

18-32 *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 148 (March 2014)

The Impact of the Extended Family on One's Marriage: An African Study

Elijah Magezi Baloyi

ABSTRACT

While for Mbiti¹ death takes life while marriage creates life, another African proverb says "A man without a wife is like a vase without flowers". This articulation puts marriage not only at the centre of human life, but also creates the impression that being unmarried is both a taboo and disgrace, not only for the immediate family but also for the whole clan and community. In ensuring the survival of the marriage, African marriage is characterised among other things by extended family interventions. Marriage life for Africans is communal. This article will unveil the role of extensive family interventions in one's marriage. In this discussion the author will clarify both the negative and positive roles which were and are still played by this practice, while the critical evaluation will be followed by pastoral advice to assist the pastoral caregivers, the family and the young couples.

Introduction

Takatso Mofokeng is known (among other black theologians) for his commitment to the struggle of liberation. He also articulated that Christian religion and the Bible will continue for an unlimited period of time as the supreme haven of the black masses. This helped me to understand him as a theologian who could not accept the western use of the Bible to replace African culture with western culture.² I personally understand the damage to and confusion for people, and also in the context of African marriages, where many practices in African traditional marriages were seen as heathen. It is therefore my contention that if black African marriages continue only to imitate western types of marriage, our liberation of the black community is incomplete. It is within the confines of this study to investigate the practice from historical point of view in order to make comments on how it influences those who practice it today; meanwhile the study will also unveil some of what happens to those neglecting it today. In this way arguments will flow from

1 J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 105.

2 T. Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation", *Journal of Black Theology* 2 (1988), 34-42, 40.

Professor Elijah Magezi Baloyi is Practical Theology Discipline Leader in the Department of Philosophy, Practical & Systematic Theology, University of South Africa. <baloye@unisa.ac.za >

the past times into the present age, hence the research will be focusing on helping the present people. Among other things, traditional African marriage customs are characterised by the relatives of the husband and of the wife establishing close relationships. That is why Mbiti argues that marriage in the traditional African view is an affair involving more than two people.³ The prevalence of the extended family intervention is at some stage also typified, among other factors, by enforced sexual relationships with the wife of the deceased, as described in the following quotation:

First my husband's family insisted I have sex with his younger brother. I gave in and had sex with him day and night for seven days. That was bad enough. But then they said I must marry him. I will only marry someone I love. I realised that I had to escape.⁴

This is the response of one young widow who was trying to fight for her own rights against the problem of family intervention in her own affairs. After the debacle above, the family demanded that she marry this young man; otherwise she would have to give up her wealth and live in a shack to escape this cultural demand. Besides asking different questions about this story, there is a clear indication that for some African people, family intervention in one's marriage is still a thorny issue that needs to be resolved.

One of the arguments in support of seeking the approval or consent of the extended family members on one's marital issues was made by McMinn⁵ who said: "Nancy is operating from the assumption that their worth depends on the approval of the elicited from others. Most of her friends and extended family are in egalitarian marriages, so she wants to change her marriage to gain social approval from those she cares about." This is also supported by Josiah⁶ who sees the wellbeing of two whole families and the clan as involved in one's marriage. This is another example of being influenced by a family intervention to an extent that family decisions are not affected by what the immediate family thinks, but by what other people think about the family. This view is also articulated by Van der Walt⁷ who argues: "According to tradition, a person has no identity apart from his family. Decisions are always taken in concert. Africans do things together, they talk about the matter until everybody agrees, never mind how long it takes." These are just some of the few examples of how other people have abused and misused the practice of extended family relationships.

3 J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* 2nd edition (Sandton, JHB: Heinemann, 1991), 108.

4 G. Nkhwashi, *Culture Shock for Rich Widow* (Daily Sun Newspaper dated 25 July 2012), 1-2.

5 M.R. McMinn, *Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1996). Read in blog last visited on 04-02-2013 at <http://books.gather.com>.

6 M.E. Josiah, *Divorce among the Wa-Embu* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1988), 6.

7 B.J. Van der Walt, 1994 *The liberating message*. Wetenskaplike bydraes of the PU for CHE. Series F3 no 44. Potchefstroom: IRS.

