Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi
İslami İlimler Araştırma Vakfı (İSAV)

DİNLERDE NİKÂH
Milletlerarası Tartışmali İlimi Toplantı

Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi
Ethem Ruhi Fiğlalı Konferans Salonu

İzmir, 06 - 08 Nisan 2012

İstanbul 2012
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IN ZIMBABWEAN CULTURE. AN ANALYSIS OF THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE MARRIAGE IN THE SHONA TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe Kültüründe Evlilik Ve Aile Hayatı: Zimbabwe’deki Şona Dini Geleneklerinde Evliliğin Kültü-rel Yönleri Üzerine Bir Analiz

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Introduction

In the Shona traditional religion marriage has some cultural aspects that have to be met without which that marriage is not regarded as proper. In a way marriage is important for everyone. This entails that they are certain things that have to be met before being pronounced married. Some of these things are the small payments and the Lobola itself which is the marriage deal proper. It is the main aim of this paper to analyse the cultural aspects of marriage in the Shona traditional religion in Zimbabwe citing the major proponents.

Background to the aspect of marriage in Zimbabwe

“Marriage is an institution which now has a variety of forms in Shona society, with respect both to the rites and customs by which the union is achieved and to the nature of the union itself.”(Bourdillon M F C, 1976: 36) From this idea it is evident that the marriage ritual may differ in the way

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they are done but the elements or the ideal of marriage remains. Gelfand (Gelfand M, 1973: 167) puts it that “marriage is probably the most important single event in the life of the Shona man—that great day when he becomes a full member of the group, a full participant of the society”. For the traditional Shona, marriage is essentially a contract between families. Although the couple had right to choose what they wanted yet the negotiations towards the marriage normally require participation by senior representatives of each family. This then entails that marriage is not for an individual but rather it involves the family. Thus marriage in our culture has an important aspect of relationship between families. Further among the Shona, marriage is primarily a contract between groups rather than between individuals. “The Christian Churches regard as the date of marriage as that date on which the spouses give to each other their consent in church in front of a priest and two other witnesses”. (Weinrich; op.cit, 81). On the other hand in our traditional religion marriage does not begin with the transfer of the bride to the husband’s home. Thus the Shona people do not share with Christianity the condemnation of staying together of the couple before Church marriage. The traditional marriages were also polygamous. Most Shona marriages remain monogamous, but when the wife has borne several children and is becoming older the couple may decide together that it is time for them to take a second (Gelfand M: op.cit). Marriage was also with those whom one had sure knowledge about them and this they called kuroorana vematongo in which they encouraged people to marry those whom they knew better than foreigners.

**Purpose of Marriage in Traditional Zimbabwe**

There were two main purposes of marriage in Zimbabwe which were regarded as the guiding reasons why people would engage in the event.
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IN ZIMBABWEAN CULTURE.
AN ANALYSIS OF THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE MARRIAGE
IN THE SHONA TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN ZIMBABWE

a) Socio-economic purpose

Large families warranted large workforce and hence they enhanced the
economy of the family. In the traditional Shona in Zimbabwe people
emphasized on peasant farming and this was the source of income for food
and families upkeep. As such families whose members were many had more
income and less paying for labourers who would work in their fields. For
such a purpose families that had many children were at an advantage
economically and worse still if their children were males because they
would bring their wives adding to the family’s number than the women
who would end up leaving the family to join others through marriage.
Weinrich A K H (op.cit) in light of this argued that spinsters not only
prevent their families from increasing in size but make it difficult for their
brothers to marry. As they are married, the brothers use their lobola to
marry also.

