her daughter to go the threshing floor and uncover the feet of Boaz is disturbing.

Naomi was encouraging her to take sexual initiative; that is in my view, similar to recommending prostitution. Naomi explained to Ruth how she should prepare herself, how to approach and what to do. She even tells Ruth what to say to seduce a man in the middle of the night. This is the case with some Anamongo mothers, who, because of the competition to survive economically, are encouraging their daughters to be seductive so that hopefully, they will marry wealthy men. We will discuss this further in the next chapter.

What is surprising is that Ruth readily agrees to Naomi’s plan, without as much protest as when Naomi tells her twice that she must return to her mother’s

home, and twice she says no. The fact that Ruth so readily agrees to this plan could mean that she recognised that the plan might have meant a permanent solution to their problems. At first, Ruth's main concern was not to remarry. She gave up that idea in order to take care of Naomi as demonstrated by her refusal to go back to Moab and find rest in the home of a husband (Ruth 1:6-18). Up until now, her main concern has been to provide food for Naomi and herself. She has not once indicated that she wants a husband. Now that the opportunity arises for her to have a husband, and in the process ensure the survival of both Naomi and herself, she is willing.

Although Ruth is determined and says to Naomi that she will do exactly what Naomi tells her, she does not follow Naomi's instructions to the letter. This is evident in Ruth 3:9 when Boaz asks Ruth, "Who are you?" and she answers, "I am Ruth your servant. Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of kin." Naomi told her to lie at Boaz's feet and wait for him to tell her what to do. Ruth, on the other hand does not wait. She takes charge of the situation by telling Boaz what she wants him to do. Also by using the phrase "spread your cloak over" your servant Ruth calls Boaz to act on God's behalf. Ruth shows her strength of character here. This is an example for African women to follow—to guide the course of their relationships— in order to have influence in the context of the HIV and AIDS ravaging the African continent. They must have freedom to express themselves and not keep on acting uncritically according to the patriarchal system into which they were socialized. Because they have to be "good" women and protect their marriages, they have to keep on doing whatever their husbands tell them even though the possibility exists that husbands can infect their wives through unprotected sex.

According to Nadar (2007:76), Ruth's action at the threshing floor was dangerous. She comments:

Ruth is thus undertaking an even more daring act than seduction when she calls on Boaz to spread his cloak over her, because she is a foreign woman calling on

an Israelite man to accept a responsibility to which by law he does not have to answer. Ruth is driving the situation to ensure her own survival without her having to sacrifice her own dignity in the process, while simultaneously ensuring her rightful place in the Israelite community. Ruth is ensuring that she can progress from being an outsider to being an insider. But it is a daring and dangerous plan nonetheless.

As quoted by Masenya (2010:266), May Say Pa's comments about the risks connected to harvest time and the threshing floor are worth noting: "It (harvest time) was a time when young men and women, under cover of darkness, could engage in sexual acts. Night-time was the time for lovers' trysts...The threshing floor itself was a dangerous place. It was used not only for agricultural purposes but also for sexual licentiousness of the fertility cult." In a more NB: similar way, Caspi (1996:158) states, "Located in the fields, the threshing floor is a place where overt sexuality is permissible, and welcomed."

According to the above comment, the threshing floor was not such a good place for a woman to go especially in the night. Even if Ruth did not have any sexual relations with Boaz, the detail that she visited the threshing floor at night gives readers something to think about.

Obediently, Ruth listened to her mother-in-law's advice (3:5). She went to the threshing floor, waited until the man had fallen asleep, and followed Naomi's instructions. When Boaz awoke at night, he found a woman lying by his legs (3:8). Ruth did not wait for Boaz to tell her what she had to do; instead she told him to marry her (Boes as quoted by Fisher 1999:30). She asked for marriage and redemption and Boaz promised to do what she wanted without any opposition.

Ruth and Boaz's marriage originated from their mysterious encounter at the threshing floor. Naomi instructed Ruth to meet Boaz there. Naomi promised to seek security for Ruth so that she would be happy. She advised her, as it was done in traditional marriage preparations, to anoint and dress up in order to meet Boaz. However, the words of Naomi quoted as, "Go down to the threshing floor; do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down," (Ruth 3:3-4) was not an ordinary marriage proposal.

Joining Naomi's people and embracing their faith was not one of the primary reasons for Ruth's declaration. She, instead, focused on her desire to stay with Naomi. The significance of this point had to do with her devotion to Naomi and her refusal to "turn to younger men" (1:16; 3:10). Her marriage to a different, unrelated, man would have meant that she would be attached to him, his family and estate which would separate her from Naomi – something she had promised to never do (1:16-17).

Despite what could have happened Naomi had Ruth's well-being in mind. Naomi understood that to find "security" for Ruth meant finding a husband acceptable to Ruth; someone who would be able to give her a son for perpetuating the name of Mahlon, Naomi's deceased son. When Ruth returned home in the morning (Ruth 3:16-18), Naomi immediately asked how things went. Naomi still placed her hopes in men and not in women (Ruth 3:18).

According to Silber, Naomi and Ruth reached their goal in a very unconventional way. They consciously skirted the boundaries of accepted social rules; they cancelled the taboos delineating the possible and appropriate behaviour for women –for instance, a woman is defined by her husband/ son, and finds her completion and value only through them (Silber 1999:106).

Marrying Boaz is a means to an end for Ruth, that is, to become socially integrated and cared for. This brings us to a consideration of Ruth's marriage.

10. Ruth chapter four: Ruth's marriage and the birth of a son

Ruth offered herself to Boaz at the threshing floor and Boaz, without resisting the offer to marry her in the name of the "*go'el*" (redemption) which, according to the biblical law, does not include such a marriage (Leviticus 25; 25-30, 47-55; Jeremiah 32; 1-5; and Numbers 35; 12, 19-27). The marriage of Ruth and Boaz

depended on the levirate law, which could not apply to Ruth, but Ruth had done everything to make it possible.

This is the end of the Ruth narrative. The story ends on a harmonious note. There is a new beginning for Ruth and Naomi. “Love is *hesed*, a generous act that goes beyond any legal formulation because it surpasses legalism” (LaCocque 2004:108).

The story of Ruth concludes with the traditional cultural ideal that problems of economic survival are eliminated by marrying a rich and prominent man in the society. For those who are engaged in a struggle for daily bread the call of the book of Ruth, seen through women’s eyes, can help to affirm women’s lives (Sakenfeld 2003:42).

For the purposes of the present investigation, on the one hand, the story of Ruth may be regarded as being positive for Anamongo women. Some scholars (cf Masenya 2004: 86-89; 2009:126-150 Julie Chu 1977:50-51); Nadar 2001:171; Weems1988:23-24; Trible1978:166-199; Nadar 2001:159-175; Sakenfeld 1999 and others) find in Ruth a model of a woman taking a decision and an initiative to support her family(Masenya 2004b:53), the story of God’s power and faithfulness working in a particular way, irrespective of the gender or ethnicity of the vessel being used (2004a:89). Ruth’s story is one of “a subversive character in that she subverts gender and ethnic boundaries through her actions” (Nadar2001:171). Ruth has a revolutionary message because it points toward solutions marked by *hesed*, that is, generosity, compassion and love. According to the book of Ruth, the centre of the Torah is *hesed* - love. One agrees with LaCocque (2004:27) that:

Love redeems everything. Then the impasses open up, the foreigner is no longer foreigner, the widow no longer a widow, the sterile woman (so considered) gives birth, the lost property is returned to the family or the clan, the interrupted story resumes its course and is returned by the advent of “David”. More profoundly, the Law is no longer a means of control and power (at times of manipulation), but the instrument of peace, reconciliation, and equality.

Ruth chooses insecurity but places herself under “the wing” of Israel’s God. She loses everything in order to gain everything (LaCocque 2004:35).

The value of Ruth as women’s literature is precisely that it renders visible what is usually invisible. Naomi and Ruth, as women of independence and initiative, respected as such by their men, are not exceptions to the Israelite rule, but examples of the rule that only the women’s perspective of the book allows us to recognise (Bauckham 2002:10).

The story certainly presupposes social and economic structures that make it very difficult for a woman to survive without a male provider. From the death of Elimelech (Ruth1:3) onward, the story adopts the perspective of Naomi and subsequently Ruth. It concerns their struggle to achieve “security” (Ruth1:9; 3:1), which is finally accomplished by Ruth’s marriage and the birth of her son (Ruth 4:7).

On the other hand, and with specific reference to Ruth 3, the story of Ruth is that of woman who believes that the only way for women to survive in a patriarchal society is through her relationship to a man, particularly in marriage.

The book of Ruth is among the popular books of the Bible that are read by women. On account of its inclusion in the Bible, which according to traditional Christian faith is regarded literally as God’s word to God’s people and thus infallible, the book of Ruth cannot be challenged. For these women, no matter what Ruth’s actions were, the story is affirming. “The concluding chapter of Ruth reminds us of the context in which women’s initiative for economic survival is set” (Sakenfeld 2003:41). The circumstances may differ from one place to another, one culture to another but “it remains exceedingly difficult for women’s independent initiative to succeed in those settings where men control most of the economic wealth”. With regard to what is happening today in our society, to focus on the happy ending to Ruth’s story, that is her marriage to Boaz, a wealthy man, and the subsequent birth of a son, the grand-father of the great King David is not altogether helpful. As Sakenfeld argues, “the story of Ruth concludes with the traditional cultural ideal that the problems of economic

survival are eliminated by marriage to a rich and prominent man in the society. At the same time, I believe the story as a whole honours the ongoing struggle of women in every age for whom the ending of Ruth 4 never becomes a reality” (Sakenfeld 2003:42). One applauds Ruth’s independence to do whatever she thought was good for her (1:16) and (3:9) not by blindly following what other people would do for her or advised her to do.

The story of Ruth however, can make women understand God’s ways of acting in our lives. It is a story of God working in a hidden and mysterious way to transform people lives. However the successful ending of Ruth, in the context of poverty, HIV and AIDS, violence against women in our church and our patriarchal culture, Ruth actions and her way to reach such happy end must be challenged for women’s wellbeing in the Congolese society today. Women must find their way, in or outside of marriage, to attain their wellbeing including that of their family realising that God is at work to help them succeed.

This brings us to an African woman’s reading of Ruth in the equatorial region context found in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

AN AFRICAN WOMAN'S READING OF THE BOOK OF RUTH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EQUATORIAL REGION OF THE D.R.C.

1. Introduction

“African Christians hold the Christian Bible in awe as the word of God written directly to them and specifically for them. They do not dwell on a passage as somebody else’s text to be read and analyzed; rather, they see the text as intended to provide them with a framework through which to look at their own lives. They immediately appropriate particular texts with a view to understanding what they expect from them.” (Kanyoro 1999:21)

The book of Ruth is a beloved one on the African continent because it appears to have something for everyone in Africa. Africans read this book in the context in which famine, refugee status, tribal or ethnic loyalties, levirate marriages and polygamy are not only ancient biblical practices but the normal realities of today (Kanyoro 1999:22).

