

## **ABALUYIA MARRIAGE AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

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*African Christian Theology is always concerned about relating biblical teaching to traditional customs. Because Evangelicals believe that all truth is God's truth, we are prepared to accept truth whatever its source and wherever it is found. Because Evangelicals believe in natural revelation and common grace, we recognise that customs and cultures reflect the divine revelation alongside of the depravity and rebellion of natural man. Hence we are always eager to assess and evaluate customs and cultures to ascertain what is biblical and approved by God and what is to be rejected as emanating from the sinful nature.*

*The authors of this article examine their own traditional beliefs about marriage among the Abaluyia and seek to find ways for the church to strengthen Christian marriage among their people.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to highlight some of the aspects of the *Abaluyia* traditional marriage. The authors seek to suggest that the church could be relevant today, albeit in the dynamic modern period. The aspects dealt with are preparation for life and marriage itself and divorce. We think that these are very pertinent issues for the pastorate today.

It should be pointed out, however, that the *Abaluyia* comprise sixteen major sub-tribes which may differ at various points in custom. Indeed, the authors are from three different groups. However, the practices are quite similar on the whole, and as Wagner points out, 'the cosmologic and cosmological ideas agree in most essentials' (Wagner 1976:30).

But before tackling any of these issues, it is helpful to understand a bit of the *Abaluyia* world view pertaining to marriage.

### **ABALUYIA TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES**

#### ***Abaluyia* World View**

Among the *Abaluyia*, it is the obligation of every man and woman to marry and procreate. Any marriage is not complete without children. Not to marry is an abnormal thing which disrupts the social set up of the whole community of elders, ancestors and *emisambwa* (guardian spirits). Indeed, this and childlessness calls for ritual cleansing where various *emisango* are offered to remove the *oluswa* and to bring fruitfulness.

The senior members of the clan and family view failure to marry and childlessness as threats to their existence, both in the physical and spiritual worlds. Who will take care of them in old age is an issue, and then, there will be no one to serve and sacrifice to them when they die (Wagner 1976: 35). Moreover the *emisambwa* would be displeased and may wreak some retribution on the family or even clan. Cases are known where some ancestral spirit makes a child cry continuously until the child is named after that spirit. In

marriage and child bearing there is, therefore, the continuity of name, family, clan and tribe. The person with many children, especially first born boys, is said to be 'one who has eaten with their right hand' (Wako 1988:21), no wonder the *Luyia* anthem says, *Mwana wa mberi, ni eshiekhoyero* (the first born is a pride).

The more children there are, higher the social status of the family and security of the clan (Lihanda *et al* 1981: 8). Barrenness among other *oluswa* (curses) means a poor ritual status, hence one cannot command authority or enjoy prestige. Further, for the woman, children were her security to remain in the home.

A successful life therefore is one lived to the satisfaction of *Were Khakaba* (God), *emisambwa*, the ancestors, elders of clan, sub-tribe and family. Knowledge that one will depart to the spirit world makes him strive to perpetuate ancestral lineage and therefore his existence. Marriage is then, not an end, but a means to continuity of life. Marriage brings together the past and future generations. Besides, while new family relations are being forged and cemented by birth of children, the departed are 'reincarnated' (Wagner, 1976:49). Even in the creation myths it is said, God provided man with a woman so that he might multiply (Wagner 1976:31,43). Is it then surprising that elaborate arrangements are made for the preparation of the children for the future?

#### ***Abaluyia* Preparation for Marriage**

Children grew and slept in the parents' house up to the age of six to ten when they would undergo some sort of initiation. Learning started early by the example of what the parents were doing. Girls stayed with their mothers, learning all about household chores, child care and farming. The boys followed the fathers in house building, cattle rearing and war (Lihanda *et al* 1981:6-7:15-16). For all children, story telling, riddles and proverbs formed a large part of their daily training in family mores. These were told by the elderly.

After initiation and puberty, the initiates can no longer stay in their parent's house. Initiation is circumcision for boys and to some extent removal of lower incisors (Wagner 1939:7). Female circumcision is largely unknown apart from the *Terik*, a mixed

group bordering the *Nandis*. Most girls would receive tribal marks on their faces as a rite of passage.

Circumcision season was and still is a time of much learning, song and revelry. The *abasinde* (initiates – persons not yet sacrificed for), go round scantily dressed, painted in white clay, singing, dancing and soliciting gifts from relatives. They then retreat into the forests, where they are not only circumcised but are taught hardship endurance and tribal values. They stay in shacks called *Murumbi*, their wounds being nursed as they learn about how to conduct themselves in marriage (Lihanda *et al* 1981:16). Secrets learnt in these places are never to be divulged to any outsider or especially women.

