

Traditional, modern and Christian teachings in marriages

Paper presented at the Fenza conference:

“The man is the head of the household” – Do culture, Bible and modern life meet?

Lusaka

25 August 2010

Thera Rasing

There seems to be a lot of confusion about marriage teachings, and subsequently, proper behaviour in marriage. Especially in urban areas there is a mixture of traditions, modernity, western ideas, western based education, and influence of Christianity. Sometimes these go together smoothly, one uses parts of it at the same time, while at other times, there is confusion which teachings to follow, or how to behave properly.

In my presentation I will try to elaborate on traditional teachings about marriage, then I will explain modern ideas about marriage, followed by Christian teachings about marriage. I will try to explain their contradicting ideas, but also try to examine their similarities.

I will start with traditional teachings.

Traditional teachings about marriage

Girls and boys grow up in an environment, either in a nuclear family, an extended family, with their grandparents, or other relatives, either in an urban or a rural area.

But no matter where they grow up, or who raises them, they are brought up with certain customs and traditions.

This is firstly, because the ones who raise them, are brought up themselves with traditions and customs, so almost automatically, they bring up their sons and daughters in the same way, but also they want their children to be brought up that way.

It is important to know ones culture and traditions, to know where one comes from. This gives guidelines how to live, and is something to hold on to for the rest of ones live.

So from early childhood onwards, girls and boys are told how to behave, as a boy or a girl, and how to become a good woman or man. They are told so, and see the examples of how their parents or other relatives live.

Every culture has certain ideas about how a man and how a woman should behave. This is often more an ideal than reality, but ideas and ways of how to behave are passed on, in a nuclear and extended family, and in society.

These teachings culminate usually at puberty, in initiation rites for girls, and in some ethnic groups also for boys. In these initiation rites teachings about how to behave as a proper woman, as a married woman, are the main issues.

This includes all facets of adult life, like how to look after oneself, not to beg (because that would indicate that the husband does not look after the wife), how to deal with menstruation, how to welcome visitors, how to deal with in-laws, how to give birth in a decent way, the importance of the matriline, that is the descent from grandmother to mother to grandchild, the line of women, all secrets of sexuality, fertility, respect for elders, and the blood spirit of the ethnic group.

Hence it embraces all aspects of life, and the knowledge passed on is often called lessons for life..

Since they include a lot of knowledge about sexuality, these rites are now often curtailed by keeping the girl inside for a week and give some teachings, while most of it is only performed when the girl gets married, at her wedding ceremony.

Traditionally, the teachings emphasize equality between men and women, or husband and wife.

They have separate tasks, but complement each other.

The man is responsible to build a house, while the woman is responsible for the inside.

The man is responsible for the general income (salary) and in the past the bulk of food like meat, the wife is responsible for the daily food.

The wife looks after the children, because in the matriline, children belong to the kin group of the woman. The husband looks after his sister's children.

Traditionally, it was thought that all women have a small baby in their belly, which needs sperm to grow and become a real baby.

Therefore, after making love, the woman should thank her husband, because he might have given her a baby to grow.

In some ethnic groups from the Eastern province, the husband has to give some money to the wife during the thanking.

It was also done to thank the ancestors, for they are the ones who might give them a child.

But nowadays this is misinterpreted, and considered subservient or submissive.

Traditional culture emphasizes to avoid quarrels.

Therefore, a woman should receive her husband when he comes home late, give him food and whatever he wants, without questioning. However, the next day, especially when he is sober, she can ask him why he was late, and tell him she does not like it. When telling this the next day, the couple can sit down and discuss, unlike when telling him immediately he comes home, drunk, hungry, tired, while the wife is angry. Then it is bound to end up in a fight, sometimes even physically.

Nowadays, it is often said that women are taught that they should be submissive.

However, I think this is a misinterpretation, maybe influenced by modern ideas. A certain subservience is taught, but it is way of being subservient to be served. The teachings are mainly about respect, especially towards elderly people.

In the teachings for the marriage, both men and women are taught to show respect to the spouse.

The husband should buy a present once in a while, while the wife should cook nice food, and so on. Their love for each other would be expressed by acts, and by using the words *mukashi wandi*.

Since traditionally men are actually outsiders in the local village, they were supposed to be with their fellow men, outside, in the *insaka*, or bar.

Women are associated more with the house, the home, and therefore traditionally a husband should not spend too much time at home.

However, the woman should prepare the husband's bath, fetch water from the well early morning, prepare his breakfast, sweep, prepare his cloths, and so on.

This actually means that the husband is treated like a child, who cannot look after himself, prepare his food and cloths. Of course he can, and sometimes does, especially men who are not married. But these tasks have also a symbolical meaning.

It also gives power: she decides when and how she will perform those tasks.