b) Religious purpose

On this purpose Chiriseri C (2011: 2) argued that marriage is a union
that is necessitated by the blessing of God. It is what God has joined which
no one including themselves (the married) should not put asunder or
separate. The Shona has another religious aspect to the marriage where they
believe in the re-incarnation through birth. In this manner procreation is
regarded as critical for any marriage. Oduyoye M A (1992: 141) argues the
fertility of the women is the biological foundation of marriage and it governs
male-female relations within the institution. According to Weinrich (op.cit.)
those who do not marry are ‘vagrants who have no home and no one to
remember them in the future after death.’ In agreement to this Hatendi R P
(1973:136) argues that procreation is the flower of marriage and vonbarn
wanuka (he who begets is resurrected). Thus childless is a serious curse in
the Shona tradition. An unmarried person is ungrateful to his parents and
family who have brought him up. This is like what Bourdillon (op.cit:43)
had to note that marriage in the Shona traditional religion has an obligation
to continue the family lineage. Hence celibacy has no place in Shona traditional religion because marriage perpetuates people. To die without a child would be regarded as a tragedy and such people would be buried with either a maize cob or a mouse on their back. This was an indication that they failed to achieve what has been required of them in their life time because for the Shona people, children are indelible footprints. Hence in the process of marriage, the part of marriage when the man pays the *rusambo* (to be elaborated further in the paper on the process) he is paying for the womb (*chibereko*) for form it is expected children. This is kept religiously by the traditional Shona in Zimbabwe.

**Types of marriage in traditional Shona**

There are various forms of marriages in the traditional Shona people’s custom. These will just be explained with their significance for the Shona people. These are *musenga bere* meaning to carry the woman you admire to your homestead, similar to kidnaping. There is also *kuganhirya* or *kubanira* (where the man will pay bride-wealth for a girl child yet to be born or young as his wife). This was similar to the betrothal. When the men did not have money he would work for her. It was not common but to a few families who were either poor or lacked food and had children to give as payment in exchange for labour or food. Inheritance or *kugara nhaka* was when a woman would replace her sister in case she died and she performs the duty of the wife or *kumutsa mapfhiwe*. Elopement or *kutizira/kutizisa kutiza mukumbo* are a type of marriage where the two would agree to just get together because the man may have impregnated the woman. He would take her without his parents’ knowledge and not yet paid lobola for her and would arrange a day to pay a fee to the woman’s parents not to worry of her whereabouts but to look for her at his house also called *matshvikira kuno* (C and P Kileff, 1970: 36). These types of marriage were done but not accepted and legal by the custom and hence did not stay long in the practice because they were infringing on people’s freedom. The accepted one and most spread one is
Marriage and Family Life in Zimbabwean Culture.
An Analysis of the Cultural Aspects of the Marriage in the Shona Traditional Religion in Zimbabwe

the *kukumbira* or the asking for a hand in marriage with the paying of lobola. This had a way of preparation as in the following discussions.

**Marriage Preparation in Traditional Shona**

Traditionally, the society helped one to marry hence marriage was a societal or communitarian obligation. When one marries they will be marrying as a representative of a society. In the Western scenario one marries by consent and in the African context, particularly in the traditional Shona, one marries by consensus. As such the family background is well assessed and vetted and they ask questions like *ndevoekwaani* (whose child is he or she). Marriage preparation helped define the roles and responsibilities of the people in the community and this ensured high rate of marriage success.

**As a wife-to-be**

The woman’s training begins as early as the age of 9 with her tutor being her father’s sister (*vatete* - paternal aunt). For the girl chastity before marriage would lead to her high value. Hence the *vatete* would instruct her to maintain her virginity. She was not supposed to be spoilt by any man before the traditional marriage. P Chidyausiku (1987:36) narrates that she would be taken to the river at the age of 14 to be inspected of her virginity. This is done because the loss of it was a cause of embarrassment to the family. It was also taken as a moral weakness for girls to associate with boys regularly. The *vatete* would teach her many lessons on the sexual matters. She was taught how to stretch her minor labia which was to give much pleasure to her man. This was done in a practical way because in Africa sex is regarded as an art and not an act and needed much training at the ritual called *chinamwari*. This is done at a certain season where the boys and girls go away from the rest of the society, separately though, and get these lessons from the elderly of the community.
Unlike in the Western context where their primary role of marriage is for being a husband or wife, in the African context the primary role is being a *muroora* (a daughter-in-law -this however, does not exactly explain the roles of the woman and the relationship she will be having with her husband’s family). The *muroora* must know her duties beforehand and how to be one as well as accepting this role. Her maternal aunt would have taken time since the age of 9 or earlier. This is because there are some African expectation and obligations that go with the roles. In the West she is a ‘sister-in-law’ which does not emphasise her core-purpose and duty. In African context the woman would have to perform certain duties before going to honeymoon e.g. doing the traditional ritual of *kugeza mabori* (giving water for bathing to the groom’s family). With the coming of Christianity most of these roles have lost value and purpose because they are not emphasized.