The book has inspired many scholars according to their contexts. Some have viewed it as a positive story that empower women but others have found in the book, a story that marginalises women as women are expected to play according to the patriarchal roles, a book that “idolizes marriage” as the only way through which a woman can survive. Ruth is a story of a woman who believes that the life of a woman has to tie in with that of a man through marriage for her to secure respect and find economic support.

In the context of the D.R. Congo, beset by migration, economic problems, sexual violence, female prostitution, unemployment, poverty, war, unstable

political systems, religious conflicts, cultural tensions and gender inequities which affect women and girl children, heterosexual marriage becomes the only way in women's views to provide them with security. The story of Ruth and Naomi is a story of women facing many struggles in life, women who think that they cannot survive in the world without men. Despite the observation that their lives were full of potentialities, it appears that these did not mean much without a man on their side.

From an early age, the Anamongo girl child becomes well-informed about marriage and how to satisfy her future husband. Anomongo women are a product of the Congolese culture that teaches them what it means to be a woman and the responsibilities that accompany womanhood.

How does one begin to describe the current situation of Congolese women? Women who live in a country that presently ranks among the world's poorest countries despite incredible economic potential? What can one say about a country with no political stability and the many armed conflicts that have caused much bloodshed in the country for over nine years? In this situation that affects the general Congolese population, what can one say about the status of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo? These female citizens who have to leave their village, religion, ethnic groups and travel to big cities in search of life and survival? Women who are most of the time forced into prostitution and/or marriage to an unknown man with a view to him taking care of her family's needs? What has the book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible to offer its readers in such a situation? In the following paragraphs, we glimpse, albeit briefly, how patriarchy has shaped and continues to shape the lives of women in the equatorial region of the DR Congo even as we will venture to re-read the story of Ruth informed by the context of these women.

2. Women within the D.R. Congolese patriarchal society system in the equatorial region

As already said, the equatorial region is the one in which patriarchal values, are still strongly entrenched. Women are only considered as male possession, that is, their fathers' or their husbands' property. Patriarchy also implies patrilocality through which a newly married woman is expected to leave her own village to go and settle at her husband's home. A woman was not supposed to own any property, either from her father's or her husband's households. Property could be owned by the male because the sons, particularly the lastborn sons were expected to stay with the clan forever.

As in the society of biblical Israel, women were almost exclusively confined to the home wherein they had the primary role of being household managers and performing wifely and motherly duties (cf. Proverb 31:10-31). In the equatorial region's patriarchal society women are not regarded as equal partners to men, but rather as servants to men. The women were, and still are, expected to be humble, patient, obedient and hard-working while men are to make the decisions for women to implement. Men did not tolerate women who questioned their decisions or disobeyed them. Women were never allowed to play traditional men's roles (e.g. that of being a chief and a provider of family). Women were born to be wives through heterosexual marriage unions and for the procreation of sons who belong to their fathers. Even today, it is common to hear people utter the phrase, "*mwana ya bato* (the child of the people.⁸)" "The woman was looked upon as the vessel of life or a fertile field in which a man

⁸ Literally, it says "the child of people". This is a common saying from the mother to her family. It means that the woman or her family have to take care of the children and protect them because they do not belong to their family, they are someone's children. A woman is just an instrument used by a man for providing him with progeny. Her work is that of a garden and when bad things (sickness, death...) happen to the child, she is the first to be condemned and can even be chased from the marriage.

planted his seed” (Wasike1992:102). “Children were seen as the glory of marriage, but that glory was first and foremost the glory of a man. The barren woman was considered a dead-end and useless to the community”(Wasike 1992:103).

Many women in traditional patriarchal societies were not allowed to be educated because, according to society, it was not important to spend the family money on someone who would soon leave the family to go and serve another family. The woman was both a man’s possession as well as his worker; both in the house and in the field. Once married, the woman became her family-in-law’s possession. Because the family of each future husband was expected to contribute towards the dowry of the bride-to-be, everyone in his family had a say in the woman’s life even as the bride became the family’s possession after her husband’s death. Something akin to the content of the South African Northern Sotho proverb interpreted by Masenya: “*Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, literally, a woman's grave is at the home of her husband”, which implies that the death of a husband is not supposed to separate a woman from her in-laws. In both cultures (ancient Israelite/Jewish and African), the death of the husband was not supposed to release the widow from the husband’s extended family.” (Masenya 2004c:50).

In the Anamongo traditional culture, even to today, after a husband’s death, one of his brothers is expected to take care of the widow and the orphans. The practice is becoming less used nowadays. We will return to this observation at a later stage.

As a wife, the Anamongo woman is expected to be strong and carry out household care and agricultural purposes. A lazy woman is the object of mockery from the society and the husband had to look for a second wife to support her. In the field, while the man was engaged in clearing land to till and prepare them, heavy work requiring physical strength and sometimes requiring travelling in undeveloped wilderness areas still open for new developments, the woman looked after planting, maintenance and harvesting. Apart from that, she

could engage in crafts, including pottery, basketry, fabric dyeing. There was no absolute rule regarding the sharing of crafts between men and women. Women were sometimes engaged in small businesses selling field products and pottery in local markets.

A woman was given in marriage by her parents at a very early age. A virgin has no problem getting married in Anamongo culture. Sexual education is given early to the girl child. “The girl’s sexual activity was regarded as of capital importance” (Beya1992:157). A girl is supposed to come into marriage sexually prepared. She is shown by her mother or older sister how to please a man sexually. With such experience, Anamongo women are some time regarded as prostitutes in the country because they know about sex and they are not ashamed to talk about it.

Until now, the image of women in the Congolese culture was first and foremost, that of a mother, then a wife. However, irrespective of how important and respectable these functions were, a woman’s personality and aspirations cannot be captured only by her capacity to be a mother and / or a wife, especially if they have a dependent status.

The woman's fundamental role of wife and mother meant that the worth of women was judged by their capacity to produce children for their husbands. Motherhood was respected and honoured. The desire to have many children, especially sons, was strong despite the dangers of childbirth. This demand for children was rewarded with security.

The emphasis on marriage and motherhood among women in the Congo, particularly in the society of the equatorial region, does not contribute to the development and independence of women. For better or for worse, being married is the expected life for women of this region.

In the following paragraphs, we now examine the situation of widows, barren and unmarried women.

3. Widow, unmarried and childless in the Anamongo society

In many African countries and especially in the DRC, widowhood is a status associated with stigma and shame⁹. Often within the traditional Anamongo setting, the word for widow means sorceress, witch or prostitute. In some cultures widows are seen as an "evil eye" or "ill-luck". Their low status leaves them vulnerable to violence, including sexual violence, abuse and murder. Mourning and burial rites further degrade widows. Among the Anamongo ethnic group, traditional practices, such as the custom of "ritual cleansing" through sex, and "widow-inheritance" or "levirate" are still practised. Other harmful traditional practices include hair shaving and scarification, as well as prohibitions on dress, diet and social mobility. While in the patriarchal society males are often accused of being the oppressors, all such rituals are monitored and carried out by females who should protect the widow. Nevertheless they are part of the patriarchal culture.

Losing a husband is viewed as something that can contaminate other women. This necessitates purification because it is believed that the spirit of the deceased husband stays with the widow until certain rites are performed to separate them. This separation is needed so that she can be safely passed on to another man. The unspoken assumption is that a woman must remain married (Oduyoye 1992:15). When the widow does not behave as the society would like her to, the society interpret such behaviour as disrespect for the purification ritual. It has become a big conflict between indigenous cultures and the church which is opposed to the purification ritual. "Although the church has intervened to take over some rituals in order to forestall abuse, the African Christian widow

⁹ In the Anamongo society, the death of the husband is mostly connected to the wife. She is viewed as the one mainly responsible for her husband's death. She is questioned all her life by her in-law's and by the society. All her acts and behaviour are questioned. Being in relation to her may become contagious to other women because she is carrying death within her. She is viewed as a man stealer by other women.

still remains handicapped in terms of finance and property inheritance. If the widow is not in paid employment, or has no means of steady income, she is thrown into penury which goes against Christian principles. In this respect, the church appears to be “helplessly silent” (Nwachuku 1992:69).

In many countries, even where the domestic law prohibits it, male relatives of the husband chase the widow from her home, take the land, the property and even the children, justifying such actions under customary and traditional laws. Widows thus become landless and destitute, becoming vulnerable to other forms of exploitation. Their coping and survival strategies often include withdrawing their children from school, having to depend on child labour, becoming beggars and getting involved in prostitution.

A woman without a husband, then, is discriminated against by the prevailing customs and she has no value in the society (Salayumbu 2010:1). Nowadays, she can be respected only if she occupies a position of authority. Nonetheless, any man can try to make sexual advances or abuse her. For a woman to have children in her parent’s house without being married is common today in the Anamongo society. However, the young woman is viewed as a prostitute and causes shame for her family. It is not common to find a woman living alone with her children without a husband or a man on her side because if so she will have no social status.

In the traditional Congolese culture, as it was in the time of Ruth, the widow of a man was “inherited” by the younger brother or assigned to the closest relative, except on refusal on the part of women. If she refused she was abandoned and chased from the family and her father had to pay back the dowry. Today, because of poverty and, influenced by capitalism, the accumulation of wealth by individuals has become the norm and thus widows and orphans are less frequently supported by their paternal families. Instead, the woman who loses her husband is likely to be defrauded of her property by her husband's family.

When taking all the property, the family of the deceased uses the customary rules as grounds that the inheritance belongs to his family. Women, unaware of their rights or afraid to confront their husbands' families, find themselves particularly vulnerable. The remarriage of a widow is not an easy option among the Anamongo people. Similarly in Masenya's context as she states, "Within the context of monogamous heterosexual marriages, widowers unlike widows can remarry easily after their wives' deaths. This is a hard exercise for widows who, in some cases, are not expected to remarry outside the household of the deceased husband"(1996:88). A widow becomes an object of sexual satisfaction for some married men. They use them in exchange of support for her and her children.

In the Christian church, a widow is regarded as a person in need. Being abandoned by her in-law's family and the society, the church becomes her only shelter. As it is written in the scriptures, God cares about widows and orphans (Psalms 68:50; the law given to Deuteronomy 24:19-22; 26:12). Many widows spend most of their lives working for the church. They are present in church activities. In the rural areas, they are the ones providing the pastor's house with water, wood for fire and so on. In short, they are among the most active women in the church because they believe that God is their Husband, the only one who provides for and cares about their needs and the needs of their children. Ruth and Naomi are in a similar situation, after losing all they had in their lives; God appears to have been the only solution for them. Although Naomi called herself "Mara" bitterness (1:20-21), she nevertheless decided to return to her home country because she heard that her God had blessed God's people there (1:6).