By doing so, the woman gives the husband the feeling that he is the boss, - she works for him, looks after him.

Also, when she wants something, she asks him or rather discusses with him.

This gives him the feeling that he decides, but actually the woman makes sure she asks him in such a way that he answers positive, so that she can do whatever she wants.

This negotiating, or 'game', or 'play', is taught by the elder women, often in the wedding ceremony, but also when consulting elders, like *banacimbusa*.

So traditionally, marriage teachings are based on equality, on separate tasks for men and women, but they are complementary.

Modern marriages

In today's Zambia, especially in urban areas, there is a lot of modern and western influence. There is western based education, there are western soap operas on television, there is a western style of clothing, and so on.

Many of these aspects contradict traditional ideas.

For instance, traditionally, it is taboo to show love in public, while now occasionally one can see a husband kissing his wife (at a party, or so), and we have seen the large picture of the late president Mwanawasa kissing his wife at the front page of the newspapers.

In discussions with my students (who were around 30 years and older) it became clear that many of them thought it good to kiss your spouse in public.

Traditionally, there was no kissing, but showing love was only done in the bedroom.

So, this idea that showing love is something between husband and wife and should be confined for the bedroom, is waning. Also, other aspects of traditional teachings in marriage are changing.

One such aspect is the traditional idea of equality.

In modern marriages, people try to copy from the west.

Most modern marriages are established in court. (as compared to traditional marriages, where the ancestors give their consent in the wedding ceremony).

This means that the couple has to follow the official law, which is based or copied from the British law before the 1960s.

This is a conservative law.

For instance, according to British law a husband is allowed to beat his wife with a stick. (While in traditional marriage the husband is obliged to look after his wife properly and treat her properly. E.g. the Bemba song in the wedding ceremony: if you do not look after my daughter well, I will get manes like a lion, meaning: I will do something bad to you.) (*pa mwana wandi nkamena amasense kamena amasense nkaba nkalamo*)

Many people consider themselves modern and think they are better off when having a modern marriage, but the contrary is truth. British law and British ideas about marriage are conservative and have a gender imbalance and are gender blind, which means they take men as a central point, and actually forget about the rights of women. The idea of modernity has changed the traditional equal gender relations to unequal gender relations.

During the colonial time, and also emphasised by the missionaries of various denominations, men gained power, while women lost power.

The colonisers made sure men paid tax, so they introduced money and jobs for men. And money is power.

If a woman would have her own income, even be the only breadwinner, she would still say that she is 'helping' the husband.

Is this modesty, or subservience, or is this to give the husband the idea that he brings in more money?

Or is this a part of what is learnt during the traditional wedding ceremony: respect the husband, and do not show others that he does not look after you well? (as I said: do not beg, because this shows others that he does not look after you well.)

Even when women are the main or only breadwinner, they usually do not boast about it.

Modern couples tend to live in smaller families, preferably in a nuclear family, instead of an extended family.

Also, they live on their own, instead of together with the relatives of the wife's mother.

This means that there is less social control.

Also, most 'modern marriages' are in towns, where they are exposed to many things that appeal to them, but are often too expensive to purchase.

In addition, in towns there are much more possibilities for men to go out for a drink, and to have girlfriends.

Women often forget the traditional teachings of accepting a husband when he comes home late and drunk. They start questioning him, which might result in a fight.

In addition, especially when husbands get little salary, or are unemployed, it is difficult for a man to cope and to keep up his manliness. This leads to frustration.

Having many girlfriends is a way to show manliness. Having little salary, not being able to look after his family properly, leads to frustration. When the wife questions him, he might get angry, and even more frustrated which results in a fight.

This is why the number of domestic violence is increasing (like in western countries.)

So, modern couples are usually raised in traditional society, but with a lot of influences from modern, often western, education, television, radio, and so on.

They tend to forget the traditional teachings for the marriage, or think they are obsolete, old fashioned.

They are proud to be modern, but this situation of being 'in between', - being raised in traditional society, but want to be modern, - makes it difficult to know how one should behave, especially in cases when problems occur.

Actually, in such cases the couple should sit down and talk together, but often the man feels he is the boss, and the wife should obey him.

This is mainly based on colonial and Christian ideas.

Women have not learnt or do not want to play this 'game' of giving the husband the feeling that he is the boss, but actually the woman herself decides.

This often leads to disappointment and frustration, especially for the woman when she just obeys her husband.

Also, there is no one nearby to guide the couple in the first years of marriage, or when there are problems.

Of course, there are also modern marriages that work out well, where the spouses have love and attention for one another.

Christian marriages

Christian marriages are based on the Bible, on Western, male ideas and interpretations of the Bible.

Officially, there is no ‘Christian marriage’ because this is unlawful when the marriage is not signed in court.

