



TRADITIONAL, MODERN AND CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS IN MARRIAGES

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There seems to be a lot of confusion about marriage teachings, and subsequently, about proper behaviour in marriage. Especially in urban areas there is a mixture of traditions, modernity, Western ideas, Western-based education, and the influence of Christianity. Sometimes these go together smoothly when using different parts of the mixture at the same time, while at other times there is confusion over 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 or an extended family, with their grandparents or other relatives, and 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 themselves brought up with particular 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 one’s culture and traditions, to know where one comes from. This gives guidelines about how to live and is something to hold on to for the rest of one’s life. So from early childhood onwards, girls and boys are told how to behave as a girl or boy, and how to become a good woman or man. They are told these things, and also 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 a reality, but ideas and ways of how to behave are nevertheless



passed on, in nuclear families, extended families, 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. They include all facets of adult life, like how to look after oneself, how one should not 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 matriliney (that is, the descent from grandmother to mother to daughter, the line of women), all secrets of sexuality, fertility, respect for elders, and the blood spirit of the ethnic group. Hence they embrace 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 for building a house, while the woman is responsible for the inside of the house. The man is responsible for the general income (salary) and, in the past, for providing food like meat; the woman is responsible for the daily food. The wife looks after the children because, in matriliney, 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 the avoidance of quarrels. For example, 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 what happened—unlike telling him immediately when he comes home, drunk, hungry, tired, and while the wife is still angry. For then it is bound to end up in a fight, sometimes even physically.



Nowadays, it is often said that women are traditionally 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 in order 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 their 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 is expressed by acts, and by using the words such as *mukashi wandi*.

Since traditionally men are actually outsiders in the local village, they are supposed to be with their fellow men, outside, in the *insaka*, or bar. Women are associated more with the house or home, and therefore traditionally a husband should not spend too much time at home. However, the woman should fetch water from the well early in the morning, prepare the husband's bath, prepare his breakfast, sweep, prepare his clothes, and so on. This actually means that the husband is treated like a child, who cannot look after himself or prepare his own food and clothing. Of course he can, and sometimes does, especially if he is not yet married.

But these tasks have also a symbolical meaning. They give power to the woman: she decides when and how she will perform the tasks. In doing them, the woman also gives the husband the feeling that he is the boss, that she works for him, looks after him. When she wants something, she asks him or rather discusses it with him. This gives him the feeling that he makes the decisions, whereas actually the woman makes sure she asks him in such a way that he answers positively, so that she can do or get 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. There are 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 influences 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, for example), and we have seen the large picture of the late president Mwanawasa kissing his wife on 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; showing love was only done in the bedroom. So, this idea that showing love is something between husband and wife and should be confined to 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 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 on, or copied from, British law before the 1960s. This law is conservative. For instance, according to British law a husband is allowed to beat his wife with a stick. (In traditional marriage the husband is obliged to look after his wife and treat her properly, as indicated, e.g., in 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 with a modern marriage, but the contrary is true. British law and British ideas about marriage are conservative and have a gender imbalance and are gender blind to women: they take men as a central point, and actually forget about the rights of women. Modernity has changed 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 that men paid tax, so they introduced money and jobs for men. And money is power.

If a woman has her own income, or even is the only breadwinner, she would still say that she is “helping” the husband. Is this modesty, or subservience? Is this to give the husband the idea that he brings in more money? Or is this 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: a woman should not beg, because this shows others that her husband does not look after her well.) Even when women are the main or only breadwinners, they usually do not boast about it.

Modern couples tend to live in smaller family units, 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. Furthermore, most ‘modern marriages’ are in towns, where couples are exposed to many things that appeal to them, but are often too expensive to purchase. In addition, in towns there are many more possibilities for men to go out for a drink, and to have girlfriends. Women often forget the traditional



teaching of accepting a husband when he comes home late and drunk. They start questioning him right away, which might result in a fight. The problem could get even worse if 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 then questions him, he might get angry and even more frustrated, which results in a fight. This is why the rate of domestic violence is increasing (like in Western countries.)

