

Trapped Between Two "Canons": African-South African Christian Women in the HIV/AIDS Era

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Introduction

Living as an African woman during the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa means that among other things one has to grapple with the negative impact of received interpretations of both the African culture and the Christian Bible on African women. HIV/AIDS has added an additional burden to the lives of women. This is particularly true for those who, in their search for identity, want to remain faithful to both the authority of African culture and to the Christian Bible. In this paper it is argued that such women find themselves trapped between these two forms of authority, which render them even more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. It is thus of vital importance to indicate the way in which the Christian Church should respond to this dilemma.

Furthermore, the paper will indicate the way in which the received understandings of the relationship between women and men, both from African culture and the Bible, impact negatively on the identity of married women and on men's control of their sexuality. It will be indicated that the current situation creates fertile soil for the entry of the HIV. The paper will focus on texts from both canons to show

that in the Pentecostal Northern Sotho church setting women are kept in the subjugated position where men (and not necessarily God as they are usually made to understand!) want them to be. It will conclude by suggesting what the church can do to address the legal trap in which women find themselves.

Trapped Between the Bible and African Culture

The phrase "trapped between the Bible and African culture" creates an impression that both the Bible and African culture are negative towards the well being of African Christian women. The question should thus be posed: Why are women trapped between these forms of authority? Are they not supposed to be liberated by their African Christian identity? An ideal answer to the last question should be in the affirmative. In reality, however, that is not the case.

In this paper, the word "canon" (contrary to its popular usage by the Christian Church), refers to African culture as well because of the authority which African culture continues to have on the lives of African women, irrespective of their status. African culture continues to influence our understanding of ideal womanhood by shaping the community's understanding and lived experiences of relationships between girl children and boy children, women and men, whether in and outside of a marital relationship. Although we are currently living in the so-called global village, our rootedness in African culture as African women, coupled with our disadvantaged position of being a marginalised "majority" in a patriarchal culture, makes us susceptible to definitions of womanhood/manhood, which are detrimental to our well-being as women.

Although debated in a number of Christian circles, the validity of the Bible as canon is not questioned in the majority of African Christian women's settings in South Africa, particularly in Pentecostal church contexts. We thus need to remind ourselves about the role which the Christian Bible played in the political and missionary history of South African peoples. As a result of this unique history and the

hope that these women derive in the God proclaimed in the Bible, many embrace the Bible as norm for their lives. A large number of these women cannot imagine life without guidance from the Bible. Despite the present secular nature of the South African state, the Bible still enjoys its authoritative status in the lives of many women, particularly in Pentecostal ecclesiastical settings.

It is, however, worthy to note that the Bible has mostly been interpreted for African Christian women by male preachers and teachers. Thus women have been socialized to male interpretations of the Bible. Therefore any attempt by women liberation scholars and preachers to make the Bible message more accessible to women, is still most likely to meet with disapproval.

One of the reasons why large numbers of African Christian women in South Africa have continued to cling to the Bible as a spiritual resource (Masenya 1996:4), is that not all male interpretations of the Bible have been detrimental to women's being and identity. However, one has to agree with the Northern Sotho saying that *sešo se baba mongwai* which literally means that a sore itches to its owner. In this regard, it is African women who have the sore. They are the ones who are likely to feel the "itchiness" caused by these problematic interpretations of the Bible. As such they, therefore, have a responsibility to reinterpret the Bible in a more helpful way, particularly in this era of HIV/AIDS.

Life becomes close to unbearable for African Christian women who choose to remain faithful to these two forms of authority in the HIV/AIDS era. These women witness in their daily lives how patriarchy reigns supreme when nurtured by the received interpretations of the Bible and African culture. The main question addressed in this paper thus concerns the issue of womanhood. In this regard, we will therefore examine the idea of what ideal womanhood is according to the canon of African culture.

African Cultural Notions of Womanhood

It is a well-known fact that a community's culture shapes its view of life. The African culture thus has its own definitions of womanhood/manhood coupled with its unique expectations of the relationships between women and men. For the purposes of this paper, a discussion of African culture is necessitated as a result of the problematic notions of womanhood and the cultural expectations of the relationships between married women and men.