**As a husband-to-be**

Like for the girls the process begins at a tender age. The boys would learn a lot of *(ugano)* folklores by the *sekuru* (uncles) who were the city of wisdom in the community at the *dare* (traditional court). Preparations were in the practical way. A Chigwedere (1982:18) argues that “young men joined older boys and men in looking after animals, fighting, building pens, repairing and building huts and caring for their young ones”. They were taught thoroughly when reaching marriageable age. They at times received instructions from their brothers’ wives in order to acquire knowledge. Senior members gave instructions of marriage on how to be responsibly in a home and this would be practical demonstration. The ideas of the community experience of marriage roles and responsibility of the house were also taught. He would be prepared to be a *mukwasha* or *mukwasha* (son-in-law). In the traditional Shona this means to be a ‘hunter’. Hence they have a proverb “*mukwasha mukuyu haapere kudziwa*” meaning that he is like an all season wild tree that does not cease to bear fruits. For the man this means that he has to continually provide for the wife’s family at all time and he
does not get out of season. According to C Chigwedere (ibid) everybody is born to marry in order to perpetuate himself or herself and from the age of about 11 years more education about marriage and married life is given to them by tutors from both sexes. For R P Hatendi (1973: 39) “man is a social being than an individual, worth of dignity.” In Shona tradition the person is epitomised and an individual does not stand apart from the large group. He is their representative.

Stages of Marriage in the traditional Shona custom

There are various stages in the process of marriage in Africa depending on the location hence in the traditional Shona marriage these stages have certain significances. This part of the paper seeks to provide the stages of marriage in Zimbabwean Shona marriage.

Love proposal

This is also known as kuryenga or kupimba and it took a dual form. On one hand the young man made the choice hence moyo muti unomera pumudza (meaning it is a choice of the individual). He would then informs his uncles who would then do the rest for him. On the other hand, the elders made the choice and sought their son’s approval. This would be done when their son has reached a marriageable age and they would scout for a suitable young woman. It was a social obligation and the boy had to abide by the rule and participate. The other members of the family participated in the process because they considered the family’s reputation in the process of marriage. They believed the young man had not experience in choosing and had to depend upon the elders.

The Engagement

This was a symbolic expression of love. There was an exchange of clothes or something that represented the acceptance of love and pledge to marry. For the Shona people this was called nduma or nhundi (meaning a pledge) and is like the English engagement ring. In the Ndebele it is called
ndeundato where a woman prepares from grass for the boy’s neck or finger. When this event is taking place the aunt is the key witness. The Shona girl would prepare a well done little basket. After reaching this stage the exchange

The Negotiations

This first stage of the ritual is the involvement of the munyai or negotiator who is the medium who will help in the negotiations of the marriage process. The first payment in the ritual will be the kuvhura muromo meaning ‘opening the mouth’. This is a request to the girl’s father to open his mouth so that he can start the marriage negotiations. Then follows the matekenya udebov which is a payment for the reason that when his bride was a little girl, she used to play about with the beard of her father. Occasionally, she used to pull it possibly to the inconvenience of the father hence the man to marry her gets to pay for the trouble. Yet when his child was growing up he never took it as an issue because in the Shona tradition beard resembles wealth, growth and gather much respect. Among these payments is the mukandinzwa nani which means ‘from whom did you hear that I have a beautiful girl?’ This did not seek any answer at all verbally but through payments and mapfukudza dumbo which is a payment done to the mother traditionally for the distortion of the mother’s tummy or posture caused by the firstborn daughter.

Bride wealth is the custom of handling over livestock or valuable goods (eventually money) to the bride’s family on the occasion of a marriage. It is especially tenacious where cattle have a relational value. For Chigwedere (op. cit) these small charges are never looked upon as an important element of the marriage deal. They have no binding force between husband and wife. This aspect of lobola can be abolished without any adverse social repercussions on the family of society at large. Hence the marriage deal only begun after paying other important things such as Rusambo. This would give the man the rights to claim that he was married. “After paying Rusambo, the
man claimed to be married and claimed title to the bride even though no
cattle had yet been paid. Likewise after this stage, the woman was married
and claimed title to the husband and was entitled to certain rights and
privileges". The payment of the cattle gives one rights to claim the children
and it is an important item in lobola.