So, modern couples are usually raised in traditional society, but with many influences from modern, often Western, education, television, radio, and so on. They tend to forget the traditional teachings for 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 wanting 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; they want to decide themselves. This often leads to disappointment and frustration, especially for the woman if she just gives in and 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, especially on Western, male ideas and interpretations of the Bible. Legally, there is no “Christian marriage” because this is unlawful if it is not signed in court. Marriage is only *blessed* in church. But here, I will stick to the term “Christian marriage”.

A Christian marriage, like modern marriage, is 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, or at least part of it, is still always performed. Sometimes people tell me they do not perform it anymore, 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, or marriage preparation, often given by another couple who are “good Christians” and have long experience in a happy marriage. This couple teaches about how to discuss issues, and subsequently avoid quarrels.

One of the differences between these teachings and those in a traditional wedding ceremony is that, in the latter, the couple is taught separately: the woman for a long time, usually 2-4 weeks; the man usually about one evening. In a Christian marriage, the future husband and wife are taught together. In these teachings, as far as I am concerned, the emphasis is on the husband and wife looking after each other, discussing issues together, helping each other. So far, this is the same as teachings in the traditional wedding ceremony.

Concerning marriages in Christian circles, 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.”

Why are these other, nearby verses often forgotten? Why, in Christian—that is, in modern—circles, is the Bible 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 how husbands should love their wives?

The story that God created man first, does not mean that he is the boss, and that the woman should be suppressed. It can also be interpreted as: When you do something for the first time, you are bound to fail. Thus God made another human being. Then he was happy, otherwise he would have made yet another human being. In 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 one 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? Within this hierarchy, the first born has most rights: the first born 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



Zambian families. It is not so much the girl who has to serve, but the youngest in the family. This hierarchy is a traditional way of organising society, in which age is more important than gender.

Yet, the gender inequality we see today is based on the Bible, which has contradicting ideas about gender. However, even these contradicting ideas are actually 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. In the booklet *Young man prepare for your marriage*, on page 8, it says: "We know that God created everyone equal". And in the booklet *Girl, prepare for your marriage*, on page 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: "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 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 and what is modern. As we have seen, people often think certain norms are traditional, but are actually modern. In certain situations these norms contradict each other, in other situations they are additional. But in most cases one has the ability to choose what 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 traditional aspects are left out. These are in particular those aspects that taught a young woman about equality between husband and wife, and how to negotiate, avoid quarrels and solve problems in such a way



that both the woman and her husband can be happy with the solutions and decisions the couple 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 to that of housewives, whose tasks were to stay at home, do household chores, and look after children. This division of housewife and mother versus breadwinner and head of household implies a hierarchy.

From the 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. But according to modern, Western ideas, motherhood has little value. Similarly, household tasks like 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 the 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 unappealing dishes when she wants to show that she is angry with him, or not interested in him.

In traditional villages, women were only allowed to cook after they had been married for several years and had some children. And traditionally, a man only became head of the house when he had been married 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, when compared to the past. They have lost the values that were attached to them and are seen as subservient roles that women have or ought to have.

In the everyday practice of marriage, conflicts due to different opinions and ideas may arise and these may 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 and by Western ideas that are often copied and sometimes interpreted incorrectly. Also, Christianity is 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 they 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 main income. The woman often has a small job, or a business, such as selling 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 emphasised that husbands should show their payslips to their wives. When I asked about this, several of my informants said that indeed their husbands did do this. When I asked them if they told their husbands how much they had earned by 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 customs in their lives. This example shows that they made decisions for themselves, they worked outside the home, and they kept the money they earned without involving their husbands.

In Christian marriages, there is more emphasis on discussion between the spouses. But 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 advise 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 continue to use, various 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 seeking advice from elderly relatives. In Christian marriages, the couple has usually followed marriage preparation training before getting married, and they 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 undergone some change. Nowadays in some traditional teachings in the wedding ceremony, modern ideas about gender relations are taught, in which a women is submissive, and the man is supposed to be the boss. However, this is an ideal which is hardly ever reflected in reality. With modernity, gender norms have become more imbalanced. Christianity has enhanced the role of women, but 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, can be re-valued, their position can be enhanced and again be equalized to that of men.