

## **Christian Teachings on Marriage and Its Impact on Customary Marriage among the Iteso of North Teso**

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### **Abstract**

*The Iteso are the sub group of Plain Nilotes found in Western Kenya. The Iteso as community observe their traditional practices and rites on marriage. Christianity brought different teachings on marriage. Despite these new teachings, the Iteso continued to preserve their traditional practices in relation to marriage. The study focuses on the Iteso marriage rites and practices, and the extent to which Christianity and other variables such as modernisation, urbanisation and westernisation have influenced those rites and practices among the Iteso of North Teso sub-County. The purpose of this study was to investigate the Christian impact on the Iteso marriage rites and practices. The objectives of the research were: to examine the Christian teachings on marriage and how they have been adopted by the Iteso of North Teso. To investigate how Christianity has caused an impact on Iteso customary marriage. Questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to interview the respondents in North Teso. Purposive sampling, and snowballing were also used in order to reach the selected respondents. Functionalist theory of attitudes by Katz and Sarnoff was used. This theory states that attitudes are determined by the functions they serve for us. People hold given attitudes because these attitudes help them achieve their basic goals. The four major functions of attitudes include: adjustment functions, ego defensive function, value expressive function; and knowledge function. The Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches were sampled because they are the dominant denominations in the study area; a total of twenty four respondents were interviewed to get in-depth information. The above methods were enriched by information sought from published and unpublished literature in Kenya. Data was classified and coded into similar themes and descriptive analysis applied to get the findings. The findings indicate that: while Christianity emphasise on monogamy as the legal form of marriage, the Iteso on the other hand view the three forms like wife-inheritance, polygamy and monogamy as legal: the Iteso still value some of their traditions on marriage in spite of Christian influence and other variables such as westernization, modernization, urbanization, among others: . The study recommends that scholars can research on birth, naming and death rites, among other communities or the concept of polygamy and the church in Kenya.*

**Key words:** Christian teachings, customary marriage and Iteso

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Iteso are Subgroup of plain Nilotes found in western Kenya, who claim to have come from Abyssinia (current Ethiopia). They migrated southwards into Uganda and occupied the districts of Soroti (Resp1, 3/12/2015); some live in Tororo and Busia districts of Kenya. The Iteso in North Teso had their rites and practices on marriage which united them before Christianity was introduced. Christianity, through western culture, brought its teachings, rites and practices that a Christian who is marrying or getting married should observe. In spite of the missionaries' efforts to change traditional practices on marriage which they saw as devilish and satanic, the practices still persist today because of the cultural importance the Iteso attach to them.

*African marriage can be defined as an agreement between a man and a woman who have decided to have a long lasting relationship as husband and wife. It can also be referred to as a social affair which involves all members of the community.*

In traditional Africa, marriage is a duty and a requirement for everyone in the community. Those who do not marry or get married are considered rebels, law breakers, and abnormal members in the community. Moreover, failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned is deemed to have rejected the society and so society also rejects him or her. Marriage as an institution is ordained by God. The young boys and girls were prepared for this sacred duty during initiation.

Marriage involved several functions, including procreation, where husband and wife had a duty to make sure that the departed members of the family were "reborn" in their descendants. Also marriage does not end with the death of a husband. This was because when a man died leaving behind a widow, she would be married by a close relative of the deceased. Children born out of this union belong to the deceased man. This was done in order to care for the dead man's family and continue his lineage.

In African concept, the choice of a marriage partner is done by the elders. But sometimes a young man and woman make their own choices though these choices must be approved by the elders. Traditionally, marriage is seen as a covenant relationship because it fulfils all the elements of a covenant, including the making of vows between the couple and the two families, the sealing of the marriage ceremony through payment of the bride price in the presence of witnesses, and acknowledgement of the consequences on the couple if the agreement is broken.