"Traditionally paying cattle was for the children in the marriage deal". It
follows then that this is a sine qua non for the husband since the main aim
for marrying is children. The best thing a woman can give to the husband is
to keep him alive and the other things were just secondary. This then is the
most important thing and it still remains the most important thing. “Apart
from bride wealth which is universal in Zimbabwe, the Shona have
preserved two other livestock prestations linked with fertility, at least on
which, “the cow of motherhood” seems to have been customary. The two
payments are masungiro (a pregnancy ritual) and mombe youmai (the cow of
motherhood). Both are linked to the matrilineal ancestral spirits”(Kileff
op.cit). Usually the masungiro goat is given as a way thanking the mother-in-
law for passing on her fertility to a new generation. Traditionally the
masungiro ritual takes place as soon as a young wife discovers that she is
pregnant. Hence the mother-in-law is thanked by the son-in-law for passing
fertility to the wife. “So, the beast for motherhood was the payment by
which the son-in-law declared that he recognised and appreciated the role
played by the mother-in-law in the development of his wife”. Further, the
cow of motherhood is not seen as part of the bride wealth proper but a
special gift made by the son-in-law to his mother-in-law, and through her
ancestral spirits.

The impact of Christianity on the Shona traditional religion

With the coming of Christianity in a way marriage in the Shona
traditional religion has changed. In the past husbands would take second
wives for the purpose of having more children. Hence polygamy was
evident. Christianity condemned this and taught about monogamous
marriages. “So in practice, polygamous marriages have always been unusual except among the more seniors members of the community. The influence of Christianity and European culture has reduced further the incidence of polygamous marriages” (Bourdillon op.cit:49). On the other hand there are other elements that have remained unchanged and are difficult to change; one may have a ‘white wedding’ but the woman will always observe traditional custom of expressing at leaving her own family. In the same way Bourdillon (ibid) states that a Church marriage does not necessarily change the Shona perception of the union and it is usually considered an incident addition to a regular Shona marriage, often taking place after the birth of a child: since divorce and remarriage is difficult or impossible in Christian communities, a husband wants to be sure that his wife is not barren before he enters the contract. This by itself is a witness that through Christianity came changing other aspects but not all aspects can be changed. Today the charges depends on how educated the bride might be. The names we are sticking to are certainly traditional; the principal lobola is also certainly part of our tradition, but exhortations that have crept into the system have nothing to do with our tradition.

More so we have lost the essence of what lobola meant to our forefathers and we are after no more than monetary gains regardless of the consequences of this on the young couple getting into married life. This is what Chigwedere (op.cit.) condemns for many are using this as a way of raising capital. “The greatest extortion that has crept into the institution lies in the fact that today it is no longer the bride alone who ‘picks her share’ several others have come into it to make capital out of the system”. By and large the Shona traditional religion has been watered down by the coming of Christianity and the need of monetary gains. “As the immersion of the Shona into the monetary economy gives more emphasis to, personal ownership, the group aspects of marriage payments are diminishing”. Bride-wealth is not a ‘bride-price’; women are not bought and sold, though bride-wealth may come close to this as a result of the introduction of money, and
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IN ZIMBABWEAN CULTURE. 
AN ANALYSIS OF THE CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE MARRIAGE 
IN THE SHONA TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN ZIMBABWE

of the bridegroom being assessed according to his capacity to pay. In which 
the people now seek to make more profit and it is likely they are selling their 
daughters and this is against their dignity. Chigwedere (ibid) complains: 
“since 1890 (the year Zimbabwe was colonized) we have become 
commercialized, every aspect of lobola has become a matter of money”.

Therefore marriage in the Shona traditional religion is an important 
event that every man aspires for. In this marriage the primary purpose is to 
get children. Traditionally the greatest service the bride rendered to her 
husband lay in ‘keeping him alive’. Thus the ritual has to be met and all the 
requirements paid so as to render that a proper marriage with all the rights 
without which one cannot claim to be married. This paper has discussed the 
stages and explained some of the aspects that were done in the traditional 
Shona life but no longer done in the modern world of the Shona people. The 
coming of the Christian tradition has also affected the Shona tradition and 
marriages done have a mixture of the Christian culture and traditional 
culture with the former covering the latter. Since culture is dynamic and 
changing there are new aspects coming in to influence those already 
available.

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200

DİNLERDE NİKĀH

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