Despite the observation that the church has become a shelter for widows, most of them are victims of degrading practices while the church remains silent. At times, they are even encouraged by church members to be obedient to their in-laws so that they can be taken care of by them. As Kanyoro (1999:22) comments:

Many churches applaud Ruth for her faithfulness to her mother-in-law, and they consider it normal that Elimelech's relative Boaz should care for Naomi and Ruth. They justify the levirate marriage and use the text to enforce widow inheritance, the African form of levirate marriage. They glorify the fact that Ruth gives birth to a son, virtually seeing this as the emblem of her true womanhood and the key to her acceptance in a foreign land among the family of her dead husband.

With the above in mind, engaged in the church activities, some widows occupied leading places as women leaders and so they accompany the pastor when visiting church members or attending church meetings. In the process, they become sexually abused. The situation arises where pastors have to spend more time with the women leaders, most of whom are widows because it is argued that they are more free in movement than married women. This situation has created a big conflict between widows and many pastors' wives. Having no choice for their survival and that of their children, they persevere through such relationships.

Unmarried women fall within the same category. Being alone is perceived by the woman and the society as a "defect", bringing sometimes a feeling of frustration and gloom.

Within the patriarchal culture, a single woman is viewed as the ultimate disgrace and a sign of divine disfavour. The blame for the latter falls on the woman. An unmarried woman is viewed by society as not being well educated by her parents, behaving inappropriately as a prostitute or even as a witch. God is the only one who can provide her with a husband. Unmarried women do not have any protection by the law. As Beya (1992:163) informs us:

Nowhere in Africa does the law provide for the protection of unmarried women. When these women are asked to express themselves, then, or to make their own decisions about their lives, they are uncomfortable. After all, their society is ruled by the "marvellous" legislation of the male! When they attempt to define their situation, their natural sensitivity readily inclines them to spiritualize it, or

to allege sentimental or economic reason for it. Their unmarried state of life wins them no respect from others.

In the Anamongo culture, a single woman is called “*ndumba*”.¹⁰ In the past, in the Anamongo society, it was difficult to find an unmarried woman. Nowadays there are many instances of unmarried women cohabiting with men. Such a situation brings shame to the woman and her family and she becomes categorised as a prostitute. According to Beya (1992:170), being unmarried today has three different forms of implications for African women. She talks about the psychological, economic and cultural impact.

Psychologically, an unmarried woman no longer feels accepted, but only tolerated, lives in a state of continual tension, and seeks at all costs to be protected by someone. Her situation can sometimes result in psychosomatic illnesses like neurosis, depression, hypertension, gastritis, or to certain sexual deviations like prostitution.

Economically it is the custom in African tradition that a woman has to be maintained by a man. However, unmarried women find themselves in a society that is increasing poverty -stricken, in which one marital spouse can no longer provide for the needs of many other persons. Thus, an unemployed single woman sees herself condemned to a life of material mediocrity. She thus becomes easily tempted to engage in prostitution and in this way to find man/men who can provide for her needs.

Culturally, while being unmarried is tolerated in some African countries, childlessness is definitely not. This increases the proliferation of single-parented families consisting of mothers only. Her situation of being mother without being

¹⁰ Literally “prostitute”, according to the Anamongo tradition, every single woman was called *ndumba*. The meaning of the latter designation does not necessarily refer to a prostitute in the conventional sense of the word but to the fact that the woman concerned, does not belong to a specific man. Previously, being called *ndumba* was not a problem for a single woman as it is today.

married often obliges her to undertake hard work outside the home in order to be able to support her children.

The preceding discussion clearly indicates that unmarried women are not considered as complete human beings who are equally created in the image of God. They, like widows have to endure many struggles in life.

Based on my own experience as a single minister who worked in both, the city (2005) and the rural area (2007-2008), within the Congolese Christian church, a single woman is viewed as incomplete. Quoting Genesis 2:18, it is commonly preached that God does not want a woman to be alone. She was created to be the man's helper. She has to leave her parents and engage in verilocal marriage. If women are not married by a certain age it is believed by the Anamongo peoples, to be the result of a curse on her family, the work of the evil spirits or the result of witchcraft or even as a punishment from God. Therefore many single women spend days and nights in the church, committing and re-committing themselves to God so that they can be blessed with husbands. They move from one church to another in search of a marriage solution.

Ruth is the main biblical character that provides these women with a model. To them, she is an example of a woman whose commitment to God is rewarded by the blessing of not only becoming a wife and a mother, but of becoming the grand-mother of the great King David! Anna, Esther, the Woman of Worth described in Proverbs 31:10-31 as well as Ruth, are regarded as models of a good woman, who, having spent more time with God, were given everything they needed. Ruth, in particular, has become to these women, a model of a good, strong and faithful woman. She is a model of hope, a woman who, even in a foreign land, obtains the blessing of a husband from God

As Masenya wrote, "Naomi's concern about the future of her daughters-in-law is also worth noting. Though our modern women's liberationist views may quickly lead us to judge her as patriarchally oriented, we should appreciate her concern for the future of her daughter-in-law" (Masenya 1996:88).

With regard to the Congolese context, one could say that Naomi was doing the right thing. In the Anamongo context, the mother-in-law plays a significant role in the marriage of her son and the life of her daughter-in-law whether her son is alive or dead. Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their home countries, and specifically, their mothers' houses so that they could find new husbands.

As I have already elaborated on the “mother’s house” instead of the “father’s house” in chapter three of this dissertation, I would like to point out that in the context of equatorial region, emphasis is placed on the mother’s house rather than of the father’s. Once married, should anything happen to her, the woman is the mother’s child. In case of her acting differently from the expectations of the patriarchal status-quo, her mother would be quoted as having been responsible for her “deviant” behaviour. Her mother is thus blamed for not having brought her up appropriately. She is then sent by her in-law family or husband back to her mother’s house (*ndako ya baboti or moboti*)¹¹ to improve her education. In the case of death, after all the rituals are done, she is taken by her mother for some days so that she can find comfort and peace of mind after her husband’s death. Even in the case of the birthing ritual, a woman is taken by her mother for about six months or more for relaxation. This was a traditional way of family planning.

Even in the case of childless marriages, men are usually at an advantage compared to women as the latter are the immediate suspects should there be no children from a particular marriage bond. Even if children are born, a new mother is expected to go through certain “cleansing” rituals towards her “restoration” after the desired, yet feared, birthing process (Oduyoye 1992:17).

¹¹ *Moboti* is the singular word for *baboti* meaning parent. When the word is used in plural even without specifying “*moboti ya mwasi*”(mother) because “*moboti*” means the one who gave birth that is the mother, in case of a bad behaviour, the latter is responsible of her daughter’s education.

Patriarchal divisions between women and men are prevalent even in the way they have to sit in some congregations. Men have to sit on the right side of the church building upon entrance and the women on the left. Sometimes, women are divided between the categories of “married” and “single”.

Whilst at her family- in-laws' place, Ruth realises that she is the only one who is able to cater for the physical needs of the family. Hence, Ruth’s decision to go out and glean in the fields (2:2). Ruth did not have any other option. Being Naomi’s daughter – as called by Naomi (2:2) –, Ruth becomes her hope for survival. According to the Anamongo tradition, the youngest is expected to take care of any adult in need. It is similar to Masenya’s Northern Sotho context concerning “parent-child relationships”. Her parents raise children with the expectation that they will take care of them in their old age (Masenya 1989:112). Childlessness is a major theme in Africa, as it was in the Old Testament. “A barren woman is regarded by her husband as a false promise, a dead end,” because children are seen as bringing parents security, wealth, place, and remembering them after they die (Wasike1992:103).

Within the Anamongo community, a barren woman is given children whom she could raise as her own¹². In other cases, a woman had to look for a young woman who would be able to bear children for her husband. Wasike’s comment is noteworthy: “whatever other qualities, gifts and talents a woman might possess; the inability to procreate reduced her to the status of a non-person. If a man was unable to bear children, however, his case was not tragic as that of a barren woman” (1992:103). The sterility of a man did not have any negative impact for him in the society. In cases of divorce, as children belong to the father within Anamongo society, they were removed from custody of their mothers, even if only a few months old.

¹² As an example for the above, my mother was given and raised by her aunt because the later did not have children.

Within the context of the church, Christian women are forced to live their lives accommodating tradition and the Christian faith. The Bible is believed to be the Word of God to God's people and is accepted literally. It follows that questioning the Bible is viewed to be sinful.

In addition to its importance as a sacred book, Nadar (2007:21) informs that:

The Bible is also viewed as a book that provides comfort and resources for daily living for African Christians. People look to it for daily inspiration. It is not uncommon for people to read a verse or a chapter each day for encouragement and comfort. The Bible is also used as a guide for daily living and spiritual direction. In other words, when Christians are faced with moral dilemmas they are likely to reach for the Bible to see what it has to say about the challenge they are facing. Often, when we go to the Bible, we go to it with pre-conceived ideas and biases, and sometimes there are a whole host of factors that affect the way in which the Bible has to be interpreted.

The Bible is the word of God written to God's people. It influences most women who are its most faithful followers (Kanyoro 1999:21). To emphasise this Masenya (2004:49) says that, "in many church settings, the Bible is still regarded as the norm for people's lives".

African Christians have a different view of the Bible. Apart from the fact that it is regarded as a holy book, it is also viewed as a Book of life. Its words are regarded as invaluable even as they guide believers in their daily lives. The same Bible though, has also been an instrument of oppression by those in power. The book of Ruth is one of those books that women must read and make it their own. In my view, the narrative speaks to the experiences of women especially in traditions where a woman has no place in society.

Finally, "the Bible is also considered a holy book capable of magical powers in and of itself" (Nadar 2007:14). For Anamongo women God is the only solution for their situation. As stated by Kanyoro (1999:21), "when they till the land with only a small hoe, when women make several trips to the river to fetch water for family use or search the forest for dry wood to use as cooking

fuel, or walk for miles to buy and sell their farm produce, they name God as their most faithful companion”.

Considering the situation described above, Christian women in DRC today find themselves in a very difficult position. The history of the church has been one of reinforcing the patriarchal values in society. In fact, in dealing with gender inequality, the church has usually lagged behind secular institutions. To be sure, the church has been involved in a great deal of social work, and women have been in the forefront of such activities. But in general, there has been a separation between women’s life in the church and their personal lives. The same person is expected to operate with two moral codes (Besha2010:4). The example provided by Besha (2010:4) for Tanzanian women is similar to that of Anamongo women. For example in rural areas, Anamongo women are often engaged in beer-brewing as one of the most productive commercial activities which meets their needs. However, this activity is usually condemned in my church (Community: Associations of the Evangelical church along the Congo River/CADELU) by church leaders in their Sunday sermons. Such condemnation arises from the belief that beer, which is naturally associated with drunkenness among men and prostitution among women, causes sinfulness. The accompanying fighting and quarrels from excessive drinking destroys moral values. Relevant questions asked in these cases are: What can women do in such instances? Does the church ever pause to enquire why those women are engaged in such activities?