This study investigated the Christian influence on customary marital practices, among the Iteso Christians in Teso North District. The study will act as a point of reference and also a teaching aid for scholars. It will help scholars to know the Iteso culture on marriage, understand why some of the customs and practices are still valued by the Iteso. On the other hand, the study will help the church to familiarize itself with the Iteso culture in its evangelization efforts. The study will further inform the readers about the impact, if any, of Christianity on Iteso traditional marriage. For the Iteso the study will be helpful in understanding and preserving their traditions for the sake of future generations. The study will also provide new knowledge of incorporating some of the aspects that the Iteso value very much into Christianity. This will bring harmony because Iteso Christians will be able to practise their rites and rituals on marriage in public because the church will have recognised and accepted them. Also, not much has been done in the area, making further investigation necessary.

Polygamy is another feature that is allowed. If for instance, a woman is barren, the community may allow her husband to marry another wife. In other cases, a man may take another wife because of prestige, or because he wants more children.

The Church defines marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman who promise faithfulness to each other before God in the presence of Christian witnesses. Marriage is a divine institution ordained by God. Young people are encouraged to get married in church, so that they can get an opportunity to learn and accept the teachings of the Church about marriage. Marriage in Christianity is for procreation, companionship and for fulfilment of mutual love. When couples get married, their union is seen as a possible remedy against sexual immorality, as it provides them with the opportunity to express their sexuality.

Christian marriage is expected to be monogamous because that was the original plan of God. Christianity also teaches that marriage is a permanent and sacred lifelong union, which is complete with or without children. However, because of pressure from the community, Iteso Christians who do not have children seek solutions within their cultural norms.

In order to civilize the Iteso, the missionaries wanted them to stop these practices, which they considered primitive and barbaric, and they required Christian converts to abandon their traditional practices including marriage rituals and rites. They were then expected to adopt the new teachings on marriage and the rites that accompany them. Despite the new teachings, the Iteso continued to preserve their traditional practices in relation to marriage. Why is this case? Why do the Iteso insist on the performance of these rites yet they are Christians and active members of the church?

While churches encourage Christian youth to marry in church, today some Christian youth shun church weddings and opt for traditional marriages. Why is it so, yet they are Christians? The church also teaches its followers the importance of being monogamous in their marriages. Despite that, Iteso Christians still practice polygamy.

### **Statement of the problem**

Customary Practices including marriage rites and ceremonies still prevail among the Iteso in spite of the influence of Christianity and its Teachings and practices. Despite Christian teachings on marriage, the ceremonies and the rites that go with them, the Iteso have preserved many of their traditional practices and rites. Why is this the case? Why have these rituals/rites persisted, in spite of the Iteso's acceptance of Christianity and its new teachings? Why are some of the traditions kept while others have been discarded? Is there a possibility of these rituals being incorporated into Christian marriage ceremony without them causing any harm to the Christian faith and vice versa. These and other related questions are the central concern of this study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

A survey research design was used in this study. A survey is concerned with conditions or relationships that exist; opinions held and processes that are going on. It is also concerned with present and past events and influences as they relate to current issues (Kothari, 2004). Survey design was chosen in order to obtain descriptive data from the selected sample. The study was qualitative in nature. This involved investigation of Iteso behaviour, feelings and attitude towards marriage before and after the coming of Christianity. The researcher was in a position to gather the information on customary marital practices and how these traditional practices have harmonized with Christianity

### **Research area**

The study was conducted in Teso North District of Busia County. Teso North is a key border district of Kenya and Uganda. It borders Sirisia District to the north, Bumula to the east, Teso South to the south and Republic of Uganda to the west. The researcher was interested in doing her research in this area because she is well conversant with the language and the geographical area where the Iteso live. The researcher also wanted to know why the Iteso are conservative in their practices on marriage.