The boys, having become full members of the commonwealth of the clan, now move to an *isimba* (the bachelor hut of an elder brother or friend) before they put up their own. The older of these young men taught the younger on family conduct among other things.

The *eshibinze* or *eshinoko* was the place the girls moved to and stayed under the tutelage of an elderly aunt or grandmother, usually a widow. She trains them in matters of being faithful, loyal wives and mothers, and the evil of premarital pregnancies (Lihanda *et al* 1981:16,17). Education also continued as the girls worked around the house went to the river with other older women and worked round the farms communally. This was to instil diligence in the girls, showing them that lazy women were not to be married.

In the *eshibuti*, where elders relaxed with some liquor, matters pertaining to marriage could be discussed in the hearing of the young men. They were also sometimes allowed to listen into the cases in the 'courts'. Now that they were considered men they could carry out any conversation with any elder. Boys were at ease with their grandfathers and would accompany them to all sorts of places as part of their training. So they learned how to take care of their future homes, about war, famine, death and sacrifices.

So when one was ready to marry they knew exactly what was expected of them in taking care of their *Litala* (homestead).

### ***Abaluyia* Transition into Marriage**

When a young man wanted to marry, a go-between called *wanjira* would be selected to investigate the lady whom the man and his family were interested in (Wako 1988:3). *Wanjira* did this unobtrusively and discreetly and when satisfied, let the suitor know. The man's family then openly declared their intent to the girl's family who also asked for time in which they too investigated this family. They tried to be their best, hiding any kind of disease or secret witchcraft practices. Kinship marriage was absolutely forbidden (Wako 1988:4).

When nothing was found to be the matter, a *ehunwa* (cow) was given to the girl's family and bride-price negotiations begun immediately. It was taboo for the boy to plan his engagement and marriage without the investigations and involvement of both families. It could cause enmity between the families (Wako 1988:4).

But when all negotiation steps went smoothly, the girl's family would escort her to her husband with pomp and food. All the while there has been no communication allowed between the couple. Now several celebrations take place at both homes. *Ingombe yo khubuka amakulu* (the cow to cover the footsteps) is given (Wako 1988:12). The marriage celebrations were usually concluded with the slaughter and sacrifice of a goat for the purpose of blessing and protecting the new bride (*imbusi yetsinuni*).

After marriage, married sons continued to live with their parents, obviously not sharing their parents' house, until they could set up a family homestead of their own, usually after the birth of at least one child (Wagner 1939:6). The new wife is then permitted to have her own cooking place, following the *eshitekho* rite to celebrate the new status of motherhood and fatherhood. Having children meant that one was now no longer a boy or girl but really, a man and a wife, who may now receive visitors (*Ibid.*, 9). A prolific wife will command a lot of respect. A man may marry more wives, though the first one remains special and honoured.

### ***Abaluyia* and Divorce**

Like many other traditional societies, marriage was never expected to breakdown. As has been shown, marriage was complete and final after the birth of children. Gifts had already been given and received, sealing the relationship therefore making it very difficult to dissolve it. To the knowledge of the authors, there is no word for divorce among *Abaluyia*.

Be that as it may, marriage did breakdown for a variety of causes. The one most important cause was the inability to bear children. As was observed in the world view, barrenness blocks the stream of life. Still, neither barrenness nor bearing of daughters was openly accepted as grounds for divorce but were more often than not the real causes. Unfortunately, it was rather one sided. If it happened to be the man who was barren, his brother could father children for him. An alternative to divorce was to bring in a *omuyeeti*, that is, a woman to help the barren wife.

Other causes were repeated infidelity on the part of the woman; persistent evasion of marital duties by either partner, *obulosi* (witchcraft), or if a wife openly lives with another man with no intention of returning. A wife who ran to her parents with no good reason was promptly sent back to her husband. The offended partner may bring the matter before the court of elders (*eshiina*) to be sorted out. Flimsy reasons could not be accepted to send away a wife. In the case that the union had to be severed, then the full bride-wealth had to be returned to the man. Marriage remained valid until this was done. The wife thereafter laid no claim either to the children or any property. She went away in shame, hoping that the children would redeem her one day. As Mbiti points out, dissolution of marriage created a great scar in the community concerned (Mbiti 1969:145). This is because marriage is viewed as a 'process' of enhancing *obulamu* (life), not snuffing it out. All in all, divorce was the exception rather than the rule.