Mathipa⁸ indicates that one of the essentials of a customary marriage is the consent of the in-laws to hand over the girl for the others to receive her. In African custom, immediate parents are not allowed to hand their child over in marriage themselves, but someone from the family would hand over the girl which is a good sign that not only the parents agree with the marriage but that it also has the consent of the whole family. That is why the author agrees with Msomi⁹ in arguing that, although the marriage is itself a religious affair, when a crisis strikes counselling should involve the two extended families as well. The western counselling strategies would not yield good results because the family may not approve of a solution that did not come through a process of family consent. That is why dealing with the issue of communalism and extended family intervention will always be difficult without acknowledging the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which according to Gathogo creates African hospitality and upholds human dignity.¹⁰ African *ubuntu* realises a person as he or she lives in the context of a community, not in isolation. The aim of the article is not only to check the negative things that result from the family intervention, but also to unveil the good and the beauty of this African tradition. The article will also discuss how this African tradition can help pastoral caregivers to support marriages by indicating the links of the tradition without compromising the biblical message on issues such as “leave and cleave”.

Theoretical Framework of African Marriage

One of the causes of the escalation of marital problems in an African context currently is neglect or ignorance of the tradition of extended family relationships. Van der Walt¹¹ sees no distinction between the African household and the extended family, while Kaganas and Murray¹² regard marriage as an alliance between the two families. But now the practical situation is that a shift is being made from this communal type of life to individualism. I am in full agreement with Waruta and Kinoti¹³ who argue that because of western influences, the traditional African society value systems had been altered and shifted from a predominantly

8 M.K. Mathipa, “Marriage and Matrimonial Property Law”, *African Review* 4, no.2 (1993), 23-27, 26.

9 V.V. Msomi, *Ubuntu Contextual African Pastoral Care and Counseling* (CB Powell Bible Centre: Unisa Muckleneuk, Pretoria, 2008), 242.

10 J. Gathogo, “African Philosophy as Expressed in the Concepts of Hospitality and Ubuntu”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 130 (March 2008), 39-53.

11 van der Walt, *The Liberating Message*, 393.

12 F. Kaganas and C. Murray, “Law, Women and Family: The Question of Polygamy in a New South Africa”, *Acta Juridica* (1991), 130.

13 D.W. Waruta and H.W. Kinoti, *Pastoral Care in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2000), 101.

kingship system to individualism and the nuclear family. Bhugra and Becker¹⁴ argue: "Individuals who migrate experience multiple stresses that can impact their mental well-being, including the loss of cultural norms, religious customs and social support systems, adjustment to a new culture and changes in identity and concept of self." The focus of this article is not on migration but on one of the consequences of migration, which is the loss of the cultural traits of enjoying and benefiting from communal life in the marriage context.

One of the questions one may ask is "If the extended family intervention as a custom is ignored or relegated to be replaced by western individualisation, will the marriage remain African, or not?" It is also important to ask whether it is a problem to have a Christian marriage that also embraces the practice of family intervention. Moreover, if this practice is abandoned, what about the African identity with regard to ubuntu, particularly the notion "I am because we are"? These questions also touch on the issue of identity where one can still ask whether our identity as African people will remain untarnished if individualism replaces communalism. These questions make the study a relevant and important one, particularly in postmodern times where many young people are moving to urban areas seeking employment, where they may be inclined towards an individualistic lifestyle. That becomes a problem particularly when they encounter family or marital challenges for which they need advice from other or elderly people.

The aim of this article is to argue by way of research that although the African tradition of extended family's influence on one's marriage has its own negative unintended outcomes, it remains a sound practice which also has its own positive impact on the family life of African people. For the sake of this study, African-based literature (by African writers) with some African idioms will be used to formulate the African view on the practice of extended family intervention. Some biblical passages will be amended to indicate how a biblical view can accommodate this African practice without compromising the message of the Bible for the sake of the African Christian families. Among other factors, the traditional practice of *lobolo* is one of the paths which the involvement of the extended family can follow; hence a short discussion on how this practice opens possibilities for intervention will also be made. The intention of the discussion is not to give details about how *lobolo* is used in different African cultures but to emphasise the fact that it indeed plays a role in bringing people closer together as a family. It is the gist of this study to argue that even though some people have abused and misused the cultural trait of controlling one's family, in itself the trait initially aims to help and protect African families as much as possible; therefore its good intentions will also be highlighted.

14 D. Bhugra and M. Becker, "Migration, Cultural Bereavement and Cultural Identity", *World Psychiatry* 4, no. 1 (2005), 18-24.