Traditional values and norms, as well as the Judaeo-Christian tradition which we have inherited along with Christianity, have had a big impact on how men view women and define their roles in the Anamongo society. As we continue to engage with the book of Ruth if read through the lenses of Anamongo women, we now reflect on Ruth as a possible role-model for women.

4. Ruth, a model for women's relationships

The relationship between two or more women in the Anamongo society, in most cases, always ends up with fighting and separation. There is a saying in D.R. Congo that “women never build a village” meaning that women are not capable of successfully doing things together. This saying is a reality in the Anamongo society. With preconceived ideas that women's relationships cannot last, women usually work toward the destruction of each others' lives. They spend time engaging with less important matters such as fighting for men, neglecting each other at the expense of striving for their personal well-being. When it comes to deciding whether to choose between a man and woman for leadership purposes whether in the church or in the political arena, women always choose a man. Such behaviour does not help women to work together and strive for change in their situation.

Another type of destructive relationship between two women is that of mother and daughter-in-law. Being attached to her son, and with the expectation that children are supposed to take care of their parents in an old age, mothers-in-law usually view their sons' marriages as barriers to the realisation of such an expectation. As Masenya (1998:87) argues, marriage “forces the entry of an “intruder” who will disturb the harmony that existed between mother and son”. In addition, the daughter-in-law considers her mother-in-law as someone who has the capacity to disturb her marriage because she is in a controlling position. It is commonplace to find mothers who even choose wives for their sons. As In most African traditions the mothers-in-law have an important role to play in the marriages of their sons. It is commonplace in the Anamongo culture that if a mother did not give her opinion of a marriage between a son and his fiancée, the marriage may not take place. In order for a young woman to secure her place in marriage she seeks the friendship of the mother-in-law from the first day of her visit to her fiancé's home.

Many marriages have been broken because of the bad relationships that exist between this mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. In some cases, the wife has to leave the house and in other cases it is the mother-in-law who is chased away. Even if some relationships are good, a closer look will reveal tensions between the two women, tensions that are usually concealed for the sake of peace. In order to avoid such an unhealthy situation in present day DR Congolese society, young couples choose to stay away from the man's family (cf. also Genesis 2:24).

As Masenya (1998:87) rightly comments about the Northern Sotho culture:

The oppression of a younger, subordinate woman by an elder woman becomes easy to understand when one remembers that the elder herself has been in a subordinate position within her own household for a long time. Once she gets an opportunity to enforce her superior status on someone below her, she may use it to her full advantage. Indeed, it is indisputable that in Northern Sotho culture, women gain more status with age as well as with the length of time they have spent at their in-laws' place (*bogadi*). The older they become, the more responsibility they are entrusted with regarding "serious" matters. In most cases, they outlive their husbands (as Naomi does), and in the absence of the latter, they have a greater say in the decision-making processes of their families.

Bearing in mind what happens within the Anamongo society (and even in the Northern Sotho culture), the relationship between Naomi and Ruth serves as a good example of how women can co-operate rather than use such relationships to effect violence against one another.

In a culture where women depend on men for their socio-economic support, it becomes interesting to see Ruth abandoning any search for a young man as a possible future partner in order to bond with an elderly woman. Ruth does not use her economic position (edge) to dominate Naomi. Instead, she welcomes Naomi's knowledge of the customs of Israel and her wisdom in determining when and how to invoke them. "Even after establishing a similar (love, trust...) partnership with a man, the relationship between Naomi and Ruth

never changes. Contrary to other women's stories in the Bible, where women compete for status, power, or even for men (cf. the stories of Sarah and Hagar; Leah and Rachel; Hannah and Peninnah), the story of Ruth and Naomi testifies to the strength of women's bonding" (LaCocque1990:93).

One agrees with Masenya (1998:90) that:

The relationship of Naomi and Ruth, as it is presented in the book of Ruth, is an example of female love, mutual respect, and bonding, and models how women, particularly mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, should behave, especially in an African-South African context. Their story reminds women of all races, classes, and cultures that they should be united and should work together against all forces that inhibit the full experience of their God-given potential.

This last statement above is relevant not only in a South African context but in a total global context including, particularly, the Anamongo context. As Weems (1988:24) writes, "Ruth and Naomi's relationship typifies the special friendship that can often develop between women, despite differences in age, nationality, and religion. Ruth and Naomi's legacy is that of a seasoned friendship between two women, a friendship which survived the test of time despite the odds against women as individuals, friends, as women living without men."

In the DRC, women are increasingly becoming the providers for their families in accordance with the common saying: "the survival of the family lies on women shoulders". We now examine the next point in our re-reading of the Naomi-Ruth narrative through the lenses of the Anamongo women's experiences, that of women being family breadwinners.

5. Women, as family breadwinners

In the Congolese tradition men are supposed to provide protection and food for their families. Women in turn, provide the fire, fuel, water; they clean the

houses, process and cook food, farm and produce children. And like women anywhere, they are expected to show hospitality and joy to guests.

The economic crisis in Africa in general and the DRC in particular, has increased intensive informal activities. Some of these activities are illegal while others not. With respect to the latter, those involved in such shady activities still manage to evade the control of the treasury or the “taxman”. The informal business sector in the DRC is predominant compared to the formal sector of the economy. The economic crisis has resulted in many companies becoming bankrupt causing high unemployment rates thus compelling a significant portion of the population to eventually join the informal sector (Salayumbu 2010:1). To ignore the informal economic sector would be to misunderstand the DRC economic reality in general and the equatorial region’s urban reality in particular, as many people make their livelihoods through informal activities. The economic crisis also involves the impact of the role-played by women within the Congolese family. The latter does not depend only on the contribution and importance of man as father and provider of the family. Women are also involved in small businesses, even at night, including the sale of vegetables, such as, cassava, spinach, soap, oil, salt and so on.

As it was with Ruth and Naomi, struggling with emptiness, with no man to provide them with food, Ruth decided in agreement with Naomi to go out and work in the field for her survival and that of her mother-in-law (2:2-3). In doing so, she became Naomi’s provider. In the actual context of the crisis facing the Congo; women too have become their family providers. This has been a voluntary movement as a result of a common willingness to fight against poverty. It covers in general all women especially any woman living alone, with or without children, and with household dependents. Included in this category are widows, single mothers, divorced or abandoned women.

Nowadays, Anamongo women are doing what their mothers and grandmothers were doing before them. They assume a large portion of the work

(ploughing, sowing, harvesting, etc.) They breed poultry, goats and pigs, and also engage in trade. In fact, in combining several activities, women play an essential role not only in the family's subsistence, but also in supplying the urban centres with needed products.

It is interesting to note the self-confidence these women, especially from the rural areas, gain and thus acquire a responsible attitude. This awareness of the role of women and the significance of their work as the sole family breadwinners is one of the signs of a turnaround in the relations between women and men. Contrary to the advocates of tradition, the man is no longer the sole provider of the family; the woman has thus emerged from the shadows. Should we then be thankful to the economic crisis that has revealed women's very active role in maintaining the family also in economic terms? The crisis has revealed that she can become independent through her capacity to survive through her own efforts. Even though this is the situation of some Congolese women, especially married women, still they are expected to seek marriage for moral and psychological stability as well as identity and respect in their society.

Ruth too is presented as the breadwinner who goes out to glean in order to provide food for herself and for Naomi. Ruth was a resourceful woman. She did not accept poverty and death; she did not let the patriarchal system define her in terms of awaiting a man to provide for her survival. She took initiative to go and work hard in the field for her survival and that of her mother-in law (2:17).

The Anomongo women today, especially those who are married are the mainstay of their families. Through the help of some Non Government Organizations (NGO's), women have organised themselves into small or bigger groups to engage in activities such as micro-credit, small business, growing crops, breeding animals and so on. Being surrounded by the Congo River and the equatorial forests, these women have also become "fisherwomen". They dare to engage in traditional "male" activities for the well-being of their families. Women are absent, away from their families for many months especially during

the dry season when they are working in the fields and as “fisherwomen” because it is the only season during which large quantities of fish are produced and the forests become dry.

Using my own experience working with women on projects for development and empowerment, I have observed that Anamongo women, living in the rural area, work almost twenty four hours per day without rest! They have to wake up at three or four in the morning while men and children are still sleeping; in small groups they walk to the fields, located sometimes about 30 to 50 kilometres away from their villages. After spending all day working under the hot sun in the field, they arrive home tired between five and eight. They must then cook and take care of their families. Those who do not have grown-up children, have also to go and fetch water for cooking and bathing. With such conditions, it would not be exaggerating to argue that women work like slaves in their own homes! In the process, their children are left to their own devices, with no special care provided for them. With lack of parental support and guidance for homework, they invariably do not succeed at school. This situation breeds hopelessness in terms of their future. It affects the future of children who sometimes have to leave school and follow their mothers or have to start school at an advanced age rather than the usual school-going age of between 6 to 7 years.

During harvest time, the woman has to carry almost fifty or more kilograms of cassava, corn, potatoes, cooking wood, every day from the field to the market and sell these in order to provide clothes, soap, salt, and pay school fees for her children and even, at times, also take care of her husband’s academic needs. As in the example of Ruth, who worked in Boaz’ fields until evening, so is the experience of Anamongo women similar. “Her departure at the end of the day proves her endurance” (Caspi1996:171).

From my personal observation, what is surprising and sometimes painful for these women is that after many years of suffering and hoping that they may

be happy, once husbands complete their studies in the cities; most decide not to go back to the village. They then marry an educated woman from the city while the village wife is now a source of shame because of poor schooling.

Anamongo women who attend church are encouraged by pastors (men or women) to work hard as women who fear God. They have to follow the model of the “Woman of Worth” in Proverbs 31:10; a woman who rises early, goes to bed late, works hard although she has high quality servants, making clothes of a high quality! As maintained by Masenya (2004a:144), “no flesh and blood person” can carry out all these many activities. The crown is definitely waiting for them at the end. Women are advised to work hard through utilising every talent so that their husbands can be proud of them and praise them.

Bearing in mind the Congolese crisis today and the role women are playing, one can say that, women have become men and men have become women. An important question to ask then is: What is the significance of marriage if it has to always be viewed in terms of women’s economic survival?

