

The Marriage Debate Among African Christians in the 21st Century: Tradition, Faith, and Emerging Realities

Patrick Maina Kamau

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Murang'a University of Technology

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90400020>

Received: 15 March 2025; Accepted: 21 March 2025; Published: 25 April 2025

ABSTRACT

Africans life revolves around survival of the self and the race. Nothing guarantees this survival better than marriage. In many African communities, marriage which is primary a union with partners of the opposite sex, is a mandatory rite of passage. Members of the society are expected to enter into this union at the appropriate time and whoever fails to adhere to this standard is deemed a disgrace to himself, family and the society. Marriage is an assurance to the family of its continuation and a guarantee to the society that it is getting stronger. The 21st century has witnessed realities like LGBTQ which have challenged the traditional understanding of marriage. For the African, the ideal form of marriage is polygyny but with the coming of the missionaries, it was largely replaced by monogamy and celibacy. The same missionaries who enforced monogamy on the Africans are blessing same sex marriages in churches in their mother countries and there is fear that the same will be exported to Africa just as the Euro-Christian culture was introduced and enforced. The question in the African mind is why they would be coerced to forego polygamy to take up homosexuality. This paper delves into the dilemma African Christians are finding themselves in as they try to lead a righteous life as trained by the missionaries.

Key Words: Bisexuals, Celibacy, Homosexuality, Polygyny, Marriage.

INTRODUCTION

The history of cohabitation among human beings has been documented through the ages. From the Biblical story of creation where Adam is unable to find a suitable helper in all the animals and God created Eve, a suitable helper for him, Genesis: 2:19-25, human beings have always cohabited in different form. The marriage institution grew as a matter of necessity. Human beings of opposite sex desired to live together and bring forth children who will maintain the survival of the race. This demanded the enacting of laws to control and defend the marriage institution as well as norms on which the societies would safeguard this union. However, as Ember et al (2021) puts it, there are tremendous cross-cultural variations in the marriage practices. There are no universal standards of what marriage is or what it ought to be.

According to Carsten et al (2021), marriages are not limited to conventions and traditions but are very flexible, a source of innovation and surprises. The intimate private world and the wider public worlds come together generating opportunities for historical change. Ember et al (2021) maintains that marriages are adaptive, many times they evolve into different forms of relationships mainly dictated upon by the prevailing human understanding of life and how to make out the best of relationships. Beyond every other endeavours, man strives to survive and gain happiness.

The concept of the marriage is believed to have been ordained by God in many communities. The Bible in Genesis 2:25 says that a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. The two will become one flesh. There no doubt therefore that God intended a one man one women situation as the ideal form of marriage. Like aforementioned however, human beings have developed different kinds of unions although male-female relationships have been the dominant form of marriage for many communities. Monogamy, polygamy and polyandry have been the main marriage traditions in many communities. This concept has been challenged in the 21st century. Same sex marriages have been witnessed and legalised. Christian churches in the Western

world; Europe, Australia and America, from where African Christianity was imported from have embraced this new development to the chagrin of many African Christians.

Christianity came to Africa with a prejudiced mind-set that everything that was African was evil and devilish. The African culture and religion particularly were targeted with polygyny being among the immediate targets of the missionaries. Polygamy, a common practice in Africa where marrying many wives was prestigious. It was a sign of wealth and responsibility and only poor men remained in monogamous unions. Polygamy ensured many children which ensured the immortality of the family and the community, (Lawrence-Hart 2019). The missionaries' idea was different, the ideal marriage to them was monogamy and for the most righteous, celibacy. By conversion and coercion Africans were forced into monogamy, it was accepted as the holy union as prescribed by God.

Falaye (2016) observes that for an African polygamist to be baptised, he had to denounce all the other wives but the first. Where the man was allowed into the Christian fellowship, he still couldn't qualify as a full member of the communion. For instance, he could also not receive Holy Communion even if he went to church although in some churches the wives could be baptised and receive the sacraments. The assertion that the polygamous husband had to divorce all the other wives but the first by the missionaries is evidence of the insensitivity of the missionaries on the plight of the Africans. A young lady was expected to live with her husband as a sister, no sex or intimacy. In the event of an enforced divorce, the plight of the children was also not considered (Falaye, 2016).

