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PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS OF MARRIAGE STABILITY AND LONGEVITY IN TRADITIONAL RWANDA

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Abstract

This paper from a research using qualitative approach looks at the marriage stability and lastingness in the traditional Rwanda. It explores the conditions and factors of marriage stability and lastingness that could serve as a lesson to prevent the scourge the couples are currently witnessing including destruction of marriages. Six focus group discussions composed of Rwandan elders were conducted in Kigali City, in Southern and Western Provinces. In traditional Rwanda, marriage was not all about the newly married couple. The two families would instead get involved and play a crucial role in the whole process of forming the new household and in shaping the psychosocial life of the new spouses throughout their marital life. Spouses would have a psychosocial responsibility to sustain family ties established between their two families by striving not to break their marriage. Additionally, some situations would even prompt one of the

spouses to "sacrifice" him/herself to the extent of accepting to live in conjugal trouble and stress in order to protect the wellbeing of their children. Because of these two reasons among others, the traditional Rwandan spouses would feel such an exceptional commitment to marriage life; and therefore, they would show mutual respect and patience to each other during their marital life. Such important values are inexistent today. Participants in this study sate that when patience between spouses was exercised, normal relationships would gradually develop. Overall, patience and perseverance were keys to marriage institution's stability and longevity in traditional Rwanda, what is hard to observe in today's society. Spouses in contemporary Rwanda can learn a lot from the ones in ancient Rwanda.

Keywords

Marriage, Family, Psychosocial, Patience, Commitment, Rwanda

1. Introduction and Concepts: Traditional Marriage in Africa

Traditional marriages in Africa provided safety and stability (The New Times, 2007). Wives' responsibilities in various traditional societies around the world mainly consisted in taking care of the husband, raising children, responding to domestic needs and playing related social roles. The husband had to feed and protect the wife and children (Ayisi, 1997). The spouses' failure to fulfil marital function could lead to family breakup and shame (Kyalo, 2012). Traditional African marriage life was connected to values (William, 1968). Marriage conferred status and dignity and values. These were fundamentals for the marriage sustainability (Kyalo, 2012).

Marriage in traditional Rwanda was a matter of families' consensus (NISR, 2012). The marriage was considered a social obligation for each man and woman vis-à-vis their family in order to perpetuate the lineage (NISR, 2012). Marriage was considered an indissoluble institution and divorce was an exceptional event. Rwandan culture recommended polygamy as alternative to divorce in a circumstance of infertility (NISR, 2012). Rwandan culture placed great importance on marriage, and married women and men were given special respect and recognition in society (Uwineza & Pearson, 2009).

The appreciation of the role played by wives in traditional Rwanda marital life was common. The following are some sayings supporting the above assertion: "*ukurusha umugore akurusha urugo*" ("a man with a better wife has a better household"); "*Umugore ni umutima w'urugo*" ("the wife is the heart of the household"). Conversely, participants in a study

complained that Rwandan traditional culture did not value the equality of men and women (Włodarczyk, 2013). Furthermore, the same study (Włodarczyk, 2013) suggests the necessity of changes to traditional gender roles in the family and in the society so that equality of men and women can be achieved (Włodarczyk, 2013). In this sense, the participants make it clear that women, despite being very competent and capable, underestimate their own potential because of lack of self-confidence and of the traditional patriarchal values (Włodarczyk, 2013).

2. Research Issues

In Rwanda today, the family is suffering and is even destructed, threatening the family members' health (Mukashema, 2014; Mukashema & Sapsod, 2013; MIGEPROF, 2011; Commission Episcopale Justice et Paix Projet, 2007). To find a solution to this situation, it is imperative to reconcile two realities. On the one hand, there is a need to consider the place and the role of women in the traditional Rwanda such as "a man with a better wife has a better household" and "the wife is the heart of the household". On the other hand, it is also crucial to support women that still keep underestimating their own potential, because of lack of self-confidence as a result of the traditional patriarchal values (Włodarczyk, 2013). Therefore, the solution to this dilemma should first of all aim to enable wives to estimate and express their own potential. Thereafter, the same wives should be encouraged to keep their traditional psychosocial responsibility of protecting marriage in preventing its destruction, an alarming situation being witnessed today (Mukashema, 2014; Mukashema & Sapsford, 2013; MIGEPROF, 2011; Commission Episcopale Justice et Paix Projet, 2007).