Historical Background

It will be difficult, if not impossible, to understand how the practice of extended family intervention came into marriage without a brief discussion on the concept, nature and intentions of marriage in an African context. Waruta and Kinoti state that “[m]arriage is defined as union, permanent at least by intention of a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation and the rearing of children and mutual assistance”. Mbiti and Waruta and Kinoti are in agreement that African marriage has always been an affair not only between two people because it unites and involves the two families concerned. Second, African marriage is mainly aimed at procreation. That is why African people have a high regard for children; hence even though other aims of marriage such as companionship are acknowledged, procreation is the more important reason for marrying. This is linked to Baloyi’s¹⁵ argument that childless marriages were regarded as abnormal, while Kalu¹⁶ also emphasised the importance of procreation in the African marriage.

An understanding of the origin of many customs of the African people is to understand what communalism is all about. African people cannot live in isolation, hence the saying “I am because we are” has not only been popularised but has become a reality of everyday life. The same idiom receives an echo from “*Motho ke motho ka batho ba ban ’we*” in which it is unthinkable for an individual not to have social relations in an African context.¹⁷ In this way, a woman and a man may not marry without the consent of their parents.¹⁸ While a person has no identity apart from his or her family, communalism is arguably the key to understanding both traditional and contemporary African culture.¹⁹

Waruta and Kinoti²⁰ also testify to the importance of intervention: “Marriage and procreation were never left to the individual whims in traditional African society as the new realities today seem to accept.” To a great extent, even when children are born they are not born for the couple, but for the rest of the family. It is regrettable that western civilisation has been internalised to such an extent that a person’s child is seen to belong to him or her alone. It is a source of sadness when it happens that a child’s immediate parents are absent – or die – yet it is difficult or even impossible for other family members to adopt the child. African marriages had always been characterised by, among other things, the involvement of the extended family as well as of the clan. Msomi agrees: “It was after a

15 M.E. Baloyi, Critical reflections on infertility in Black Africa Christian communities, *Journal of Practical Theology in South Africa* 24(2), (2009),1-17.

16 U. Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (University of Pretoria: Pretoria, 2005), 533.

17 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 14.

18 M.E. Baloyi, “Counseling Christian Shangaan on Choosing a Marriage Partner”. Unpublished M.Thesis. University of Potchefstroom, 2001, 38.

19 Van der Walt, *The Liberating Message*, 201.

20 Waruta and Kinoti, *Pastoral Care in African Christianity*, 114.

mutually agreed settlement that the young woman was given to him as a wife. It important to note that in this traditional practice the whole extended family and clan was involved.”

This means that since Africans believe that marriage is an issue not only for the two people, then the other family members must be given an opportunity to decide for one's family. I am in agreement with Khathide²¹ that in some families no major decision can be taken without consulting the maternal uncles. Although among some African peoples parents no longer play a direct role, they are still indirectly involved. In agreement with other African scholars like Mbiti,²² Hartman and Boonzaier²³ are correct to argue that marriage is a bond between the two families concerned, which is also confirmed by the provision of the marriage goods. In the same vein Kaganas and Murray²⁴ extend this argument by regarding African marriage as an alliance between two families which will then facilitate the creation of relationships.

In supporting extended family involvement Kiura²⁵ argues: “Delegate a lot to them, give them what finances you can afford and let them plan according to that income and if needs be they may contribute more to it.” This supports the idea of involving parents and even other family members in one's marriage arrangements, which may also give them an opportunity to have influence in the future. The opinion of the author is that the family must be involved in the whole arrangement. My argument is that the extended family members can be involved in issues like lobolo negotiation, but that must not give them a licence to take control of the marriage itself.

Regarding those who might contribute things in the form of money for assisting the man in *lobolo* agreements, such people need to be made aware that they should not use that assistance to dominate the new wife in future, reasoning that they helped in the marriage. In actual fact they helped the man to marry – they did not marry the wife themselves. It should be the pride of the man to pay *lobolo* on his own, but some men might as a result of unemployment accept help from their family members. It must be clear beforehand that a helping hand here should not imply any right to future influence over the new family.