### **Sampling procedures**

The researcher visited the village elder in Teso North sub-county, introduced herself to him, and presented an introductory letter from Moi University. This first elder introduced the researcher to other three elders who provided information about the Iteso practices and rites on marriage. The elders further introduced the researcher to four couples married traditionally and four couples married in the church. The researcher used snowballing and purposive sampling to reach the respondents. The couples married in the church introduced the researcher to their four pastors from the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church which were purposively selected by the researcher.

### **Sample Size**

Twenty four respondents were selected through purposive sampling and snowballing. These were: four elders of the Iteso, four couples married in the church, four couples married traditionally, and four members of the clergy. These respondents provided information on Christian marriage as well as the Iteso traditional marriage.

Purposive sampling was used by the researcher to select two churches among many churches which were found in the area. These were the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church of Kenya. The researcher identified two Roman Catholic priests and two Anglican Church pastors through their members who were married in the church. The researcher was directed by the elders to four couples married in the Catholic Church. The same elders referred the researcher to four other couples married according to the Anglican faith. The researcher was also to note changes which have taken place in Christian marriage. Focus group discussion was used by the researcher. The researcher requested those married traditionally and those married in the church to discuss traditional marriage practices and Christian marriage practices respectively.

### **Data Collection Tools**

Data was collected using un-structured questionnaires to elicit information from literate respondents identified from the individuals in the church and Iteso traditionalists, in an attempt to balance the requirement for capturing important details and unlimited applicability.

Two focus groups were identified through purposive sampling, one of traditional respondents and the other of Christian respondents. The informants were grouped into two groups of twelve members each. The first group gave the information on Iteso traditional marriage practices and rites and the other group gave information on Christian marriage practices and rites.

### **Secondary data**

Secondary data was derived from journals, books, magazines and theses from various libraries. The internet was useful in accessing information from available and accessible documents, journals, published and unpublished reports.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was qualitative in line with the nature of the study. In order to analyze and process data, the researcher coded data by identifying similar themes and put them together. Editing and classification of data was done and descriptive analysis used to summarize and present information gathered from the respondents.

### **Ethical considerations**

The respondents were not forced by the researcher to participate. They voluntarily gave the information. This is because the researcher had made herself known to them through the village elder.

Questionnaires had a covering letter that assured the respondents that the information would be treated with total confidentiality. The respondents were also assured that the results of the study were purely for academic purposes. Names of the respondents were not mentioned; instead the researcher used groups of people to safeguard their identity. Anonymity was assured because the names used were not the real names of the respondents.

### **Christian Marriage**

Christian marriage is the making of a lifelong covenant before God, between a Christian man and woman who have accepted sexual, social and spiritual obligations, and who state this publicly through their marriage vows at the wedding ceremony. In the Roman Catholic Church, liturgical constitution recommended that marriage should take place either during mass or outside mass. It could also be celebrated between a catholic and a non-baptized person. (Resp4, 6/12/2015). The service would commence with the couple attending the mass. The matrimonial ceremony is performed during or after the mass. The church calls this extension of the celebration and can take place at the groom's home or any other designated place.

The catechism of the Catholic Church also states that "marriage is a covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership for the whole of life, ordered for the good of spouses and the procreation and education of the offspring". Marriage brings harmony between couples and through it, partners are blessed with their offspring (Resp4, 6/12/2017).

### **Religion**

An Iteso Christian who married in the church said that believers were encouraged to marry fellow believers. For example, a young person professing the Roman Catholic faith is advised to marry one of the same faith and not, for example, someone from the Anglican Church. This is because people of different faiths may not understand one another, which would lead to conflicts that can affect their marriage. The respondent also said that the church teaches that Christian youth should not marry non-believers 2 Corinthians (6:14-18) says "do not be miss-mated with, unbelievers, for what partnership have the righteous and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?"

Believers are controlled by the Holy Spirit and non-believers are controlled by the flesh, which is sinful and ungodly. The respondents said that purity before marriage is emphasized and the young are encouraged to maintain virginity before marriage. In case of difficulties couples are encouraged to seek help from the church officials who will provide the necessary counselling.