Even though women are making huge efforts, and are becoming independent, some aspects that must be appreciated include the differing experiences of married rural and urban women. For instance, instead of working out in the fields, urban, women go out selling and doing business in the open market) where everything concerns money in the desperate competition to fighting economic insecurities. Unfortunately the sex industry also becomes a means of survival for many Anomongo women who enter prostitution occasionally or regularly. Indeed as Beya (1992:171-172) says, those who exercise the

oldest profession in the world, (including) ... the crowd of students who sell their bodies to their teachers to have their diploma and rich fellows who support them and sometimes help finance their studies, there are workers who occasionally give in to sexual harassment by a superior or a colleague to ensure their place, even in the informal sector, there are all those who complete a modest income or buy a favour in exchange for their charms.

Women do whatever is in their power so that their families can survive. As reported in the quotation above, sexual harassment is also a problem that some Congolese workers endure in order to gain employment or promotion. The bodies of women are exchanged for money. It is common to hear a mother telling her daughter to close the “shop” meaning to close her legs when sitting. In today’s Congolese society, it seems that it is easier for a woman to be employed than for a man as her body is easily accessed for her to get whatever she wants. It is also commonplace to find parents who send their daughters into prostitution in order to feed the family.

A “short-term”¹³ solution for women often involves selling what they have, that is, their bodies.

As Beya (1992:170) puts it:

One of the consequences of the institutionalization of corruption in our bureaucratic system is the prostitution of women. For example, take the primary school teacher who is passed over for promotion because she refuses her supervisor’s advances. Obviously some of her colleagues must be more compliant! We must say that, generally speaking, women are subject to a great deal of sexual harassment, in the workplace as elsewhere in their lives...In sum, we regard prostitution not only as the result of women’s unsatisfactory living conditions today, but as the cause of degradation of all African society.

The sex trade in the Congo especially exploits unmarried women and takes several forms depending on the context and the actors. Otherwise, there is the phenomenon called “bureau”¹⁴ literally “offices” which lies at the crossroads of traditional polygamy–prostitution and the system where a woman is kept by a wealthy man for sexual satisfaction and/or need for procreation. Even if

¹³ Commenting on Ruth, Sakenfeld uses the expression “short term solution “to refer to Ruth’s activity in the field. As she argues, “gleaning is a short-term solution, however, because the harvest season is short” (Sakenfeld 2003:33). In my view, this is something akin to women who avail their bodies for survival.

¹⁴ “Bureau” is a phenomenon that is happening in D R Congo. One man having two or more wives at the same time but those women can or do not know each other.

monogamy is the rule in the modern marriage context of the Congo, the phenomenon of “bureau” recalls the days not so long ago when a man could legally and legitimately take several wives. A common saying indicates “a man was not created to belong to one woman”. Because a woman’s survival depends on having a man in her life, one man can have two to four “bureau” at the same time! He can be traditionally married to all of them and each one of them can have children. Differing from the official polygyny, those women do not share the same house and in most cases, they do not know one another. This phenomenon is mostly practiced by politicians and business men (wealthy men). For such a man it is prestigious to have many women to satisfy his sexual needs.

As for the woman, she can expect financial security from her protector in full or in part. Some women also increase the number of their “protectors.” But the woman is nevertheless vulnerable in this partnership as she is dependent for her survival on the financial support of a man who has no legal obligation to her. Of course, if this union produces children, Congolese law requires the father to recognise them, but even then the male protection is normally directed to the offspring rather than their mother.

In chapter two of the Book of Ruth (cf 2:14-18), Boaz invites Ruth to eat with him, explaining how he was impressed that she accompanied her mother-in-law. Ruth ate her full and put the rest in a “take-home container” for Naomi. Boaz advised her to stay with his harvesters, and when she was thirsty she could drink from the water barrel. He warned his men not to disturb her, and she continued to glean until the evening. Such a situation can be compared to Anamongo women working in the field or finding favour in men’s eyes. Ruth found favour in Boaz’ eyes and she was invited to eat and drink with him. She was allowed to come every day to glean in his field for her survival and that of her mother-in-law. What one finds surprising though, is that the problematic relationships described above about the “bureau” relations, are encouraged by all family members’, including the Christian believers, as long as it is

remunerative. Similarly, with Ruth who was encouraged by her mother-in-law to keep in touch with Boaz, not to follow the young men or work in other fields (2:22). As argued by Caspi (1996:163), “Ruth knows that a young woman must find favour in the eyes of a field worker to ensure her success.” She had to stay closer to the man from whom she had found favour. Perhaps a “long term solution”, that is, marriage in our context, could come out of such an arrangement.

Another phenomenon in the DRC is that of “marriage par commission”. “Mariage par commission” meaning marriage through commission is a type of marriage with unknown men or unseen men. In most cases, those men are living in the city or abroad. In search of more submissive women belonging to the same ethnic group or speaking the same dialect, such men prefer to marry a woman from their own villages in their home countries. In the Anamongo culture, and in many other cultures in the DRC, a man was not allowed to marry outside his ethnic group or village.

This compares to Israelites of Bible-times as marriage with an “outsider” was prohibited by society according to the law (cf. Ezra 9:10). After the woman is chosen by the future in-law’s family, the two families agree and the dowry is given. As a man’s possession, and in order to avoid any sexual behaviour out of wedlock, in many cases the wife was given to her in-law’s family. It remained the responsibility of her father’s household to bring her to her husband in the city. For those in a foreign country, she had to wait as long as she and her family are taken care of by the husband, that is, until her husband summoned her. Some can even wait for about five to ten years to see their husband or never to see him at all!

We continue on to the next point that addresses the “marriage at all costs” crisis.

6. Ruth chapter 3: Marriage at all costs?

In chapter three of Ruth, Naomi speaks about Ruth finding security that is, finding a (rich) husband able to take care of both of them.

To reiterate, among the Anamongo women the belief that being single is a curse means that every woman has to be married preferably to someone able to provide for her and for her family. Generally speaking, it is believed that the value of a woman is found only in marriage. Knowing that sometimes it takes a long time before a marriage can occur, as according to the culture, a woman cannot be the first to propose love to a man; women have to be innovative to seduce a man and get his attention. Some even go to the extent of using witchcraft to lure the man into fall in love with them.

Something to be brought up to the attention of the readers is that, within the DRC context, no matter how rich or poor, educated or not a woman can be, being married is the most important thing in the life of a woman. One may like or not, An Anamongo woman's place is within marriage where she builds her life. Married or not, however, she is sexually active and as such, she cannot be comfortable without a man. Naomi's advice to Ruth to wash herself and visit Boaz at the threshing floor in the night is problematic.

She was advised to wait until the man had finished eating and drinking and then go, uncover his feet and lie down. What is equally surprising to a modern day reader of this painful story is that the Ruth, the daughter-in-law not only failed to question such dangerous advice, on arrival at the scene, and contrary to her mother-in-law's advice to wait until she was told what to do, Ruth "proposed" marriage to Boaz: "I am Ruth your servant, spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." (See Ruth 3:10) (Masenya 2007b:34).

Masenya goes onto say "Parents should be wary of being so overwhelmed by poverty to the extent of encouraging their girl children to use their bodies as objects for prostitution" (2007b:28).

Naomi's advice to Ruth is similar to that of Anamongo mothers today. They think and work hard for a happy ending for the life of their children especially their girl children. Contrary to the traditional belief where boy children were regarded as being of more value than girl children, today, with the desperate situation of unemployment, it is believed that a girl child can become the family provider more easily by being married or engaged to a man, particularly a wealthy one.

In the same way as Naomi decided to seek security for her daughter-in-law, Ruth, so many young women are sent by their mothers in search of a rich man to marry so that in this way she can support her family. Being unable to pay their children's school fees, clothes, even to satisfy their primary needs, young girls are taught at a young age how to seduce a man, how to cook for him, how to be attractive and make him comfortable in every way so that she can be a good candidate for marriage. However, it does not always matter whether the man is married or not, or how many women he has, the overruling objective is to obtain financial support and thus security.

In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I noted that the Anamongo women leave their villages and families to stay in big cities where they sell their bodies as they do not have any other alternative because of the ever present challenge of poverty. Unlike Ruth most of them do not have any family or friend to support them. Gaining a reputation for exciting sexual moves and having developed their capacity to seduce, such women engage in sexual relationship with any wealthy man. They are not concerned about the man's status, the age gap between them, the number of wives he has, their only concern is money, the means of survival. Living in a "foreign land" (having come from the villages to the cities), rural Anamongo women, with their origins as women from the equatorial region notorious for being skilled regarding sex, are usually not viewed as good candidates for marriage.

As stated by Yee (2010:132), Ruth is particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence in the field by the male farmhands, who may regard her as “easy” because she is a Moabite, one of “those” women”. From this perspective, Ruth the Moabite’s behaviour with Boaz on the threshing floor (Chapter3) illustrates such associations of “foreign” women with promiscuity. Consequently, Ruth’s brave actions may only be acceptable in the narrative because she is a foreigner. Yee comments that, “other aspects of Ruth’s sexual exploitation in the text work hand-in-hand with Ruth’s foreignness. Foreign women in the Hebrew Bible have a long tradition of erotic allure and sexual instability. Witness Madame Potiphar, Delilah, the queen of Sheba, Solomon’s foreign wives, Jezebel, the whole of Babylon, and the foreign woman in Proverbs. These women bring about the downfall of men through their sexuality” (Yee 2010:132). Outside of their context, the image of Anamongo women has become that of foreign women as described by the Bible. Levine (1998:87) considers that, “it is the reader’s task to determine whether the book affirms Ruth or ultimately erases her, whether she serves as a moral exemplar or as a warning against sexually forward Gentile women”.

This makes one think about the story told by Sakenfeld (2003:35). It concerns the story of the young woman from a destitute family who was approached by a “recruiter” to work as a dancer in a wealthy foreign country. Having accepted the offer, she announced the good news to her woman pastor who questioned her decision. Her answer was: “Ruth put herself forward attractively to a wealthy foreign man in hopes that he would marry her and take care of her family. I hope that a rich man will choose to marry me and take care of my family. God made things turn out right for Ruth and God will take care of me too.”

This is a story similar to many others that are questioned by feminist theologians’ with regard to their interpretation of biblical stories related to women. As argued by Kanyoro (1999:24), who hopes that women pastors will

be prepared in their sermons, to talk about the reality of women's experiences, making the connection between church, home as well as society.

The words of Sakenfeld (2003:37) come to mind here:

As we think about this story and the efforts of women to achieve longer-term economic security for themselves and their families, we come up against the limits to the solidarity of action between Ruth and Naomi. While the story of Ruth and Naomi may be a model of women acting on their own, women making decisions, women taking initiative, and women cooperating with one another..., these women lived within the overarching and undergirding context of a societal structure in which women's economic welfare was almost entirely dependent upon men.

With the above story of the young woman in mind, Sakenfeld argues that for women in a society like that of Israel, marriage (preferably to a wealthy man) was the obvious if not mostly the only way to escape an economically marginalised life. For most women around the globe, such a marriage is but a hope or a dream. Such a dream is inculcated by cultural traditions everywhere, whether through the expectations and planning by one's parents, or by fairy tales such as Cinderella (2003:37).