The idea of carrying out this research is in the general line of urgent efforts the researchers should make as ways for responses to the problems of the society (Nierras, 2018). Today's institution of marriage has degenerated because of many challenges it is facing (Kyalo, 2012). It is however to accept that culture and society have a lot to teach and it is never too late to regain and restore the traditional consistency of the institution of marriage. There are relevant and useful values in African spirituality to enrich marriage today (Kyalo, 2012).

The present paper looks at the traditional marital life in terms of protection, stability and longevity of marriage. It intends to answer the following questions: (1) What were the conditions of marriage stability and lastingness; (2) What were the factors of marriage stability and lastingness in traditional Rwanda that could be referred to in order to prevent the current marriage epidemic suffering and destruction? The answers to these questions shall be the lesson that can

be learnt from the traditional marriage life that ensured the marriage stability and the marriage lastingness and thus the social stability at large.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

A total of forty-five (45) people participated in six different focus group discussions (FGDs). The small focus group discussion was composed of 5 members and the largest focus group discussion had eleven members. Two focus group discussions were mixed, i.e., composed of male and female participants each. Participants in one of them were from the "Guardian of memory" (GM) in Gasabo District of Kigali City and this FGD was composed of three females and two males aged between 71 and 78. The second focus group discussion was from Rwanda Elders Advisory Forum (REAF) of Nyarugenge District of Kigali City and was composed of five males and two females aged between 59 and 76.

All participants in the focus group discussion in Kigali City were holders of university degrees. Participants in other two focus group discussions, i.e. one with males aged between 58 and 79 years old and one with females aged between 60 and 78 were from Nyanza District (Ny), a semi urban area of Southern province of Rwanda. The participants in these two focus group discussions were of 0 year up to 6 years post primary education. Two remaining focus group discussions, one of males aged between 61 and 98, and the other one of females aged between 60 and 90 were conducted in Karongi District (Ka), a rural area of Western Province of Rwanda. In this area, the members of the two focus group discussions were of 0 up to 6 years of primary education.

3.2 Research Approach

Grounded theory as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used as research approach. A moderator, together with a note taker, conducted the six FGDs in a safe place, ensuring and encouraging the participants to freely speak out their views on marriage life in traditional Rwanda. We developed Focus Group Discussion guide based on the research questions. Ethical considerations of participation and confidentiality in research with human beings as participants were observed too. Participation was freely consented and confidentiality was respected throughout the whole process. Permission to record the Focus Group Discussion was obtained from all the participants. To preserve confidentiality, participants' names were not mentioned anywhere in the collected data recorded.

4. Analysis

The recorded data from the FGDs were transcribed and translated from Kinyarwanda into English. During analysis process, thematic content analysis was conducted. Using NVivo software, we proceeded with open coding of the data as is recommended by Strauss (1987) and by Strauss & Corbin (1990). Throughout the analysis process, the location of the information given by the participants was recorded along with each of the identified themes and subthemes related to the research questions and objectives (Baribeau, 2009; L'Ecuyer, 1989, 1990; Duchesne & Haegel, 2005).

A systematic examination of the text from FGD was done. Using codes, similar information was identified and retrieved across the data as recommended by (Miles & Huberman (1994), Rubin & Rubin (1995), and Rubin & Rubin (2005). Codes were compiled into subcategories, compared and combined into broader categories.

The data presented in the present paper focus on the conditions and factors of marriage stability and lastingness in traditional Rwanda. Firstly, the participants expressed their views on the conditions linked to the values given to the families of origin of the spouses. Secondly, the participants described the roles of the spouses themselves in safeguarding marriage stability and lastingness in traditional Rwanda. They gave their points of view about the loss of cultural values in today's marital life. The traditional values which supported the marriage stability and longevity were among others avoidance of families' shame and this would serve as a psychosocial factor of spouses' conjugal commitment to marriage protection. Generally, those values included consideration of the role of the families in the marriage and in the marital life of new spouses, the value of sacrifice by spouses and mutual respect and patience on the side of the spouses.