For many Africans, the “*vat-en-sit*” marriage in which couples simply live together, has long been problematic. Therefore for young people to have a marriage that is acceptable to the family they will obviously need to ask the parents as well

21 A.G. Khathide, *Bone of My Bones: Building Marriages that Work in Africa* (Kempton Park: AcadSA, 2007).

22 J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1991), 104.

23 J.B. Hartman and C.C. Boonzaier, “Verwekkings en Versorgingsimplikansies van die Leviraar by die Tsonga”, *African Journal of Ethnology* 2, no.2 (1988), 75-81, 80.

24 Kaganas and Murray, “Law, Women and Family”, 116-134.

25 J.M. Kiura, *Courtship and Marriages* (Uganda: St Paul Publications, 1987), 40.

as clan members to assist. It should also be recognised that the tradition does not allow the bridegroom himself to negotiate with his in-laws about *lobolo* – others are needed to do that on his behalf. This help must be differentiated from the one in the previous paragraph, because this refers to involving people in the negotiations, not in the payment or contribution. This argument receives its strength from Baloyi²⁶ who further argues that since the ancient African peoples had no formally legal means of forming marriages, marriages were simply agreed upon between parents and families. This became one of the ways which introduced the opportunity for family intervention in one's marriage. That is why Musharamina²⁷ indicates that a young man, even though he may be independent, must still have his choice sanctioned by his parents.

Perhaps the other question from some readers will be how this study plays a role in pastoral care. The author's assertion is that it takes pastoral counselling to build healthy African marriages; therefore marriage, particularly in a challenging African context, demands the involvement of pastoral caregivers. I am also of the opinion that pastoral care should, among other things, have had two main functions: first, incorporating members into the life and discipline of the church and, second, assisting persons who are handling crisis, conflicts and personal and spiritual problems. It is the pivotal role of pastoral counselling to build relationships as well as Christian marriages within their particular contexts.

The Nature of the Influence of Family Intervention in One's Marriage (some cases in which family intervention can be identified)

The birth and raising of children in the family

The traditions and customs of raising children in the family context can be summed up by Mbiti in Masango: "It takes a village to raise a child."²⁸ Mbiti's idiom matches the Shangaan idiom: "*N'wana ahi wa un'we*", literally meaning "a child does not belong only to his or her biological parents". The implication of these sayings is that once a child is born he or she must belong to a family, clan or community. Since African people never left anything related to family to an

26 M.E. Baloyi, "The Use of Imago Dei as a Pastoral Healing Vision against Women Killings in the South African Context – Original Research", *Verbum et Ecclesia Journal* 33, no. 1 (2012), 1-6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve33i1.703>.

27 M.G.C. Musharamina, *Traditional African Marriage and Christian Marriage* (Uganda: St Paul Publication, 1981), 14.

28 M.J.S. Masango, "African Spirituality that Shapes the Concept of Ubuntu", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 27, no. 3 (2006), 930-943, 931.

individual, children were also believed to belong to the community; hence every elderly person in the community was responsible to ensure that children in that community were raised to respect community values. That is why I support Waruta and Kinoti who point out that there were no street children or homeless children in African traditions, because every child belonged to a family or community. Among other things, this meant that even children in a single parent's family would enjoy the benefit of having other extended parents in the community. The love for one's fellows and respect for identity are therefore the two main natural characteristics of extended family relationships.²⁹

Tembo³⁰ argues in the same vein:

Children among the matrilineal peoples are brought up in a similar traditional extended family village social environment. There is socialization to raise boys and girls to become responsible and acceptable adults of the village, community, and ultimately society. The children learn the customs, beliefs, and culture pertaining to the social roles of being a woman, mother, and wife for girls; and a man, father, and husband for boys. Matrilineality is the major influence in what children learn and come to accept about their society.

Although one criticism may be the possibility of children's lifestyle conforming to the norms and values of the larger community, which may sometimes be against the expectations of the immediate home, the author is of the same opinion. This is one of the fine values that African people are losing because of western civilization which teaches them to isolate their children from the community, making it difficult for a child to identify with his or her own culture. It is supposed to be our duty as parents to ensure that our children learn to live with one another and respect all elder people, whether blood relatives or not.

The case of barrenness and second marriage(s)

Although some traditional husbands also stress the need for children, it is noteworthy that initially the requirement of motherhood came from the family. It is a traditional family and community concern that if one is barren, there will be pressure from the family and the community. According to the tradition, it should be the same people (members of the extended family) who were sent to pay *lobolo* who should now be sent either to arrange for the second marriage or for the goods to be returned if the wife has not borne children.³¹ This must be understood from the African context where women are usually to blame for barrenness even

29 E. Okonkwo, *Marriage in the Christian and Igbo Traditional Context: Towards an Inculturation* (Peter Lang Publishers: Berlin, 2003), 74.