## **THE CHURCH'S EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN MARRIAGE AMONG THE ABALUYIA**

The Old and New Testaments hold a high view of marriage. It is understood to be perpetuation of that fundamental social unit which God created. Divorce was extraordinary, an action hated by God (Mal. 2:6). God expects his will to be taught and inculcated in every generation and culture (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 4:6:7; Matt. 28:20; Eph. 6:4).

Now, culture cannot be completely abandoned when people become Christians. Every part of it must be carefully evaluated. Some aspects of it may be helpful, some neutral and some harmful to the gospel. Those practices which are in line with the gospel must be emphasised as a bridge to that culture. In our particular context, principles from particular rites of passage in the family should be used to enrich families in the church. Our world view is shaped by the Bible.

### **Preparation for and Enrichment of Marriage**

What may the church do as modernity breaks up the close knit kinship and family system in which all education took place? How may we help Christians to build strong family structures in the midst of individualism, rebellion and ignorance that are disastrous to marriages even in the church?

We would like to suggest that education should begin in the church at all levels. In the traditional society children begin to learn at tender ages. The parents, grandparents and other kin spent a lot of time preparing the young ones for life. The modern parent, because of pressure to earn a living, has little time, if any, for the children. Other kin members are far off, busy in their own pursuits. So children grow up in ignorance and get into relationships and marriages through hearsay. Terrible mistakes are consequently made with irreparable damage.

### **Parental Priority**

Parents must be taught over and over again that the development of their family is their first priority. What will it profit a man if he

gains the whole world and loses his family? This traditional and biblical idea must be stressed in sermons, Bible studies, seminars and camps. Deuteronomy 4 and 6 are primary. This may mean introducing family life departments in the church to sharpen this primary unit of society. The family altar is of course not negotiable.

### **Professional Laity**

Together with parental training there is no shortage of all sorts of professionals in the church who could replace the traditional specialists. Whereas aunts, uncles and grandparents strained themselves to bring up especially good girls, so that they might obtain a portion of the bride wealth, today Christian doctors, lawyers, counsellors, gynaecologists, and others, could do it to gain an imperishable crown! The trouble is they are never asked and their abilities not employed by the church.

### **Godfathers and Mothers**

The ideas of godparents when people are baptised or confirmed in some churches and best couples in weddings are good, comparable to the kin who traditionally trained people for life. But these are poorly utilised. Godparents and best couples hardly know their discipling responsibilities. The pastorate must teach them the enormity of their responsibilities, even being answerable to God. Like *Wanjira* (go between), they must be selected carefully.

### **Priority of Children and Youth Ministries**

A growing church is one with vibrant children's and youth ministries. These are the people who need the pastoral resources most, but are ignored in most churches, and at best treated as appendages. Children and youth in the traditional society were never treated this way. They were valued, trained, initiated and incorporated into the clan. Should the church of Christ not care more for those it baptises, confirms, dedicates and weds every year? Camps could take the place of the annual initiation ceremonies. What about Vacation Bible Schools? An untested idea in Africa! Why not take these opportunities to teach youth about puberty, sexuality, passion, virginity, relationship with the opposite sex,



courtship, engagement, marriage commitment, love, conflict resolution and accountability? This would help prepare the youth to live in a God honouring way in this ungodly society. Intelligent decision will be made for richer fulfilled families.

The authors are impressed in this area by a Nairobi church that holds marriage preparation classes for those aspiring to marry. Should couples marry without a graduation certificate?

### **Communal Wedding Support**

Weddings in the traditional society were a communal effort from both families. Challenge and encouragement should be given to church fellowships to carry one another's burden instead of the exploitative pre-wedding parties. Weddings should be simple, not extravagant.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Like in the Bible, divorce was tolerated but not easily granted. A husband had to present his case convincingly to the elders before he could get back his bride wealth. At the same time a woman could not just take off for flimsy reasons. Her parents would send her back. The church should encourage dialogue and communication by organising family enrichment seminars and also ask relevant professionals to be available for hurting marriages. This vacuum must be filled or else Satan fills it with breakdown and divorces. The pulpit must be used to the maximum in emphasising these matters.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Perfecting the Saints, for the Work of the Ministry**

What we have said, cannot be done by the clergy alone. Elders are to ensure that members have appropriated the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given them. God has provided many people with various abilities in His body, the Church. It is the work of the pastorate to

seek out these (various gifts and offices) and organise them to edify the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12).

As elders ensure that the above takes place, believers will be spared from any departure from truth to error. The believers then will know the Word of God's grace in order to distinguish that which is traditional and harmful to the gospel from that which is traditional but not harmful to the gospel. This will only take place as they are encouraged to sanctify themselves for the priesthood of all believers (Acts 20:29-32).

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