In African culture, like in many patriarchal cultures, a husband determines a married woman's identity. The latter is expected to take control not only of the newly founded household, but also of his wife's body. We therefore agree with Nicolson who claims:

AIDS has spread in sub-Saharan Africa because of cultural beliefs, and in particular the belief that men need, and are entitled to, frequent sex with a variety of partners. Even if we can immunise against AIDS, even if we find a cure for AIDS, issues such as the commercialisation of sex, the expectation among men that women have a duty to provide them with casual sexual gratification, the belief among young women that their worth is determined primarily by satisfying the demands of their partners, remain (2000:10-12).

In the Northern Sotho South African setting for example, a married woman's body is no longer her own as she belongs to her husband. Even her sexuality belongs to him. However, his sexuality in this culture does not belong to himself only. It can be shared with other women outside the family. A few proverbs bearing witness to this will suffice as examples: *Monna ke thaka, o a naba*, literally, a man is like a pumpkin plant, he spreads. A married man can have many concubines). *Monna ke tšhwene, o ja ka matsogo a mabedi*, literally, a man is a baboon, he eats with two hands. It means that though a man is married, he is free to have concubines for sexual gratification. On the other hand, a woman who complains about such a man is reminded that *ga se more, ga a fehliwe*, literally, she is not a tree, she cannot be eaten up by a moth. The underlying meaning of the

proverb is that a woman must not be worried by her husband's absence, one day he will return and find her still intact.

Given the reality of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, what repercussions will such a lifestyle have on the women involved? Such cultural expectations can only make women vulnerable to the HIV. These expectations, as we will later observe, are also cemented by the male-friendly interpretations of some biblical texts. African Christian married women are therefore trapped between these two forms of authority.

It can thus be argued that with the advent of HIV/AIDS the status of woman, as dictated by interpretations from African culture and the Bible, has been seriously affected. The inequalities between African men and women become glaring when confronted by the epidemic of the present era. We cannot but conclude that one other oppressive factor has been added to the list of those which have pushed African women to the bottom of the patriarchal ladder: the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In the light of all these, could African-South African Christian women (and men) review these old definitions of womanhood in order to rethink what ideal womanhood could be, particularly if reinterpreted from a womanhood (*bosadi*) perspective? What is our understanding of God's definition of womanhood? Will we find it to be similar to the (allegedly divine) one, which we have traditionally received from our churches and academies?

Grappling with the Issue of Ideal Womanhood in an African-South African Christian Context

It is a well-known fact that in the traditional African culture a woman becomes fully human only when she is married. It appears that society had a stereotype that a woman cannot live on her own, independent of marriage, as Oduoye remarks: "Society demands that she stays married, because a woman has no dignity outside marriage" (1995:62).

It should, however, be noted that this expectation of a marriage partner also applies to men. It was, and still is, inconceivable in African culture, that a man could remain single for the rest of his life. Mbiti thus rightly observes that both men and women were/are expected to be married:

To die without getting married and without children, is to be completely cut off from the human society...to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind. Everybody, therefore, must get married and bear children: that is the greatest hope of the individual for himself and of the community for the individual (1989:131).

Having said this, it is important to note that what significantly differentiates the two parties in marriage is the privilege which a man enjoys in a patriarchal culture. As the initiator of marriage he is expected to hand over *lobola* to the girl's family to obtain full control over his wife and her body. Such a view of the husband-wife relationship is basically cemented in these African Christian contexts by the received interpretations of biblical texts like Ephesians 5:22-24 and 1 Corinthians 7:5; 1 Corinthians 11:7-9¹, to name but three. A look at the way in which two of these texts are read in this ecclesiastical context will suffice at this stage. In Ephesians 5:22-24 we read:

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body, of which he is the Saviour. 24. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Another popular text in the circles of African Christian men is 1 Corinthians 7:5:

Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourself to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Whether consciously or not these two texts are used effectively in this church context for patriarchal control. They

are interpreted with a bias for men against women. What is usually highlighted in the interpretation of Ephesians 5 is the subordinate position of women vis-à-vis the headship of men as though that was part of the original preoccupation of this text. This would not have been the case as the early readers of this text knew that the patriarchal status quo of the Greco-Roman era dictated that husbands should be heads of families and wives be their subordinates. Due to literalistic readings of biblical texts in our contexts, such mundane facts are usually hidden under the guise of the Word of God-an exercise that succeeds in entrenching patriarchal control in a marriage relationship in the name of God's will. Such an emphasis on the God-ordained nature of men's headship in marriage, vis-à-vis the subordinate position of women, clearly reveals the power-consciousness that Christian men have. The hunger for control over women's lives is as a matter of fact, the direct opposite of the analogy of Christ as servant portrayed in the following text: "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." (Ephesians 5: 25).