30 M.S. Tembo, *The Traditional African Family*. Undated blog last visited on 04-02-2013 on <http://people.bridgewater.edu>.

31 J.N.K. Mugambi, *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Initiatives Publications, 1989), 100.

when medical tests have not yet been done. In this way, we also learn that even the decision about divorce or second marriage was supposed to be a collective one rather than being the decision of the husband and his wife or the couple. The influence of the elders in this regard would carry more weight than the couple's decisions. Although this was logical in view of their influence when the marriage was arranged, this was another form of dictatorship which would not allow the couple to face their own challenge; rather, they would sometimes be told what to do against their will. Here the author would argue that the family should only advise, not decide or dictate, because of the possibility that the husband will marry a second wife not for love, but because for childbearing.

Inheritance of property

In most African tribes, decisions about inheritance of the deceased person's belongings were never an individual responsibility. The elders of the extended family, even the clan itself, should be part of the decisions about who should inherit what in the family. It should be a consensual agreement. An example can be viewed in the film *Neria*³² in which the Zimbabwean family members from the clan gathered together after the funeral to ensure that the inheritance is authorised by the elders. Here certain widows lose what belongs to them if jealous family members do not support the widow for some reason. That is why the belongings of the deceased were confiscated until everyone was available for the practice of deciding an inheritance. It is my belief that this practice also helped to avoid tension and fights among the remaining members of the family in the film. Anyway this could not eventually stop jealousy and greed that sometimes become obstacles if some elder or influential family members target the belongings for themselves. Learning from this film, it is important to note how traditional collective decisions are sometimes not only used for self-enrichment, but also to selfishly betray and subject other people to suffering.

Erecting a new homestead: opening of a new entrance by the elder brother

According to some African people, if the younger brother or the son finds a new site or home for himself without proper consultation with the parents, the parents would not set foot in his home. In some cases the parents or elder brothers would perform a certain action to allow them access. In a personal case study, once during my teenage years my late father and I visited my uncle in his village, where my father had never visited before. When we arrived he took an axe from the boot of his car and began to cut one of the traditional walls which are used to surround the houses (huts), called "*maguva*".

32 *Neria*, Zimbabwean Film written by T. Dangarebga and directed by G. Mawuru, 1999.

Thereafter instead of us using the normal entrance, we used the opening which he made. When I asked about this practice afterwards I was told that according to the tradition, since the uncle (his younger brother) got a site and built in his absence, it is not allowed for him to use the younger brother's entrance, but he should open a new one. From then onwards the old entrance was closed and even today, the family use the new entrance. He went on to tell me that had they denied him opening a new entrance, there was no way he would have entered the premises.

Forcing one to stay in an abusive marriage relationship

Traditional Tsonga-speaking people believed that "*vukati va kandza hi mbilu*" meaning "to be successful in marriage a woman must be patient and obedient".³³ This type of belief was often used as an encouragement by the older woman towards a young, married but troublesome woman. This encouragement was often given as a model to those preparing to get married as well as to those coming with their marriage problems. In most cases, it was used to persuade a woman who had left her marital home to return, particularly by her parents. Besides being an encouragement, it was also a way to insist that marriage can still continue if the wife persists through many difficulties, including beatings and abuse from the husband. In an African context, things like "wife abuse or harassment" never existed because that was the tradition which the patriarchal system held as a normal way of running the family. I am even reminded of a certain medical doctor (Dr Mawema) in Zimbabwe who would argue that he did not see anything wrong with wife beating as a corrective measure which will also lead to fewer divorces.³⁴

It is in cases like this where the pain of the abused woman would be ignored by those family members who would insist that she should stay with the abusive husband because things might change. Therefore the extended family sees the woman as the one who should fight for the success of the marriage while the husband is free to ignore most of the troubles. That is why the family would try to persuade the wife to stay in the marriage, while the husband would perhaps be left alone. Without taking away the fact that Africans tried to prevent divorce at all costs, each case should be treated on its own merits. By this I mean that in cases when a woman is abused severely, the family should then look for an alternative instead of sending her back into the abusive marriage. There is a lot of evidence that some wife abuse has ended in killings. Both the husband and the wife must be held responsible for the problems in their marriage, not only the wife. The African sayings or idioms mentioned above reflect a view that is both one-sided and patriarchal.