The Bible recognizes a hardworking woman as a good wife, (Resp 4, 6/12/2015). The respondents said that the book of Proverbs (31:10-31), talks about the qualities for a good woman. This woman wakes up very early and provides food for her household. They observed, however, that, in the church today, members seemed to look for additional qualities besides hard work.

### **Christian Teachings on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage of Widows**

The Christian teaching on marriage are drawn from the Bible, which teaches that it was not good for man (Adam) to be alone and therefore God made a helper for him. God made a woman (Eve) out of man's rib to be a great companion for him. God did not just create a woman but He made a woman suitable for the man (Resp4, 6/12/2015). The focus is on (Genesis 1 and 2), which said that through marriage, God blessed Adam and Eve with children and God still blesses Christians today with children. However marriage is deemed complete with or without children. Respondents also said that marriage was monogamous in the sense that God created only one woman (Eve) for Adam. A man therefore leaves his parents and is joined to his wife and two become one flesh.

Among the Iteso, marriage was exogamous in the sense that one did not marry from his own clan. The respondents pointed out that Christian believers should marry their fellow Christians as they had a common faith. The respondents drew the above argument from the book of Exodus (34:10-17), which says that God desired His people (Jews) to marry fellow Jews. In the New Testament, believers are instructed to marry fellow believers. The Mosaic Law directed that the Israelites should never marry Canaanites. The reason God forbade them from doing so was because the Israelites would be tempted to embrace the Canaanite gods. The church today is doing its best to educate its members on the importance of marrying from the family of believers. This is because it is difficult for one partner to make the other partner change their faith.

Sexual fulfilment was only allowed within the confines of marriage. The book of Ecclesiastes (9:9) encourages a man to delight in the wife of his youth all his life. According to our respondents, the church discourages its members from engaging in sexual immorality, like fornication, which is sexual intimacy between unmarried people, should be avoided. Also, adultery which involves married people have sexual relations with people they are not married to, should not be seen among Christians. They emphasized that a man who has decided to marry should not engage himself with other things, for example, having too much work which will draw him far away from his wife. They argued that marriage is meant for companionship and mutual love where the two express their sexuality.

Resp3 (5/12/2015) emphasized that Jesus Himself was very concerned about the institution of marriage. This observation was based on the fact that Jesus attended a wedding at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). The two priests said that Jesus also taught that marriage should be monogamous (Matthew 19:5). God created human beings both male and female and united them to be one flesh. Jesus Christ talked of the permanence of marriage (Mark 10:9); therefore divorce is wrong.

In the book of 1 Corinthians (7:2) Paul encourages people to marry to avoid sexual immorality; the married man and woman fulfil each other's conjugal needs. Christian marriage should be permanent as indicated in the Book of Malachi (2:16) which says that God hates divorce. According to the Bible, divorce is not an option for Christians except in cases of spousal unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:9).

### **Character**

Resp3 (5/12/2015) said that those with good character have their lives shaped by the word of God. Thus the youth who are morally upright bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit that as recorded in Galatians (5:22).

### **Common interests**

The respondents from the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church of Kenya emphasized that people who want to get married should have common interests. This is to avoid conflicts based on different areas of interest.

### **Education**

The respondents pointed out that the youth are encouraged to choose partners of the same level in terms of education. According to them, it is good to marry someone with whom one shares similar life experiences.

### **Age**

According to Christian respondents, the youth who intend to marry should look for partners within their age bracket. This was thought to bring about proper understanding of each other in the way they relate and work together as a family.