The marriage is only blessed in church.

But I will stick to the term ‘Christian marriage’.

A Christian marriage is, like the modern marriage, rather new to Zambia, but nowadays it is quite common for a couple to have their marriage blessed in church, either after a long time, or as soon as they have had their traditional wedding ceremony.

For, as far as I am concerned, the traditional wedding ceremony is still always performed, at least a part of it.

Sometimes people tell me they do not perform it any more, but when I ask them how the bride knows how to deal with the husband, they tell me that of course she will learn that in the wedding ceremony.

Usually, before a couple gets married in church, they have to follow lessons, the marriage preparation, by another couple, who are ‘good Christians’ and have a long experience in a happy marriage.

This couple teaches about how to discuss issues, and subsequently avoid quarrels.

One of the difference in these teachings is that in a traditional wedding ceremony the couple is taught separately, - the girl for a long time, usually 2-4 weeks, the man usually about one evening. In a Christian wedding, the couple is taught together, the future husband and wife together.

In these teachings, as far as I am concerned, the emphasis is on husband and wife looking after each other, discussing issues together, helping each other.

So far, this is the same as the teachings in the traditional wedding ceremony.

In Christian circles, concerning marriages reference is sometimes made to the Bible, especially to Ephesians 5:22; “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husband as unto the Lord.” But what about Ephesians 5:21, which says:

Submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God”?

And what about Ephesians 5: 25, which says: “Husbands, love your wife even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” And another one, Ephesians 5: 28:

“So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.”

But why are these verses often forgotten?

Why, in Christian, that is modern – circles, the Bible is interpreted in a negative way for women, leaving out the positive parts for women, and leaving out the parts about men or husbands, the parts that indicate that husbands should love their wives?

The story that God created man first, does not mean that he is the boss, and the woman should be suppressed. It can also be interpreted as: When you do something for the first time, you are bound to fail, so he made another human being. Then he was happy, otherwise he would have made another human being. Genesis 2: 24, it says: ‘Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh’.

If they are one flesh, one body, how can a part of the body be lower than another part? Why do we interpret this as “the woman is lower than the man”? Is this because of the traditional hierarchy that is common in Zambian society and cultures.

The first born has most rights, should be served, the last born is to serve (until he is grown up and others will serve him). I have often seen this in a family.

It is not so much the girl who has to serve, but the youngest in the family.

But this hierarchy is a traditional way of organising the society, in which age is more important than gender.

Yet, this gender inequality is based on the Bible, which has contradicting ideas about gender.

However, these contradicting ideas are actually also based on mutual assistance and respect. That has become clear from the verses in Ephesians 5: 25 and 28.

There are some booklets on marriage preparation written by a priest, fr. Coninx, and printed at Mission Press in Ndola.

The booklet: Young man prepare for your marriage, page 8, says: “We know that God created everyone equal”.

The booklet: Girl, prepare for your marriage, p. 11, it says: ... a good boyfriend is one who is always respectful to you, with whom you feel at ease, and who never makes you afraid of sharing your life with him.” I think instead of boyfriend we can also read husband.

So, again we see that a man should respect his wife.

Challenging gender norms in today’s marriages

Often, it is said that: “It is our tradition or culture to be subservient.” Culture is believed to have come from the ancestors. But what is culture? :

There are many definitions of culture, but the most common one is that it is the whole set of norms, values, learnt behaviour, beliefs, customs in a society that are passed on from generation to generation, and are thereby changed according to time and circumstances. Culture is flexible, not fixed.

Culture is made by people, and changed by people, who stick to culturally accepted norms or try to avoid or change them.

If we look at culture critically, we see that also within culture there are contradicting ideas, just as in Christianity.

Moreover, even ‘traditional’ culture has changed.

But in daily life traditional norms, modern norms and Christian norms are intertwined. It is difficult to indicate what is traditional, what is modern, as we have seen, people often think certain norms are traditional, but are actually modern.

In certain occasions these norms contradict each other, in other occasions they are additional. But in most cases one has the ability to choose how to do, how to act, based on one’s thinking.

Female initiation rites and wedding ceremonies in town have been adapted to urban areas and to a more modern way of life. This means that certain aspects are left out.

These are in particular those aspects that taught a young woman about equality about husband and wife, and how to negotiate, avoid quarrels and solve problems in such a way that both the husband and herself would be happy with solutions and decisions the couple would make.

Of course, this gender equality has been disrupted and altered due to colonialism and missionaries.

They emphasised the role of the man as head of the household, thereby lowering the position of women, for instance as housewives, whose tasks was to stay at home, do household chores, and look after children.

This division housewife and mother versus breadwinner and head of the household, implies a hierarchy.