We therefore agree with Scanzoni and Hardesty who proclaim that:

The usual way of teaching Ephesians 5 suggests that it is the wife who must make the self-sacrifices (just the opposite of what the text says) and unwittingly encourages the husband to be selfish, egocentric, convinced of his right to have his own way, and filled with pride and a heady sense of power. That is why the usual interpretation is so harmful (1986:124).

The view that the headship of men is viewed as God-ordained assigns all authority and power to control to men. This includes the control of women's bodies. The understanding that a wife must be subject to her husband in everything (verse 24) would thus also be understood to entail that she must always be willing to avail her body for her husband's sexual gratification. Female excuses in this regard are usually considered to be counterfeit and it is yet another favourite text in such settings. For example, 1 Corinthians 7: 5 'Do not deprive one another except perhaps

by agreement for a set time, to devote yourself to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.'

Though some scholars have viewed verse 4 in which a wife's body is viewed as belonging to her husband and a husband's body as belonging to his wife, as affirming women, as one reads the whole chapter, it becomes clear that the author is preoccupied with male concerns. The very opening verse of this chapter for example, brings this to light: 'Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well that a man not touch a woman" (see also verses 9b, 36-38).

Given the androcentric bias of the Bible, it may be concluded that Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 7 are preoccupied with male concerns. Such a conclusion naturally renders them susceptible to androcentric hermeneutics. However, the interpretation of Ephesians 5 as outlined above, for example, usually lets one miss the exhortation which opens this pericope: "Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).

In our view, this opening verse is part of the "new" revelation, which was supposed to shape husband-wife relationships in a Christian family context. What would differentiate a Christian couple from the husband-wife relationships of the time would therefore not be male headship vis-à-vis the subordinate position of women. The uniqueness of their relationship was to be based on the fact that as members of the same body of Christ, they have a responsibility to submit mutually to each other.

Similarly, the "new" way of exercising headship in the context of sacrificial love so foregrounded by Ephesians 5 receives little or no attention in African - South African Pentecostal hermeneutics. The emphasis on the husband as the head of his wife is not situated in the context of his responsibility to love his wife just as his own body. On the contrary, it is on women, who are always expected to make sacrifices.

Thus it is worthy to note that our attempts at re-reading biblical texts in a way that will affirm women will not necessarily change the androcentric nature of some of these

texts. In this regard Ephesians 5 is no exception. We therefore agree with Schussler-Fiorenza who states:

Instead, Ephesians Christologically cements the inferior position of the wife in the marriage relationship. One could say that the exhortation to the husband spell out what it means to live a marriage relationship as a Christian, while those to the wives insist on the proper social behaviour of women (1995: 270).

To summarise: women-unfriendly interpretations of the Bible such as those outlined in the preceding paragraph can only pave way for the unilateral control of women's bodies in the name of God's will for family life. With such an understanding of the unilateral control of women's bodies and sexuality, rich soil becomes cultivated for the entry and spread of HIV/AIDS.

It is nevertheless noteworthy that the issue of the unilateral control of women's bodies is not uniquely African as a reading of some Old Testament texts reveals. In addition, such texts easily find a comfortable footing in some various African Christian contexts.