33 T.S. Maluleke and S. Nadar, "Breaking the Covenant of Violence against Women", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (Nov 2002), 5-17, 11.

34 See Waruta and Kinoti, *Pastoral Care in African Christianity*, 115.

Critical Analysis

African people would protect a marriage at all costs. The husband would not decide to separate from or divorce his wife without the consent of the elders in the village. Before the final decision was taken, the family members would come together and try to solve the problem and try to find other means to save the marriage. I will start by mentioning some advantages of the family intervention. There will always be cases where the immediate couple needs assistance from the other extended family members, for instance in sickness and childbearing there is a need for people to help with cooking and cleaning while the husband is away at work. In the absence of psychologists and psychiatrists, consulting family members will bring greater relief than looking for help from strangers to a family burdened with problems. It is not easy to divorce because the decision to divorce must be consensual among family members. This is an advantage because other members of the family might try to call a husband to order when they see that he, for example, wants to get out of the marriage for unfair reasons.

Maswanganyi³⁵ is correct in seeing this family intervention as an opportunity for Christians to evangelise the group or those relatives involved in that marriage; however, it needs to be understood that the marriage event should not be confused with or reduced to a mere missionary agency. He says: "It is an opportunity to show them that the Super-Culture of God is not hostile or destructive."

The author agrees with Maswanganyi when he emphasises that the involvement of the family and relatives has a positive effect because it opens a door for parental commitment and responsibility towards one's marriage. This is one of the positive points about family intervention. There are cases where Kimathi³⁶ is correct that problems often arise when the husband and wife have no clear policy for governing the issue of relatives. This lack of clear policy often happens particularly if the couple did not receive proper counselling in preparation for their marriage and hence, that lack on its own will become a black spot on the practice of family intervention.

Maswanganyi is certainly correct in some cases, particularly when the young couple are not yet mature enough to think for themselves. He says that parents often influence their children to get married before they are prepared spiritually, mentally, physically and financially for marriage. Just as not all parents will agree on this issue, we need to acknowledge that children will also not all agree with it because some would resist and refuse to marry before they were ready. Some children may tell their parents they first want to study before they marry.

35 E. Maswanganyi, n.d *Choosing a Life Partner* (White River: Emmanuel Press), 33.

36 See G. Kimathi, *Your Marriage and Family*. Wetenskaplike bydraes of the PU for CHE. Series F2 no 58. (Potchefstroom: IRS, 1994), 40.

Basically, Maswanganyi³⁷ is correct when arguing that these types of marriages are like a basket of mixed oranges in which some of the oranges are good and sweet but some are bad. But it is also important to be careful about making a general statement. Some families are able to reach sound agreement among themselves as an extended family and clearly some families also have irreconcilable differences, but then the issue of associating with people we disagree with on certain issues in a family does not ensure that personal differences on opinions and how to reach decisions can be used as a measurement for all African marriages. Excessive family intervention in a marriage not only overrides the rights of certain individuals but also becomes a weapon of oppression and abuse in some cases. Kathide³⁸ is correct in indicating that it becomes a tug of war where there will be paralysis resulting from the fact that the new family cannot take decisions before the in-laws give approval.

Kathide³⁹ is in agreement with Nhlapo⁴⁰ on the fact that the extended family relationship sometimes serves to subordinate the interests of women as persons to the interests of a wider group. Although the custom may have its own good intentions, I am personally critical if the very same custom is used by others to create or promote gender imbalances or even any form of oppression. If the practice is used to promote male superiority against female inferiority, a revision of such a practice becomes an urgent one. The good intentions of every practice, including family intervention, should be maintained for the sake of goodness, but should not be used to abuse and oppress other people.

The family intervention should not compromise or hinder the biblical message of "leave and cleave" which is always a good, if well understood, for every marriage to endure.⁴¹ Sometimes child dependency or parental superiority may cause this problem, of undermining the message of "leave and cleave". In some cases parents become over-attached to their children and depend on them for everything to such an extent that even after he marries the parents may demand that he gives them his salary.