### **Catholic marriage rites**

According to Resp3, 5/12/2015, Catholic marriage rites include:

- Entrance rite: Processions, which may include a hymn. The priests greet the congregation, and then penitential and opening prayers are said.
- Liturgy of the word: includes Bible readings, one from the Old Testament, and a responsorial psalm, and one from the New testament, a which is a practical sermon.
- The rite of marriage: questions are asked about the couple's faithfulness to one another and their willingness to bring up children according to God's teachings.
- Vows: are made and the rings are exchanged and finally the signing of the marriage certificate.
- Liturgy of the Eucharist: gifts are presented, and the Eucharistic prayer is said.
- Communion rite: the Lord's prayer is said which is followed by blessing and the sign of peace given by the priest
- Concluding rite. The final blessing is made, there is a dismissal and the couples kiss. In a wedding without mass the liturgy of the Eucharist is missed out.

### **Anglican Church marriage rites**

In the Anglican Church, the wedding ceremony rite is more or less the same as that of the Roman Catholic Church. The ceremony has a fairly uniform order (Resp3, 4/12/2015):

- In the beginning the service; the priest welcomes the congregation and then reads out the word of God on marriage.
- Declarations: The couple promise before God that they will love, comfort, and honour and protect their partner as long as they both Live. Vows: the couple make their vows to one another:  
To love and to hold  
From this day forward;  
For better, for worse  
For richer, for poorer  
In sickness and in health,  
To love and to cherish till death do us apart
- Proclamation: the priest tells the couple that they are now husband and wife ( kiss)
- Prayers: prayers are said for the couple, which may include a prayer for the gift of children.
- Ring: The couple exchange rings and say:

With my body I honour you, all that I have I give you, and all that I have I share with you, within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.

- Readings and sermon; there will be some readings from the Bible and the pastor or minister gives a sermon
- Signing of the register; the bride and groom, along with two witnesses, sign the register, which is a legal requirement. They then receive a legally binding marriage certificate.

### **Modern church wedding ceremony**

The Iteso youth claimed that marriages conducted in the church were legal. They argued that these marriages were more linked to the constitution; therefore all the rights are drawn from the bill of marriage. This, according to the Iteso youth, ensures protection in marriage. Regular teaching on marriage is given to the couple by the church to the couple before a wedding ceremony can take place. A church wedding can take place in church, in open grounds or at the bridegroom's home. At the reception the couple is welcomed by traditional dances, songs, ululations accompanied with the beating of drums and trumpets of the Iteso. They will be escorted with traditional dance and songs up to the place reserved for them, where they are served lunch. After lunch, there is more singing and dancing and the couple is led to a table holding the wedding cake.

Reaching the table two previously appointed women will assist in the cutting of the cake. The cake-cutting ceremony is taken very seriously. The couple feed each other a cake as a sign of their love for each another. The bride is encouraged to always feed her husband well. The cake is then cut into small pieces and the bride instructed to feed her maids as a symbol of feeding her own children. Then the couple is encouraged to remember their parents by giving each set of their parents a cake. This shows that although the couple have separated themselves from their parents to form their own family, they will still remember them and strive to feed and clothe them. The bride will finalize her work by feeding all the guests, signifying that they will always welcome visitors to their home and feed them.

Gifts (financial and otherwise) are offered to the couple, following the blessing and encouragement of the elders of the church.

Christianity through Western culture impacted the Iteso practices and rites on marriage in the following ways:

- Christianity teaches on strict adherence to monogamy and condemned wife inheritance which was core to the Iteso.
- Christianity encouraged marriage within the family of believers. This impacted on the Iteso traditional marriage rites as they paid great focus on the background of the couples to establish their lineage to avoid marriage between kins. This was also to avoid marriage to families with history of witchcraft, barrenness, physical disabilities and poverty.
- Some Iteso marriage practices and rites were bedeviled, these included 'caning of newly married woman as a way of welcoming her in the family, sprinkling of beer *ajono* using grass *emuria* to bless the couples. The Iteso who got converted to Christianity abandoned these practices although they secretly performed their rites when called upon as a measure for solving problems.
- Christianity impacted on the Iteso belief in many gods by teaching on one powerful God who is the controller and sustainer of all creatures. Those who were converted professed the Christian God but would still venerate their gods not accepted by Christianity when faced with challenges in life.