4.1 The Psychosocial Consideration of the Families of Origin in the New Spouses' Marital Life

When two people got married in the traditional Rwanda, the marriage would serve some other purposes than just the interest of the spouses. The couple had the responsibility of being the bridge unifying their two families of origin. In other words, marriage was not an exclusive business of the spouses in traditional Rwanda. Marriage, instead was for the interest of the two spouses' families of origin at large. The spouses would serve as ambassadors of their respective families of origin in the family of the in-laws.

"I would like to say that one of married partners is not for his or her own purpose, he/she is rather his/her family's ambassador in the in-law family" (REAF, F).

When the two young people, a boy and a girl, were aged enough to be married, their respective parents had the responsibilities of advising them on behaviours they would have to display in their marital life. These behaviours would, among others, include good representation of the own family of origin in the family in-law. The spouses had to be always careful and protect the ties established between their two families of origin.

"Each spouse was his/her family's ambassador in the in-law family. So, he/she acted carefully so as not to be the reason of destroying anything about the two families' relationship" (REAF, F).

The father and the mother used to tell the girl:

"...listen please our beloved child, do not indecently represent us in that home you are going to" (REAF, M).

The son was asked to take good care of his wife. "*Take care of this woman, your wife, do not indecently represent us in that family*" (REAF, M). In traditional Rwanda, the new spouses had the psychosocial task of representing well their family of origin in the family in-law. They had the psychosocial responsibility to unify their two families of origin and to protect the ties established between them.

"...you had a must to unite your father-in-law and your born home's family members. The new household intermediated both ...you who were married to each other had to be the cornerstone support in the unity of both families. There used to be great social reciprocal control" (REAF, M).

"If you were a wife, you had to live so that both your family in-law and your family of origin could live together in harmony; even when you were a husband,

you had to unite your family-in-law and your born home's family members. The new home intermediates for both families" (REAF, M).

Spouses had a psychosocial responsibility to prevent break of the family ties established between their two families of origin through their marriage. In a situation of marital problems, the spouses were required to find solutions without harming the relationship of their two families of origin.

"...the spouses had to be patient and had to have effective particular ways of solving problems without harming both families' established ties and relationship" (REAF, F).

Each of the two spouses had the moral and psychosocial responsibility to avoid being the cause of the two families' separation or breaking the ties and established relationships.

"...you who were married to each other, you had not to be the reason of the separation and the breaking to the ties and relationship established between your two families. You had to be careful about those two families, thinking: "what will my family of origin say..., what will they comment on it (my behaviour) ... as the married couple, there were some things you had to pay attention to in order not to make your family feel ashamed; there was social reciprocal control to be respected. There were some issues that you had to pay attention to as the married couple: your family of origin and your family in-law" (REAF, M).

Before marriage, the two families would play an important role in advising their young children to get married and on what their daily marriage life would be like. The purpose of the families' involvement was to help the young spouses to have good marital life. Additionally, this involvement would make the new couple bear in mind the importance of keeping their two families of origin in good relations. This responsibility of being the "family's ambassador in the in-law family" would put the new spouse in a situation of living his/her marital life carefully. The new spouses had the psychosocial responsibility of protecting the established relationships and

ties. Traditional marriages provided two primary advantages over any other relationships and that was safety and stability (The New Times, 2007).

The Rwandan traditional spouses had the psychosocial responsibility of ensuring cohesion of their respective families of origin. Marriage in traditional Rwanda was a serious family matter. Marriage was an affiance, an agreement or contract between two families or groups of kin's, because African societies see marriage not only as a relationship between two individual people but also as a structural link between groups (Hendrix, 1996). Marriage is not just a business of an individual or the couple concerned as is noticed today, it concerns all and is affected by all (Goody, 1997).

4.2 The Roles of Spouses Themselves in Safeguarding their Marriage Stability and Lastingness

In traditional Rwanda, spouses were characterized by mutual respect in their marital life. Even in a situation of marital life difficulties, the spouses could sacrifice themselves, be patient and tolerant to each other. This was so for the ultimate goal of avoiding making their children victims. The marriage could benefit from this commitment of protecting the children from suffering.

4.2.1 Mutual Respect between the Spouses

The spouses were characterized by mutual respect in their marital life. This mutual respect among spouses could serve as a model of respect for the children.