Sometimes family intervention may force the children to engage in ancestor worship, particularly if most family members are not Christians. Lastly, the author fully agrees with Masenya⁴² who observes that most of our churches and

37 See E. Maswanganyi, *Choosing a Marriage Partner*, 33.

38 A.G. Kathide, *Bone of My Bones*, 108.

39 See A.G. Kathide, *Bone of My Bones*, 108.

40 T.R. Nhlapo, "The African Family and Women's Rights, Friends or Foes?", *Acta Juridica* (1991), 135-146, 135.

41 See M.E. Baloyi, *Counseling Christian Shangaans on Choosing a Marriage Partner*, 18.

42 M. Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), "Sacrificing Female Bodies at the Altar of Male Privilege: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading of Judges 19", *Journal of Theology and Religion in Africa* 27, no. 1 (2003), 98-122, 102.

households remain patriarchal in their orientation, and the author still supports the issue of family involvement – of course for the sake of advice and not for dictatorship. Van der Walt⁴³ agrees: “Ask for their honest judgements.” It is important for African traditional people to recognise that the times when abuse and violence against women was orchestrated by either culture or tradition are gone, particularly now that human rights are central to most debates. It is ruthless to continue using those traditional trends to violate and subject people because the South African constitution demands a change away from these tendencies. Lastly, I commend the practice of living together with extended family members for many reasons, including helping and supporting each other – but there should be a difference between “instructing, commanding, dictating” and giving advice to the couple. Extended family relationships are good practice for African marriages, as long as they do not undermine the authority of the couple in decision making.

Pastoral Guidelines

Pastoral handling of relationships

This becomes a very difficult issue because western models of counselling do not particularly help in a situation where African communalism is a custom; hence, according to the immediate family, the two extended families should be involved. It is the church’s role through its pastoral services to ensure that the families and the in-laws, particularly in the Christian family, are pastorally educated to not become involved in one’s family issues without being invited. It is good to advise and help where necessary (e.g. trying to stop a fight or divorce), but that should not give family members licence to interfere without being requested to do so. That is in line with what Kathide⁴⁴ advises when he says that the in-laws and extended family members need to know that they should be invited to become involved in issues by the new family. Perhaps it will need a wise pastor who knows the tradition and practice very well to develop a communal counselling strategy such as that suggested by Phaswana among the Vha-Venda speaking people.⁴⁵

Message of leave and cleave

Pastoral marriage counsellors sometimes ignore or are confused about the teaching

43 B.J. van der Walt, *Can I Marry Someone Who Holds Different Faith from Mine?* Orientation Issue no. 58-62, 58-62. (Potchefstroom, IRS, 1991), 10.

44 See A.G. Khathide, *Bone of My Bones*, 109.

45 D.R. Phaswana, “Communal Pastoral Counseling: Culturally Gifted Care-giving in Times of Family Pain. A Vha-Venda Perspective”. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of South Africa, 2008.

of "leave and cleave". It is important, without compromising the African customs, to carefully teach this message to both the parents and the new couple, especially when preparing them to marry. Although teaching on "leave and cleave" is not the focus area of this study, it is important to highlight a few things which pastoral caregivers need to take into consideration when helping new couples and their families. First, leave and cleave, according to Carson, France, Motyer and Wenham, does not necessarily mean to move geographically, but it means to put one's wife's interests above all others, parents included.⁴⁶ This is slightly in disagreement with Kathide who emphasises that geographical distance can be helpful and should be encouraged.

The author's opinion is that it is not the distance that necessarily counts but it is the emotional attachment; therefore it is possible to leave geographically, but remain attached emotionally. So without prescribing whether the couple should leave geographically or not, the author emphasises the importance of the emotional detachment which is still possible whether the couple lives far from or close to the parents. This detachment does not imply that parents and other family members do not give advice to the couple, but the issue is that, even after advising, the advisors must not expect the couple to blindly accept their advice. In this way the mutual relationship between the couple and relatives will be handled properly, without disturbing or interfering unnecessarily with the marriage. Matthews says that leave implies that marriage requires a new priority by the marital partners where obligations to one's spouse supplant a person's loyalties.⁴⁷ There should be a clear difference between forsaking and leaving in this context. I agree with Kathide that leaving the parents does not mean ignoring or forsaking them when they need a helping hand. The couple should still respect, honour and seek advice from them. Another point is to indicate that all this does not mean that the advice from parents and other relatives should just be ignored, but it is the responsibility of the couple to discern, select and take heed of helpful advice.