Where there is no rich man to provide security, young girls are engaged with sexual relationships with men who could be their grand-fathers in age. It is now common in big cities to observe the relationship known as "sugar daddy" (cf. Chapter 3). Old men suppose that young girls who are less than eighteen years old do not have multiple partners and are not as demanding as older women. In exchange for school fees, clothes, cellular phones, and food, young girls expose their bodies without any protection by their "service providers". These relationships are known and encouraged by some family members and end up sometimes with the girl falling pregnant and thus being rejected by the "sugar daddy". Kanyoro (1992:22-23) says that:

African women notice the age gap in the marriage between Boaz and Ruth. This is an issue of concern when related to child marriages and the sexual abuse of

women by men in power- a practice not absent in Africa. Critical reading by African women theologians poses questions about too quickly appropriating the text of the Bible. The story of Ruth underscores some of dilemmas of uncritically owning a biblical story. What is this biblical story used as a justification by African families who marry their young girls to old men? Such questions, generated by the life-experience of African women, pose a dilemma for basing liberation and the story of salvation on cultural practices which have the potential for denying women possibilities for “abundant life” (John 10:10).

Ruth agrees to visit a man that she met only some days ago and introduces her desire for marriage. Within the Congolese context, Ruth’s action would be qualified as that of a prostitute and foreigner. As Kanyoro has argued above, African families are giving their girl children away to marriage with older men. As previously noted, on account of the need to survive, the age gaps between the two people no longer matter. Irrespective of whether the girl is willing or not, if the father or the uncle has consented to the man’s family, she has to agree in the name of survival. Women educated or not, are increasingly the source of provision for the family. Generally speaking, it is supposed that God has given to them an easy way of gaining life. To reiterate, even if it means polygamy, it does not matter.

As postulated by Masenya, “In our world which idolizes marriage (cf. also the one which produced the Naomi-Ruth story), a world in which married women are not expected to have control over their bodies, it is common place to find women availing their bodies whether willingly or not, as coping mechanism to survive through marriage” (Masenya 2004c:58).

In the case of Ruth, she was in such an economically precarious position that security could only be found through marriage. Nonetheless her mother-in-law’s advice to make herself available to Boaz on the threshing floor in the night was not a good one. With the changes wrought by modernisation though, education provides a sense of security and confidence which helps women to battle against different odds they face in their everyday lives.

However, in the DRC, especially within Anamongo culture, marriage is still looked at as the means to security. Even the highly educated believe that marriage provides better emotional security than financial security does. They feel that even if financial security cannot be achieved through marriage the value of a woman, rich or poor, is related to marriage. Emotional and psychological security is what they are looking for through marriage.

As we continue to examine chapter 3, we need to look at women enduring an abusive marriage because of the need to survive.

7. Challenging the “marriage at all costs” mentality

It occasions a sense of wonder that women and young female adults still persevere through abusive marriages and/ or partnerships. However, the increasing rate of divorce among younger adults can also be accounted for by young women’s growing resistance to some of the reactionary definitions of womanhood. (Tohidi 2010:2).

Almost every woman in the DRC has suffered from physical violence at one time or another. Specifically, almost every Anamongo woman has suffered from spousal or partner abuse, whether physical, emotional, or sexual (Rukata 2010:11).

In the Anamongo culture, violence against women is not openly discussed or acknowledged. Rather, it is kept undercover by a tradition that “a man's home is his castle” and what he does there is of concern only to him and his family. This state of affairs operates in both urban and rural areas. Some men can even argue that: “a woman is like a child who has to be educated”. It was an accepted practice that a husband might physically cause bodily injury to his wife in the name of disciplining her to remain in her place. Furthermore, women whose husbands are often drunk are more likely to suffer from physical or sexual violence than women whose husbands do not drink.

Women who are subjected to traditional customs are being infected by husbands who have contracted HIV outside of their marriage relations. As already indicated, the women are culturally incapable of protecting themselves. In addition, by virtue of traditional land tenure laws, widows were not allowed to own or inherit land. In fact, they became landless and lacked sustainable livelihoods.

To overcome violence, women have created support groups to help one another. Sometimes, men see the power of such groups as a threat, and there are cases in which husbands have beaten up or threatened to divorce their wives if they continued to belong to such groups. The survey conducted on marriage and security shows a rise in women's power in that women are now becoming more confident about opposing any kind of domestic violence (Ministère du Genre, de la famille et de l'enfant 2009:24).

Within the family, as already mentioned, a married woman does no longer belong to her own family, but to that of her husband. With such a custom, the idea of remaining married at all costs, becomes practically inevitable. Despite the abuse that a woman bears, her mother advises her "to love and accept him" because she belongs to her husband. She must tolerate everything because a woman has a big "hearth" to support and is expected to deal with anything and everything.

Paul's teachings are very much alive in many churches in the DR Congo. In many conservative Protestant denominations, where women are taught to dress with modesty, and are not allowed to be ordained or hold official leadership positions, they are not accepted as part of the church assembly. Men have to decide for them while they must cook and serve meals. In churches where women and men have to sit apart so as to avoid temptation during worship in order to concentrate better, many women still consider abuse as the cross they have to carry. Women assume that is the way life is supposed to be. Most pastors act as if domestic violence does not exist in their congregation.

Some attribute the violence committed to their church members to the devil. In such settings, the devil usually gets blamed for sins committed deliberately by people. When violence continues without respite even after the church members' efforts at prayer and fasting, and performing rituals that are usually considered as easy recipes or magic solutions to various problems, the female victims are usually blamed for being not being good wives who take care of their husbands! The women may be condemned for lack of maturity in faith and Christian life. All their suffering becomes attributed to God's punishment.

Although sex work is largely considered illegal, communities still desperately resort to finding employment through commercial sex-work. Because sex work is considered illegal it creates difficulties for women to negotiate for safer sex, as they simply have no redress.

Within the church, women suppose that carrying a husband's name is a privilege for them, even if the so-called Christian husband does not always respect the marriage vows. The alternative, being single, cannot be entertained. Since being married is so highly valued, women are asked by the church to turn a blind eye to the infidelity of their husbands. Within their Christian background, women are taught never to say no to her husband's sexual advances except by mutual consent and only temporarily while they devote themselves to prayer (1 Corinthians 7:3). In such circumstances, what do African women theologians say to their fellow sisters concerning the above situation? These theologians and biblical scholars have done a great deal of work in terms of theologizing informed by African women's experiences within the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic (cf. Phiri, Haddad and Masenya (2003), Dube and Kanyoro (2004), etc). A noble task indeed in the context of the African continent that is ravaged by the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

The next aspect of consideration is heterosexual marriage – challenge in this time of HIV and AIDS.

8. Heterosexual marriage, a challenge in the time of HIV and AIDS

Keeping the trend of the preceding discussion in mind, I highlight Dube's assertion on the feminisation of poverty and how this leads women into the centre of the HIV and AIDS storm. Dube (2004:8) affirms the preceding observation that:

Due to centuries of gender constructions that have alienated most women from property ownership, professional skill development, career advancement, combined with a lack of control over their own bodies, gender violence and lack of decision making powers, women in almost all societies are among the most poverty stricken members. It follows then that if poverty contributes to the increase of HIV and AIDS, women will be the worst affected by this poverty-driven epidemic. As women are economically dependent on men, both for their own welfare and for the welfare of their children, a woman does not have the power to negotiate or say no to sex with her husband as it can lead to losing her and her children's economic support.

Most women know that their spouses are unfaithful and probably carry the HI-Virus. However, they are still not in a position to insist on faithfulness, abstinence or protected sex, "because of their subordination and for fear of losing their economic support. Even when they are able to support themselves, they still feel culturally and religiously bound to remain in such a relationship" (Dube2004:9). Because of such norms, married men who are sexually involved outside marriage feel that they have the right to unprotected sex with their own wives (Dube 2004:9). Dube concludes her discussion by saying that as a result of the HIV and AIDS-epidemic, heterosexual marriages have turned out to be "one of them most deadly institutions due to patriarchal distribution of power" (Dube 2004:9).

To recap, sex is also used as a weapon of domination. It is assumed that a married woman should not say no to her husband's sexual advances. "It is

further assumed that the day she said “I do” on the wedding day, she also said yes to have sex with her husband whenever he wants” (Dube 2004:13)

Nadar (2007:76), concerning the incidents on the threshing floor, comments about the issues HIV and AIDS saying:

Ruth’s actions in the threshing floor are dangerous and pose many problems in our HIV and AIDS contexts .In the context of HIV and AIDS that is ours today, many women because of no financial independence are also forced to go beyond the scope of the law to survive. They cannot simply survive on the “gleanings from behind”.

As in the situation of women today, women who on account of poverty whose children often go hungry and /or are chased from school, one may ask this relevant question: what could Ruth, a poor, foreign (Moabite) widow do in her situation? Nadar adds “Such was the economic situation in the time of Ruth and such is the economic situation even in our own times” (2007:77).

The fact that Ruth had to marry someone she did not know mainly for economical survival constitutes a precarious situation. She knew little of Boaz, other than that he was Naomi’s relative. Her situation reminds us of Anamongo women who have to get married to unknown and/or unseen men. In our context of HIV and AIDS this is obviously a very hazardous practice, especially since the sexual relationship does not occur within a context of mutual love and respect. “It simply occurs as a cultural law, or in Ruth’s case as an economic law” (Nadar 2007:71).

In the context of HIV and AIDS today, Ruth appears to be similar to a sex worker forced by poverty to go out and sell their bodies to rich and foreign men to ensure their survival and that of their children. With such behaviour, most of them contract HIV. The latter usually leads to AIDS and death as due to poverty, they are unable to take care of themselves even as they do not have access to drugs and good nutrition unlike the rich men who infected them. (Nadar 2007:80).

Speaking on the same subject, Kä Mana explores the reasons why the message of A (abstinence), B (be faithful), C (use condoms) in preventing HIV and AIDS may not lead to a change in behaviour when the concepts used in traditional Africa about masculinity are not taken into account. He writes that, “Commitment is seen as reducing men power, abstinence as an attack on his manhood, and condom use is up to remove his masculinity”(Kä Mana 2005:395). Within the context of Anamongo with the common mentality enshrined in the following saying, “you cannot eat a banana with a skin, eating the same food every day is not good for the health”, women cannot but be daily in danger of being infected. These behaviours in time of AIDS are harmful, especially to women.