Elsewhere I have argued at length about this problematic issue of the unilateral control of the bodies of married women by their husbands both in the Old Testament and in Northern Sotho African culture (2001:185-202). I have shown that there are close similarities between the Jewish post-exilic culture and the African Northern Sotho culture regarding the control of the bodies of women, particularly bodies of married women. Some of the similarities highlighted in that article are listed below:

Firstly, in both cultures, the husband unilaterally controls the sexuality of married women because the system of dowry (*lobola*) as used in both cultures contributes significantly towards such an unfortunate view of the relationships between men and women regarding their sexuality. Viewed in a Northern Sotho context, the system of *lobola* can be regarded as a double-edged sword to women. It is empowering in the sense that under normal circumstances, a woman for whom *lobola* has been "paid", tends to be respected by the community. On the other hand, the

understanding that *lobola* has been "paid" can lead to the abuse of the same woman, particularly by her in-laws.

This system helps to reinforce the patriarchal authority structure so that the new household may treat her in whatever way they wish. In the traditional Northern Sotho community, however, *lobola* was not regarded as a means of "purchasing" a person, but, in reality, many women for whom *lobola* is given today, come to understand that they have actually been bought! In this new setting, a woman is no longer her own but belongs to the man and his family. Even her sexuality belongs to the one who gave the *lobola*.

Regarding the system of dowry in Old Testament times, however, a wife could be actually purchased (*qaneh*) like any piece of property. In Ruth 4:4 we read: "Then Boaz said, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth, the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance" (KJV). It therefore makes sense that the cost of buying a woman included the purchase of her sexuality as well.

Second, women whose sexuality is not under the legitimate control of a particular man (husband or father) become easy prey to men to satisfy male lust. Prostitutes and single women fall into this category. For example, the Israelite society recognised three classes of women whose sexual function did not belong to any man and hence could be used as these men pleased: widows, divorced women and adult single women (Wegner 1992: 41-42). In present day South Africa, the situation has actually gone to the extreme. It does not matter to which category a woman belongs in terms of marriage, all female humans, including babies, may become the objects of abuse by men.

Third, a married man's sexuality can be shared with other women outside marriage without such a practice being scorned. As such, adultery is a word more applicable to married women than to their male counterparts (cf. African proverbs endorsing promiscuity for married men). The story of Judah with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, in the Old Testament (Genesis 38) can be cited as a case in point in this regard. What therefore counts in a text like this is not

the people's devotion to God's commandments but satisfying the sexual needs or the lust of those who are in power.

An African Christian woman who decides to remain faithful to the cultural expectations of men's control over her sexuality as well as to the men-friendly interpretations of the Bible therefore, finds herself in a dilemma. If she remains faithful to both, she will have no option but to engage in unprotected sex with her husband. In addition in this culture, like in many cultures of the world, large numbers of men do not take religion as seriously as their wives do. They may use the Bible as long as its interpretation helps to endorse the patriarchal status quo. In such contexts, African culture, as can be expected, remains an important canon. Such men will not find biblical texts about fidelity in marriage appealing. Some may, for example, quickly embrace biblical texts endorsing polygamy. Such men need to be reminded of Kwesi Dickson's warning: "Similarly, for a church to base its acceptance of polygamy on the fact that it was practised by some of the giants of faith in Israel is to ignore the fact that polygamy was not the normal form of marriage in biblical times, even though it was considered acceptable" (2000: 133).

A woman is thus confronted with making a hard choice. Choosing life (see the biblical theme of life as expressed in John 10: 10) will mean her taking control of her own body contrary to the dictates of the patriarchal status quo. She will have to be frank and confront her unfaithful husband with two choices: to either insist on abstinence from sexual intercourse, an option which will deprive her of her conjugal rights; or to recommend the use of prophylactics.

For a typical African man, any of those options is not likely to be welcomed. Such a "radical" stance on the part of a woman, particularly if she is persistent, may ultimately lead to the dissolution of the marriage in question. For the African woman, the latter will not be an easy choice to make due to the following reasons: First, the received definitions of what an ideal woman is in both canons is that the one who is married and has children, particularly sons. If her children are mostly sons, she will have proven to young virgins what it means to be a woman in this culture. Even

the Israelite matriarchs in the Old Testament, for example, craved to have children, particularly sons (Genesis 16: 2, Genesis 30:1ff).

Second, both canons have distaste for divorce. In traditional Northern Sotho culture, divorce was unheard of. A new bride went through a counselling session in which she was advised on the societal expectations of a woman in marriage. The following proverb would be cited, *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, (literally, the wife's grave is at the husband's place). The underlying meaning of the proverb is that even in the event of death, a wife is not expected to "divorce" her husband but that her in-laws will take care of her in his absence. This proverb warns the new bride that nothing, even death, let alone an abusive husband or an unfaithful husband should separate her from him.