Teaching the new couple about independent decision making

Family enrichment courses and conferences should also focus on freeing new couples to be able to think on their own, independently. Connecting to what Kimathi has to say on the lack of clear policies on part of the couple, it is necessary that the church to which the couple belongs takes it upon its shoulders to mentor or teach the new couples about independent thinking.⁴⁸ Some depend

46 D.A. Carson, T.R. France, J.A. Motyer, and G.J. Wenham, *Bible Commentary* 21st Century Edition (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 61.

47 K.A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary*, Vol 1 (Library of Congress: Broadman and Hollman, 1996), 223.

48 Kimathi, *Your Marriage and Family*, 80.

on their pastors and parents, and therefore marriage is the time when they should be released to think on their own, which also involves the pastoral vision of the church. It is sometimes very dangerous for parents and pastors to expect a couple to remain dependent on them after marriage. In one case a couple ended up divorcing as the husband claimed (and even told the author) that his wife, instead of discussing family issues with him, consulted her pastor about buying a car without the husband knowing. Workshops, conferences and seminars, as well as pastoral visitations and other means, should aim at freeing couples to think independently. I want to close this discussion by saying that part of the goals of marriage counselling is to help the couple involved to work out solutions to their problems to the advantage of each, both interpersonally and legally.

Conclusion

Family intervention is an African tradition which had been in practice and is continuing to be practised by some even today. This custom had been beneficial for uniting African people, the idea which Mofokeng would love to support, even though it also had its own problems in some areas, especially where couples and the entire family were not clear about their roles. The arguments indicated clearly that without the practice of the custom, it is possible for one's African identity to be questioned. It is therefore the duty of the church, through its pastoral services, to ensure that for the sake of the independence and happiness of the family, the couples know their responsibility while the entire family also know theirs. My opinion is that for the custom to continue enriching its own people, there is much to be learnt about African marriage and the intentions of its customs – rather than just throwing away fine customs which identify African people among other people of the world. Besides the benefits of custom, the research indicates clearly that there is a difference between advice and command; hence African people should learn that it will not only offend the couple if one unnecessarily interferes and issues commands, but it might also be considered an offence against human rights as set down in our constitution. Lastly, it is very important that parents should liberate their children by educating and teaching them responsibility and decision making, as well as independent thinking skills, to avoid unnecessary interventions when they are married.

Biographical Notes of Authors

James H. Cone is an African American theologian, best known for his advocacy of Black liberation theology. He is the author of *A Black Theology of Liberation* and his most recent book is *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. He is currently the Charles Augustus Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

Elijah Magezi Baloyi lives in Pretoria and is Practical Theology Discipline Leader at the University of South Africa. Being a Christian church pastor also challenges his mind to research the context in which he lives, where some African customs are being rejected by Africans, without specific reasons. Due to urbanization as well as western civilization most young couples are rejecting their extended family members and that is a concern for the study. This article is influenced by his newly published book entitled "Building African Christian Marriage" in which the topic of extended family relationships received attention. Readers understand that being a Christian in the African context does not imply that one has to blindly replace his/her African traditions with western ones, but they should be able to discern between bad and good from the traits.

Francisca Hildegardis Chimhanda is a black Zimbabwean and Roman Catholic nun working in South Africa. She is concerned about the dignity and vocation of women surrounding Christian liberation theological discourses (including eco-justice), whose access points are, gender, ethnicity, class and creed. She explored these issues in her (published) masters and doctoral dissertation and thesis and has also written several articles and two book chapters. At present, she attempts to take liberation, feminist, eco-feminist and black theological discourses further in researching on the liberation potential of Shona culture and the gospel, focusing specifically on a post-feminist perspective.

Jennifer Slater lives in Hartbeespoort, Northwest Province and works in the Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, in the discipline of Theological Ethics, at the University of South Africa in Pretoria. She holds two PhD degrees: one in Systematic Theology (Unisa) and the other in New Testament Studies (Fribourg, Switzerland). Freedom, as an inherent feature of being human as well as an ethical credential for Christian living, forms part of her research in both PhD's, but in particular in the New Testament research where it is dealt with from a Pauline ethical perspective. The notion of freedom remains, for her, a valued interest since, as a theological-anthropological and ethical concept, it has