Phiri (2008:8) commenting on the same subject says:

Today more women than men are infected with HIV. The disease has long been regarded as an infection primarily of men, but now more women are becoming infected. Sixty per cent of the infected adults are women. Thus now there are some 17.5 million women in the world infected with HIV and AIDS. 13 million of them live in sub-Saharan Africa. Teenage girls in sub-Saharan Africa are five times more likely to be infected than boys. The impact of the epidemic is particularly hard on women and girls as the burden of care usually falls on them. From being at the periphery of the epidemic, women today are at the centre of concern.

African women theologians highlight poverty, political situations and global economics as contributing to the immensity of the pandemic. Gender inequality and female subordination is, however, the main factor. According to Dube (2004:10), gender-based inequalities overlap with other inequalities such as social, cultural, economic and political, and affect women irrespective of their ages thus leaving women in the centre of the HIV and AIDS storm.

African countries of the sub-Saharan continent with their patriarchal cultures, value women through their fertility and fidelity while the men are free and even encouraged to have multiple sexual partners or to practice polygyny.

Most of the time, women's fidelity do not protect them. They get infected by their husbands for fear of being considered unfaithful, were they to insist on safe sex. Women are thus required to remain silent and ignorant of HIV and AIDS (Dube 2004:9).

Women have to accept the fact that their husbands can have multiple partners because as her provider, the husband can leave them without food or shelter. The second reason relates to the nature of AIDS as a primarily sexually related disease.

Despite the fact that AIDS and some other sexually transmitted infections ravage the continent; the Church is still hesitant in addressing publicly the issue of sexuality. Talk about sex remains a cultural taboo and regulated by patriarchal societal structures and in the process, even the church is reduced to silence. When someone dies because of a sexual transmitted disease, few will dare to speak out. As Dube (2004:8)

In the context of HIV and AIDS, Masenya (2007:37)) concludes by challenging women and men to be informed by thinking critically about how the Bible is used. She suggests three specific ways to effectively engage the Bible in the context of HIV and AIDS. Firstly, "it is by being very conscious about the dynamics of the context of the interpreter; second by taking this context seriously in our Bible translation processes and third by affirming the dignity of all people as human beings created in the image of God."

One can now conclude that, according to the African women theologians, heterosexual marriages, whether monogamous or polygamous, have become the highest risk factor for African women in terms of the possibility of being exposed to the HI-Virus. It is imperative that something is done by African women and men to review the interpretation of both patriarchal culture and the biblical tradition that highlights marriage as the only legitimate condition for women. Women or men should feel free to decide whether to get married or not. Marriage as a vocation is the next aspect to consider.

9. Marriage, can it be a vocation?

The notion of vocation, literally “call” from the word *vacare*, is at the centre of Christian spirituality. Vocation, in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, is linked with being summoned into a covenant relationship with God (Orsuto 2008:162). In the context of this study, I use the word “vocation” to talk about the call of every one to do what she or he believes is better for her or his life. As the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, each one should go on living according to his or her gift received from God. Relating to marriage, everyone must feel free to marry or not according to her or his conviction (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). We live in a diverse society, a society where not everyone has to be a doctor, a theologian, a musician, a teacher and so on. Such options should also be made available with regard to decisions to marry or not.

Ruth made an independent decision to engage with Boaz. Even though it was the norm at that time for a young woman to be married, Ruth decided on her own to propose Boaz to marry her. Although she was advised by her mother-in-law, Ruth was free to decide as made clear in the story by her voluntary decision to follow Naomi (described in chapter 1). Her decisions to go out and glean in the field in (see chapter 2) and (chapter 3) asking Boaz to marry her were her own. In my view, marriage has to consist of more than love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God's ordinance, through which God has chosen to perpetuate the human race in the context of mutual love and respect (Steil 2000:677). Marriage per se, however, is not what gives value to women to the extent that it should become a “must do” in their lives. For marriage to succeed, it has to be the result of a free will inspired by love for each other, that kind of love that joins people together in the sight of God and of people. Marriage also needs to offer financial security, a complementary emotional, spiritual relationship between those who choose to enter it.

With regard to the situation of the Congolese women today and the situation of women in the time of Ruth, one can say that not a lot has changed. Even though “Ruth proved that she can labour and take care of herself, Naomi in turn would like to see her in the house of a husband” (Caspi 1996:175). Naomi’s behaviour is similar to that of an Anamongo mother. Although a woman is wealthy and independent she is, apart from marriage, do not have consideration in the eyes of Congolese society. There is a common Congolese saying that, “*valeur ya mwasi eza bobele na kati ya libala, mwasi mwasi nde libala*” meaning that the value of a woman can only be found within marriage, a woman is a synonym of marriage. A woman can be educated, she can become a president but without marriage, she is nothing and cannot (unlike her male counterpart) be respected within the society. Even though, as we have seen, women are starting to become financially independent, they are still doing whatever they can, for the survival of their families; even enduring abusive marriages to retain the “value and respect” within their society.

An important question I ask as I conclude this chapter is: Can the Anamongo women be liberated from the patriarchal status quo that provides them with an identity, respect, value only when married? Can they ever feel free to decide whether to get married or not, and so choose how to live their lives as complete human beings created in God’s image (apart from men as husbands) like other women across Africa and the rest of the world? In the next chapter, we take a look at the conclusion and possible answers to these questions.

Chapter 5

TYING THE KNOT

1. Introduction

The aim of this study was to reread the book of Ruth with regard to the issue of women's security through marriage in the context of the experiences of women living the equatorial region, and in particular, the Anamongo women there. Through the rereading, the researcher has found out that, in the Congolese context, a context where people, especially women, are living within conditions of extreme poverty; a context where women have to agree to patriarchal norms that "idolize marriage" mainly for survival reasons, the story of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible concerning Ruth and Naomi's ways of seeking survival through marriage, would not be a helpful model for the Anamongo women today.

2. A Review of the five Chapters

In the preceding four chapters of this dissertation, I have tried to explore the situation of the Anamongo women with regard to the "culture of marriage" as their only means of survival comparing their situation, to some extent, with that of Ruth and Naomi.

In Chapter One I focused on the orientation of the present study. After engaging the problem statement, the hypothesis and the methodologies to be employed for the research, the purposes of the study, I explained the African patriarchal culture, which basically subjugates women to men, then taking the latter, as a point of departure for our critical study on women's identities that exist only in relation to men within marriage relationships.

With regard to the methods employed in this research, firstly, the narrative method enabled me to get deeper into the biblical text as it stands as

we tried to understand every movement and situation related to Ruth's way of seeking security through marriage with Boaz. Secondly, Masenya's *bosadi* approach helped me to critically approach a rereading of the book of Ruth. Through such an approach, I was enabled to have a better understanding of the African patriarchal system that makes women subordinate to men. The *bosadi* approach enables us to value marriage as God's institution and important to the life of those who decide to marry. We are also enabled to condemn the "idolization of marriage" as the only means for a woman to have an identity.

The *bosadi* approach acknowledges the integrity of the text by allowing the text, as far as it is possible, to speak for itself. It also helped me to make a parallel comparison between the Anamongo women and Ruth the Moabite in the Hebrew Bible. The positive and negative elements were found within the biblical text. The positive elements (e.g. Ruth's freedom to decide to go with Naomi contrary to her will, her initiative to go out and work, the bonding between the two women, among others) were highlighted and the negative elements (Naomi and Ruth's way of seeking security through marriage, Ruth's actions at the threshing floor, and so on) were challenged. The *bosadi* perspective helped us through our re-reading of the biblical text to come up with a more liberating reading in the context of heterosexual marriage within the DR Congolese context.

The main question of this study was: In light of the "idolization" of heterosexual marriage within the Anamongo people of the D.R. Congo, as well as the risks involved within such a view of marriage as well as the institution of marriage in our day, can the character of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible serve as a helpful model for the Anamongo women in their quest for liberative definitions of womanhood?.

With regard to the main question of this study, the hypothesis was proven to be correct because what was found out through this research is that, if read

from the perspective of the Anamongo women, the story of Ruth can offer partially liberating possibilities for Congolese women.

The study has confirmed that the biblical tradition contains both liberating and oppressive elements reinforcing women's subordination to men and men's domination over women. As already mentioned, the story of Ruth is liberating because it reveals the value (worth) of women within a patriarchal society. The story of Ruth highlights the significance of the family as an essential institution in the Judahite society. It portrays Ruth as a woman who appears to be an "independent thinker" (Masenya1998:88). Ruth, at least in the opening chapter, is a woman who challenged the patriarchal system of her time by committing her life to an old woman rather than to go back to her mother's house to find comfort in a husband of her own kind. She is pictured as a woman who cares about her family by going out to glean for its survival.

The book however, does not challenge heterosexual marriage as the only way for women to live a meaningful life. It portrays Naomi in her search for Ruth's security through heterosexual marriage and the birth of a son as women's destiny and way of survival. In my view, Ruth's action at the threshing floor appears to be similar to that of a prostitute, an action that is hazardous for women especially in our contemporary HIV and AIDS contexts.

In that respect, Ruth's character cannot be helpful to the Anamongo women in their struggle through patriarchy and poverty as well as their search for liberative definitions of womanhood.

Chapter Two provides an overview of women's situation in the equatorial region with regard to marriage. It showed that marriage occupies a special place in the DRC society especially among the Anamongo people. Marriage represents a fundamental aspect of women's identity that is viewed as providing them with security, respect, survival, and so on. Women are persevering and enduring abusive marriages; they are sacrificing their bodies through prostitution and other forms of problematic sexual behaviour. Women's

behaviours are shaped by the patriarchal norms as well as the problematic interpretations of the biblical texts. The patriarchal norms compel them to deny their own identity as women created in God's image.

In Chapter Three, the researcher focuses on the rereading of the book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible. It was argued that, regardless of the positive example that Ruth can provide for women as that of a woman taking decisions on her own, of two women taking initiative and bonding in their struggle for their survival, Ruth's behaviour of seeking security through marriage at all costs, is to be read critically. With regard to the Anamongo context, a context where women offer their bodies in order for a husband or a man to provide them with support and security, a context which sets great store by heterosexual marriage, Ruth's actions must be challenged.

Chapter Four entitled "An African women reading of Ruth in the context of D.R.C ", was an attempt to bring the two contexts together so as to come up with a more liberating biblical hermeneutic of the book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible. Similarities and differences between Ruth and the Anamongo women were made. In contrast to the Anamongo women, who think that freedom is something to be given for as a right without any struggle, Ruth is a woman with freedom of expression and decision, a woman who knows what she wants and fights for it; one who does not deny her identity even after being married. "Ruth is a woman who transcended cultural barriers and overcome gender separation" of her time (Caspi 1996:177). It a story of two women united without any regard to their race, classes, and cultures and who work together against all forces that inhibit the full experience of their God-given potential (Masenya 1996:90).

The two women act according to the patriarchal status quo. Nonetheless both are full of potential and initiative and are able to take care of themselves. All the same they indicate though, that they are capable of giving up everything for marriage!