In Zambian traditional perspective, male and female tasks were valued equally, they were equally important.

From a modern point of view, however, being a housewife and a mother, has a low value.

Traditionally, a mother was respected, and the more children she had, the more respect she gained.

In modern, western, ideas, motherhood has little value.

Also, household tasks have little value.

Cooking and cleaning have little value, and yet they are very important.

What would happen if a woman would not cook for a few days, or if she would not clean the house, or wash the dishes and do the laundry? It would soon become a mess.

Also, traditionally, cooking was an honour and only done by an elderly woman in the matrilineal village.

Audrey Richards, who conducted anthropological research in a village near Chinsali in the early 1930s, has written in detail how women cooked together for the group of men that lived in their village, and how one of the elderly women distributed food to men. If she did not like a certain man, she gave him little food.

This shows that cooking and serving food gives someone power; she can decide what to cook, or not to cook, or to cook a very nice dish if she wants something special from her husband, or cook not nice dishes when she wants to show that she is angry with him, or not interested in him.

In the traditional villages, women were only allowed to cook after they had been married for several years and had some children.,

Traditionally, a man only became the head of the house when he had been in marriage for a long time, and had several children.

So, all these ways of negotiating, and the positive values attached to women and their tasks, have waned, or are interpreted wrongly or differently as compared to the past.

Now they have lost the values that were attached to them and are seen as subservient roles women have or ought to have.

In the everyday practice of marriage, there might be conflicts due to different opinions and ideas, that might be related to traditional, modern or Christian ways of behaviour.

But we cannot say that a marriage is traditional, or modern, or Christian.

Women and men are raised in modern Zambia, often in urban areas. They are influenced by tradition, but are equally influenced by modernity, western ideas, that are often copied, and sometimes interpreted wrong.

Also, Christianity has a major influence.

But usually these norms are intertwined.

Labour, including household tasks are defined by cultural norms. However, they are not always clear-cut, and are shifting. As I saw in a village where I visited a certain woman, her husband swept the floor and cooked for me and his wife.

Also, my students who grew up in town are sometimes surprised when they do research in a village to see men doing household tasks.

Men and women in traditional marriages know they should help each other, and do help each other.

In modern marriages, it is common that the husband earns the income. The woman, often has a small job, or is a business woman or sells groceries at the market.

The idea that the man is the boss, is often an illusion instead of reality.

This illusion is maintained by both men and women.

During my fieldwork on the Copperbelt, the priests in their sermons were emphasising that husbands should show their payslip to their wives. When I asked about this, several of my informants said indeed their husbands did. When I asked them if they told their husbands how much they had earned with selling groceries at the market, they started laughing, and said “Of course not. That is our money.”

These were Catholic women, all active members of a Catholic lay group. They considered themselves modern, while following parts of traditional aspects in their lives.

This example shows that they decided for themselves, they worked outside the home, and kept the money without involving their husbands.

In Christian marriages, there is more emphasis on discussion between the spouses.

One aspect of modernity is the waning of the extended family, that gave support to a young couple, especially in raising children.

In traditional marriages, the elderly family members would advice a young woman.

The spheres of a man and a woman were more separated than in towns.

Modern life in urban areas has renegotiated and redefined gender relations and gender norms, including relationships within marriage.

Urban, modern, and also Christian life challenge traditional gender norms that were common in rural areas in the past.

Men and women, husbands and wives are supposed to talk more openly and freely, while in the past issues were made clear in a more symbolic or figurative way.

Women (and men) used and use strategies and refer to different authorities for negotiating their roles and their expectations of marriage and behaviour in daily life.

They refer to Christianity or tradition, depending on the issue and the way they want to deal with it, which might guide them in their daily live and in dealing with various problems.

Modernization, and migration to towns, have changed life and the expectations of life, including relationships within marriage and gender norms.

Because in modern and Christian marriages the emphasis is on the nuclear family, the couple has to solve problems themselves, instead of asking advice to elderly relatives.

In Christian marriages, the couple has usually followed a training before they got married, and have learnt or are supposed to have learnt how to deal with problems and how to negotiate. In addition, there can be counselling from a priest.

Conclusion

With urbanization and modernity, and influenced by Christianity, traditional teachings have slightly changed. Nowadays in some traditional teachings in the wedding ceremony, modern ideas about gender relations are taught, in which a woman is submissive, and the man is supposed to be the boss.

However, this is an ideal which is hardly ever reality.

With modernity, gender norms have become more imbalanced. Christianity has enhanced the role of women, and has weakened their position in society and within marriage.

Traditional, modern and Christian norms are intertwined, and can hardly be separated in daily life in town.

But the role of women and the many tasks they perform, would be re-valued, their position would be enhanced and could be equalized again to that of men.