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- Christianity is not the sole source of these impacts on traditional Iteso practices and rites. Other factors such as introduction of formal Education exposed the youth to different cultures away from what they were used. This alienated them from the practices such as guidance and counseling from the elders because they spent most of their times in school.
- Formal education made the graduates to move to urban centres in search of jobs. This resulted to urbanization as the youth migrated from their rural areas. In the urban they mingled with people of different culture. This eroded their commitment to the traditional Iteso practices.
- Modernization greatly impacted the Iteso traditional practices as the youth in urban centres interacted with the motivation and advice from those around them who were usually their friends. These replaced the crucial role played by the elders in guiding and counseling the youth.
- Modern technology has impacted the Iteso marriage rites by promoting individualism rather than communalism which characterized the Iteso society. Marriage was a communal affair that involved all members of the society. Money economy has replaced payment of dowry using cattle, sheep or goats. This is quantified in monetary value. Modern medicine is used to address cases of barrenness and impotence. This was traditionally addressed by the Iteso by involving in-laws and clan members to sire children on behalf of the affected person. Modern family planning methods have replaced the natural polygamous setting in birth control. Among the Iteso, a woman who has given birth is excluded from the husband.
- Qualities looked for in a marriage partner has changed. Traditionally focus was on the moral values such responsibility, honesty, charity, hardworking among others. These have changed with focus on Education achieved and economic status.

## **CONCLUSION**

Due to Christianity and other variables such as modernization, formal education and urbanization, some of the Iteso practices have been eroded while others still prevail because of the significances attached to them. It is noted that polygamy is still a barrier to the Christian way of marriage. The reason behind this is that, majority of men have more than one wife, and those that have one, would want to marry a second or third wife in future incases where the couples are faced with problems of barrenness, illnesses or when a man is wealthy enough to provide.

The Iteso still hold to the practices of customary marriage, in spite of them being Christians, resulting to the mixture of rites and practices in today's iteso marriages. The church should accept dynamism for it to meet the needs of the modern Iteso. The church needs to enter into a dialogue with the Iteso culture on marriage for it to be relevant to the people.

Church leaders should be equipped with Iteso culture in order for them to make effective evangelism on marriage practices and rites. There should be sessions on guiding and counselling to the couples, before marriage. This will help the Iteso Christians to respond simultaneously to the demands of the gospel as well as the demands of Iteso the culture.

In both religions children are valued as a gift from God given to the couples. In Christianity, a family without a child is still a complete one in terms of marriage and those with children

should bring them up in a Godly way. The Iteso would also do everything possible in order to get a child for the family, for they believe that children continued the family tree.

Couples should be faithful to each other according to the biblical teachings on marriage. The bride (church) should prepare by being faithful to the coming of her husband (bridegroom) who will come unexpectedly. The bridegroom (Jesus Christ) and the bride (church) will consummate their marriage in heaven where separation will never be experienced.

The western culture through modernization; urbanization and formal education among others have contributed to the deterioration of the Iteso culture. In both religions, marital life has many challenges. Life has become so fluid in the sense that, those entering marriage are not serious about it. Marriage is like a fortified castle those inside would want to come out (divorce/ separate). Those outside would want to enter marriage.

Counselling sessions are not as effective as those of Iteso traditional setup. The church should by all means put up counselling sessions for partners who would wish to marry each other so that divorce or separation is reduced among these people.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Scholars can do research on, birth rites, marriage and death rites or the concept of polygamy and the church among different communities within Kenya and beyond.

The Roman Catholic and Anglican churches should enter into a dialogue with the Iteso so as to borrow some meaningful practices from the Iteso traditions into Christianity, in order to avoid conflict between the two cultures. The church should understand the Iteso traditions and practices on marriage and try to support the Iteso culture without violating their moral rights and dignity.

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