Similarly, the church will cite texts like Matthew 5:31-32;19:9 and Luke 16:18 to support the argument that divorce is not in line with God's will for the people of God.

Confronted with this situation, what response is expected from a Christian woman? This dilemma becomes increasingly serious if her husband is HIV positive. In this difficult situation, she has to choose between life and death. Culturally, ideal womanhood is linked to her marital status. In marriage, she is expected to adhere to the dictates of the family head. If she remains in this marriage she will be infected and that will be a deadly choice. A difficult yet safe option will thus be to get out of the marriage. The question however is:

If she loosens herself from the bonds of these two canons, will the Christian community still view her as *fully* African, *fully* Christian and *fully* woman/human? Who must define what ideal womanhood is? Could womanhood be regarded as ideal if it is death-dealing?

The question worth asking as we move to a conclusion is: How should the Christian church respond to this situation?

The Christian Church Should Respond

The church has a role to play regarding the plight of African Christian women in the HIV/AIDS era because it is supposed to be their spiritual home. I therefore suggest the following steps towards the alleviation of the problem: the church membership needs to be re-educated to undo the problematic education received from the traditional male leadership and its teachings. Education should be geared towards women empowerment and could entail the following aspects: The redefinition and transformation of the African culture in a way that will be life-giving to all members, both women and men.

As part of the education process, educators should expose patriarchy both in the African culture and in the Christian Church for what it is: an evil system which has been used and continues to be used by the church to perpetuate inequalities between people who have been created in the image of God. As has been revealed from the preceding discussion, the main problem with patriarchy is that it idolises one sex at the expense of the other. Such idolisation cannot do women any good, particularly given our HIV/AIDS contexts.

The church should also critically revisit the androcentric interpretations of the Bible since these interpretations have contributed to the perpetuation of the view that the female is inferior, and that the latter is God-ordained. Such a view has enabled dangerous cultural sayings, reinforced by apparently similar sayings from the Bible, to be applied indiscriminately to powerless girl children and women.

These women-unfriendly Bible interpretations should be substituted with empowering life-giving ones that will show that women and men have a role to play in God's divine plan for the world. They should include definite attempts to redefine important aspects of women's lives, for example what ideal African Christian womanhood is. In my view, an ideal African Christian woman (*mosadisadi*) is a female African person, who though conscious of the corporeal mentality of Africans and respecting it, can stand on her own and affirm her full humanity as one created in God's

image. As an independent person, she may choose marriage, a choice, which does not make her lose her full humanness and independence to her partner. She may also opt for celibacy, an option that in no way tampers with her full humanness (1996:182).

Such redefinitions may enable the Christian church to "de-idolise" marriage and accept that singleness can also be part of God's plan for human/female lives. If this is accepted, the church will be in a position to proclaim that God affirms all women, irrespective of their marital status. Such a proclamation will not only liberate but in this church (Pentecostal) setting, it will make sense because there is a belief that what counts to God according to the Christian Bible is not an individual's (marital) status, but an individual's status in relation to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of all humanity.

Though such redefinitions of womanhood are not likely to make sense or could even be resisted by many men and women in our contexts, we need to insist on them, particularly if they prove to be life-giving in our death-invested HIV/AIDS contexts. The women of Africa, who are at the receiving end, should therefore be in the forefront in our struggle to stop the extermination of the African peoples.

Conclusion

We have noted that our time is a moment of crisis. The church can no longer afford to keep quiet when its innocent members face unjust deaths. Can the church afford to remain asleep in this dangerous moment – a moment when it is compelled to raise its prophetic voice against the injustices done to (female) humanity? No! This is the moment to speak the mind of God, to proclaim that God's mind is geared to giving life to the sick and dying nation. If the Church who has been called to be the light of the world decides to put the light under the bushel, who must show this light? This is the moment for the church to heed to the call: "Let the Church be the Church!"

Endnotes

1. In this paper, all Biblical texts are cited from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

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