Chapter Five focuses on the findings and conclusion.

3. Challenging patriarchal norms and other related injustices

From these discussions, I came to realise that the Anamongo women take the Bible as the Word of God for granted and that as such, they regard it as an infallible norm for their lives. This is in contradiction with many men and women liberationist scholars' readings of the same text.

The story of Ruth is that of two women who played according to the rules of the patriarchal game, a society in which women as widows, unmarried, childless are not regarded as human beings created in God's image. Irrespective of their patriarchally-oriented play, the analysis also revealed that Naomi and Ruth managed to "be agents of positive change" by taking their own initiative within a patriarchal society and thus managing to change their lives positively. Ruth worked in the fields the all day as Anamongo women do today so that she and her mother-in-law would not die. This consideration of others is to be encouraged.

From the biblical patriarchal view of women to that of Congolese patriarchal one, this study observed similar ways for women to seek security and survival that are no longer helpful for women today. I noted that women are discriminated against and are made victims in the name of culture and religion, a victimisation that is frequently caused by misinterpretation of the Christian Scriptures, by ignorance or by just fulfilling the patriarchal norms.

With regard to the context of our study, focussing on Chapter 3 of Ruth, the research proves that the story of Ruth and Naomi would not empower Congolese women from the equatorial region. In Chapter three of the dissertation, we discovered that Ruth has played according to the rules of the patriarchal game. Seen in the context that foregrounds marriage at all costs, what Ruth does at the threshing floor, ambivalent as it is, with glaring sexual undertones, cannot empower modern women from the equatorial region, where young women even the married ones, engage in sexual activities so that they can

provide for their families' needs. Women's bodies are almost being sold for the price of bread. In most cases, young women are coerced by their mothers to accept being married to a man who is two or three times their age, but a wealthy man who is able to take care of her and her family.

This research has revealed that the main cause for women's problematic behaviours is poverty, the patriarchal norms that marginalise women, the androcentric church tradition and women's resulting lack of self-esteem. These three factors are the basic factors that define the situation that women face in the Anamongo society.

The first factor is poverty caused by the economic injustice and discrimination. Women have to decide and find their way out of the patriarchal system that has put them in a situation of dependence on men. Even though they can choose to be married, they must think about surviving if the husband dies so that they do not end in a similar situation in which Ruth and so many other widows in the DRC find themselves in because they will be economically independent. This can happen only by becoming educated, just like the males in the community and family, and taking initiatives.

However, there are still many families and communities who deny women the opportunities which are given to men to receive education, hence they always have to be dependent. Some women (like Naomi) in some cultures are still not allowed to inherit property. The situation of poverty and HIV and AIDS is a call for women to challenge and revisit this situation.

Cultural practices are another factor. Women have to begin to re-interpret cultural practices that bring with them more harm than good. Being forced to sleep with one's relative, should not be a requirement, even for the continuation of a family name, since the only way in which the family name can be continued is through male children. What happens if a woman only gives birth to daughters? Does she have to continue giving birth at risk to her life until she gives birth to a son? Does she have to be divorced or to be joined with another

woman in polygyny as is prescribed by the prevailing culture? These practices need to be recognised and exposed for what they are: as dangerous ways to advance the male cause at all costs!

Another aspect to consider is how people become oppressed or more vulnerable due to race and/ or ethnic identities. Ruth was more vulnerable because she was a foreigner. She could not survive without a Judahite husband. The strike against her was not only that of being a widow; she was also childless, a foreigner, and of course a woman. Even today these same factors continue to hinder progress towards women's empowerment, even as some of these contribute to the rapid spread of HI-Virus.

So far, it can be argued that poverty, patriarchal norms and other social injustices, are serious concerns for the present and future generation of women in both the church and the DRC society in general. There has to be a change in the interpretation of biblical stories so that as much as it is possible, patriarchal norms, with their devaluation of women's self- identities can be resisted and dealt away with .

As described by Fewell and Gunn (1990:105), in spite of appearances to the contrary, God is in the book of Ruth because "God can be found somewhere in the mixed motives, somewhere in the complicated relationships, somewhere in the struggle for survival, anywhere there is redemption, however compromised." To do acts of redemption is to do God's work in the world. A liberationist reading of Ruth consequently demands that the people of God create a new kind of community. We are to do that by redeeming, liberating and freeing those who are usually excluded because of marginalisation, exploitation, or other types of oppression.

According to what we have read, women's voices are still not allowed as that of men to speak in terms of cultural, political or religious discourses, even within minority and victimised communities where they are directly affected they have little say in what needs to be done. Christian women in Africa today

find themselves in a very difficult position; in the situation that I and others have experienced. We have seen that the history of the Church has been one of reinforcing the patriarchal values in society. Even though the church in the D.R. Congo, especially in the equatorial region, has made great strides in the last ten years to ensure greater participation by women in its decision-making bodies, it is not enough.

With the above view in mind, it is impressive that today, women nurture sustaining friendships with other women like mothers, grand-mothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, neighbours, co-workers, members of the same faith community or support group. “Women gather for fun and for comradeship. They turn to each other in time of joys and pain; they celebrate life and mourn death. Together they work for a world where it is sharing, not winning, that matters. And in the deepest of those women’s circles, it is a God who transcends pettiness and human divisions who provide the staying power” (Kam 1995:119). “Women have begun to make themselves felt and respected within the society. Women are as human as men. So, it is together as women and men that we should seek and work for the good of the human community” (Fanusie 1992:154). Kanyoro(1999:23) commenting on the same subject emphasises that:

Many women are now organizing to protest female circumcision, early childhood marriages, food taboos and other harmful cultural practices; and women are using the Bible in these protests. Church women no longer limit themselves to “spiritual matters”, as used to be the case. African women are asking something new from the theological debate in general and from the African theology of enculturation in particular. They are refusing to accept the argument of “our culture says so”.

Masenya, in one of her articles related to HIV and AIDS (2007:27) argued that, “the Christian woman is caught between the hammer and the anvil; African culture has its definitions of femininity/masculinity, but also its specific expectations on the relationships between women and men, it is a patriarchal culture in which the husband determines the identity of a married woman, he is

the owner of the female body”. According to her, the Bible continues to win with authority over the lives of many women by the way it is being interpreted by African women and male preachers. The sexist interpretation of the Bible has become a hard lot for many an African woman. Thus the African Christian has become vulnerable to HIV and AIDS due to problematic expectations based on the African culture and Christian preaching on what ideal/worthy womanhood should be. The Church must respond to this situation primarily through re-education by undoing the problems of education received through traditional leaders who were mostly men with teachings that failed to empower women. In Masenya’s view, this education must cover the redefinition and transformation of African culture in such a way as to make it a life-giving culture for its members, both women and men. Patriarchy both in the African culture and, in the Christian Church, should be exposed for what it is: an evil system that was used by the Church and continues to be used, to perpetuate inequalities between peoples who have been equally created in the image of God; as a system that idolises one sex at the expense of the other, a system that cannot do any good to women, especially in the current context.

“To use the Ruth example again, a woman who has been raped for example might be extremely cautious of Ruth going to the threshing floor at night and making the kind of request she made. A male pastor reading the text might only focus on the end result of Ruth marrying Boaz and might not see the danger in the method she uses to ensure this”(Nadar 2007:29). Hence, the reader is not innocent. She or he brings to a text a vast world of experience, presuppositions, methodologies, interests and competencies. Biblical interpretation asks how an ancient text can speak to us today.

In a more or less similar view, in her reading of the Bible from an African perspective, one agrees with Kanyoro (1999:19) who contends that:

...our culture needs to be put to a thorough test under the framework of what I later came to call “cultural hermeneutics”. Hermeneutics literally means

“interpretation”. Biblical hermeneutics, as a theological discipline, permits people to reinterpret scriptural texts from one generation in the light of the culture of their own generation. The call for cultural hermeneutics is meant to demand a similar treatment of culture. Because culture is so central to people’s thought systems, it too needs to be analyzed. Cultural hermeneutics therefore refers to the analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people’s understanding of reality at a particular time and location.

Ruth is a woman who claimed her freedom of choice to act. She exercised this freedom by not returning to her mother’s home to marry a Moabite man, going alone to work in a field, facing Boaz, a powerful man, in a decisive conversation, and acting on her own by refusing to do exactly what Naomi tells her to do. Ruth’s story is that of a woman who knows what she wants and fights for it.

The promotion of women to high positions of power in some African countries and elsewhere in the world, reminds us that even in a patriarchal environment, women can find their own way to survive without being tied to men in marriage. The right to freedom is not something that is given on a plate, but has to be taken forcefully at times.

As marriage is such a crucial institution in any society one should not be viewed as opposing marriage. Instead, I am opposed to the idea that women have to be viewed only in terms of marriage. Women have to work on their own ways and places to ensure economic survival on other grounds. Women, as well men, who wish to live as single persons should be able to do so. Celibacy should be seen as the vehicle of certain typical African spiritual values necessary in the society hoping to achieve harmony.

In conclusion, the church and the society in which we find ourselves should pursue their task in working for the liberation of women, by way of opening and forthright promotion of the interests of married or single women. One thus agrees with Masenya that “We might be enabled even to challenge our beloved cultures and ideologies when these are found wanting by the standards of God’s will for our lives and encouraged to lift those passages that foreground

the need for celibate lives (1Cor 7:25-39) in order to affirm those who choose to spend their lives outside of marriage. As we do this, we might be enabled to challenge the view that regards marriage as an idol” (Masenya 2007:38). The African woman must therefore learn to define herself in terms of herself as a full human being created in God’s image, able to act on her own and together with men for a better world. Women need to fight for their integrity as persons in their own right, as human beings created in the image of God (Ruether 1998:20-35). This confirms what Kanyoro says when she states that “the concept of humanity created in the image of God speaks of equality before God” (Kanyoro 1996:158).

4. Significance of the Study and Recommendations

As I conclude, a brief note about the relevance of this study is in order:

- It can serve as an encouragement for all Congolese women in their struggle for life in the midst of poverty. Like Ruth, they can be encouraged to become agents of change for the welfare of their families, including their mothers-in-law.
- For those who continue to have the authority to interpret sacred texts, including the Christian Bible, caution needs to be taken regarding the need for life-giving interpretations of the Bible. My re-reading of the Book of Ruth both in chapters 3 and 4 in this dissertation, will hopefully serve as a good example of liberative biblical hermeneutics.
- A reading of this work, will hopefully problematise and resist our tendency to seek marriage at all costs, calling us to the affirmation that all women, irrespective of whether single or married, are equally created in God’s image.

Noteworthy is the observation that the present study is not exhaustive of research on the area of the Bible and women in the context of the D.R. Congo. Future studies could concentrate of the following themes among others, the Hebrew Bible and violence against women and children and HIV and AIDS gender-sensitive readings of the Bible.

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