"The spouses really respected each other: the husband respected the wife and the wife respected the husband. Therefore, they sought for affordable way of training their children on the culture of respecting one another and sharing ideas" (Ka, M).

The mutual respect of spouses could give a room that would make it easy to practically teach the culture of respect to the children.

4.2.2 Sacrifice by the Spouses

In traditional marriage life in Rwanda, the spouses could "sacrifice" themselves whenever deemed necessary. They would accept to live in conjugal trouble and stress in order to protect the wellbeing of their children. More particularly, the traditional Rwandan woman would steep in safeguarding the values of Rwandan culture. She could live the sacrifice for her household in love

for her children. The rights of her children would always prevail over hers and such a sacrifice benefited both children and the longevity of marriage.

"A wife also would sacrifice on her home ground, she would sacrifice for her children even though she has had some problems with her husband. She would in any way protect her children, in the way she would be patient on her husband with bad behaviour in order that her children will not be victims" (IN, F).

As the women can be the solution of economic issues in development processes (Virgil, 2019), the women can also be the great solution to the issues of the today's marital conflicts and marriages destruction. The women of ancient Rwanda have shown the strengths and have shown that marriage stability and lasting is possible. When there were problems between the spouses, they would accept to sacrifice i.e. endure them in order to protect the wellbeing of their children. The couples would avoid any decision that could negatively affect the children and victimize them. This "sacrifice" by the wife for her household and for her children always led to longevity of marriage in traditional Rwanda. In case of trouble in the marriage life, divorce was not allowed. The husband would instead go to look for another marriage (NISR, 2012), while the wife was required to be patient, she was exhorted to be patient under a common traditional saying "*ni ko zubakwa* (that's how marriage is sustained)"! The woman was required to live in such a way that both her family in-law and her family of origin could live together in harmony. The man had to ensure unity of his father-in-law and his born home's family members.

In the Rwandan traditional marriage life, wives played a central role to the wellbeing of the household. They played a capital role of protecting their children and their marriage. That protection was a priority for them. Instead of the common saying "*iyu amagara atewe hejuru umuntu asama aye*" (when it comes to face a danger [of death], each one first saves his/her life), the wives were generally brave and would sacrifice their own joy and interest. They were always consistent in terms of moral and social responsibilities. They were committed toward the wellbeing of their children, their husband, their family of origin as well as their family in-law. A wife would accept suffering in whatever she had to do as part of her psychosocial responsibilities.

Furthermore, spouses were bonded by cultural values of mutual respect. Misbehaving against the spouse was forbidden in the traditional Rwandan culture. More particularly, Rwandan husband had the responsibility of taking care of his wife and to avoid making her suffering.

"A husband who beat his wife was called an animal" (IN, F).

4.2.3 Patience and Perseverance as Factors of Having a Strong Household

The concept of patience in marital life expresses the capacity [for the spouses] to accept problems, or suffering without becoming annoyed or anxious (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). Traditionally, children in Rwanda would listen and obey and go by their parents' advice even in terms of marital life.

"...children obeyed their parents.... when the problem became complicated; she was told by her mother.... my child: "*ni ko zubakwa* (that's how marriage is sustained)...she would obey and know that she had to be patient before difficulties and she would build her household in a strong way" (Ny, F).

In this case, the wife would be guided by her mother and try to cope with any marital problems experienced. She would obey and eventually make a strong household. Participants in this study insisted on the fact that with patience, the spouses who were facing conflicts ended up getting on well with each other.

"To be a bit patient could help spouses get on well in the future of their life together. As they persevered in being patient, then after some time they found no value in disputation...because they persevered in the past, the time came and they had common understanding" (IN, M).

Patience is among the key features of everyday human experience that have typically been neglected or ignored in mainstream psychological discourse (Kunz, 2002). Patience is the quality of being patient, as the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, irritation, or the like (Dictionary.com, 1995). Impatient individuals are more likely to experience divorce (De Paola & Gioia, 2017).

Currently, there is no more room in Rwanda of being patient, which was an important traditional cultural value. This may be caused by modernity that emphasizes much on the human

rights protection of the spouses. Unfortunately, however, there is a trend to forget that building and living in a good household is also an aspect of human rights.

The challenge today is to find a room to accommodate both aspects, i.e. protecting the spouses against intimate partner violence (Mukashema, 2017) and promoting the marriage stability through the respect of traditions in marriage. This should pass through innovative educative strategies for marriage preparation. The elders' views about what they call patience of wives in traditional marital life in Rwanda pushes one's interrogation of the sense of "*Niko zubakwa*" as traditional advice to a wife facing marital problems (Mukashema, 2017) and what is qualified as intimate partner violence today (Mukashema, 2017).

Is the "*Niko zubakwa*" that was especially said to wives a bad or a good piece of advice in the traditional Rwandan marriage life? Of course, each answer, calling it bad or good, has its own advantages and challenges to the marital life. The Rwandan saying of "*Ukurusha umugore akurusha urugo*" [better wife, better household] (Ny, F) could work also in the situation of sacrifice of the wife for her household.

4.3 Marital Life in Rwanda: Traditional Values versus Modernity

Today, there is a loss of traditional values in marriage life. The loss of these traditional values in marriage life has a negative impact on marriage stability. Marital lastingness was supported by the spouses' families and by the Rwandan culture. Nowadays, traditional practices are undervalued and marriage is becoming more a matter of personal choice of the people involved.

"Even when there was inconsiderable stuff, but because they [spouses] persevered [in marital life] in the past, the time would come and they would end up having a common understanding and getting on well... today spouses do not have a place to patience and to waiting [in marital life]" ... (IN, M).

With time, the dissolution of unions through divorce or death has intensified (NISR, 2012). This situation threatening the marriage and the family is common in the world. The family is concerned by the moral and cultural decline that the world is presently experiencing (Singer, 2019). Today, it is a matter of urgency to bring in the traditional values that were protecting marriages and were ensuring its stability and lastingness.

"We need to pick up some values from those which ancient families were built on, and keep those which are related to today's situations [of marital life]. We may teach them [values] to our children because, for instance these values such as of being patient...even if we cannot compare it to what our parents did at their time, but that patience is missing"(REAF, F).

Participants in this research deplored the fact that some values on which family life was built in traditional Rwanda are lost. They suggest that there is a dire need to go back to the culture and bring in those values. This includes among others patience in marital life, which supported marriage stability and lastingness and psychosocial wellbeing of the household and the families' members.

5. Conclusion

The present research paper searched from traditional values, practices and behaviours in marriage life in traditional Rwanda. Due to the psychosocial consideration of the two respective families in the new household life and awareness the spouses had about it, the traditional Rwandan spouses had an exceptional high level commitment to marriage life. The commitment to marital stability was there because each spouse wanted to avoid being the cause of marriage destruction, the breakdown of the ties built between their two families and thus the shame to the families. This would support the spouses in demonstrating different values. These values were the sacrifice of spouses and the patience in marital life which was central to marriage stability, its longevity and the psychosocial wellbeing of the household members.

Today, the traditional cultural values in marriage context and marital life are lost. The consideration of the family in today's marriage, the psychosocial sacrifice of spouses and the patience are missing in marriage context and life. Currently, such a loss of traditional cultural values in marriage has a negative impact on marriage stability and longevity. It is to be noted that there was an important place of the families of origin in the marriage and in the marital life of the spouses. The traditional Rwandan spouses had a psychological feeling of protecting, not only their marriage, but also the ties between their two families (of origin and in-law).

The spouses were committed to the stability and the longevity of their marriage. This would first result from their living under values in the household, especially the patience and the sacrifice

for their children. The psychosocial influence of the consideration of their families in the spousal life would contribute to this too. Patience was giving the marriage institution a possibility of stability and longevity in traditional Rwanda. That is no longer something common to observe in today's society.

Participants expressed the need for a recovery of some traditional values in marriage. They emphasized on the marriage alliances in families rather than on initiative of people to get married only for their own benefit, which is a trend in today's marriage life. That recovery of some traditional values in marriage could prevent today's alarming and epidemic marriage suffering and destruction. Drawing from the ancestors' behaviour in marriage life and adapting them to the current life conditions would be of benefit to the marriage institution both in present and in the days to come.

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