The purge on polygamy made many Africans give up the practice along with many other African cultures. These newly converted African Christians believed that the new culture would give them a happier and holier encounter with God. Monogamy became the preferred form of marriage for Christians and for over 100 years, this has been the norm. The emergence of same sex marriages among Christians in the 21st century particularly in the Western world has perplexed many African Christians. The question in many Africans minds is, "why would the church force African Christians to give up polygamy and take up same sex marriages?" This negates the gist of the African marriage which is mainly procreation for the purpose of security, acquisition of wealth and the propagation of their race. These three needs are not met by same sex marriages and thus Africans loath the idea as it is neither a part of their culture, nor does it add value to them.

BACKGROUND TO HOMOSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Homosexual alliances are not new to the world. Many scholars such as William N., Mills, R. Hodes, J. among other have documented same sex unions long before the Common Era. The Bible itself gives several accounts of the existence of the same sex encounters. Genesis 19 is a story of the men of Sodom who went to Lot's house to demand that they have sex with two men who had visited Him. *Gen: 19: 5. "Where are the men who came to you tonight. Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."*

The verse says that there were many men, young and old demanding, to have sex with the men who had visited Lot which suggests that men to men sex was desired by the Sodomites. In verse 8 Lot offers to give his two virgin girls to the men but they would not listen. This shows that homosexuality was an honourable form of sex for these men because they are not only preferring men to virgins but they are demanding to engage in homosexuality publicly.

The Pentateuch has laws forbidding samemsex unions: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The condemnation of same sex unions goes further into the New Testament. Paul's 1st Letter to the church in Corinth 6: 9-10 include homosexuals as part of the people who will not inherit the kingdom of God. *"Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers no male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders...will inherit the kingdom of God"*.

Romans 1: 26-27 says that because of men turned to idol worship and lying, God punished them with shameful lusts. *"Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones...Men abandoned their natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men."* Men had sex with men while women also practiced lesbianism. These are close examples of the existence of homo sexuality over 2000 years ago.

Traditionally homosexuality has been treated as a queer behaviour (Mills, R. 2006). In fact, it has been seen as a mental disorder. It is only in 1978 when American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from their list of mental illnesses while the world Health Organization (WHO) purged homosexuality from the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems in 1990, (Wizlo and Kuzelewska, 2021).

In the secular world homosexuality as documented has been live for many millenniums. Hodes (2018) asserts that homosexuality is noted in ancient Egypt over 4400 years ago. He notes that these years are of the recorded history. This means it could have been practiced even earlier. Hodes (2018) argues that same sex practices were prevalent in China, Rome and Greece. He also cites the prevalence of homosexuality in other species other than humans including reptiles, birds and mammals.

Aldrich (2004) posits that homosexuality has traditionally been concentrated in the cities. From the time of ancient Athens, homosexual culture has thrived more in cities than in the rural areas. This could be attributed to the escape of the people from societal norms in the rural settings. According to him, many liberals who resent traditions are attracted to cities where they can practice their activities without much scrutiny by their societies.

Mills (2006) clearly states that “*Queer is Hear*” asserting that homosexuality is with us. The fight for recognition by Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgender has finally borne fruits and the community can no longer be ignored. This is evidenced by the public display of an inclination to LGBTQ by public figures. Political leaders such as the former Prime Minister of Iceland, married a same sex partner in 2011 and became the first political leader in the modern West to have a homosexual marriage while still in power. Elio Di Rupo of Belgium followed and in 2013, Xavier Bettel the Prime Minister of Luxembourg married his husband immediately after same sex marriages were allowed in his country, (Chesnel, 2021).

Many African Christians are in a dilemma of what to make out of homosexuality from a Christian perspective. The war against this form of union is not over as some countries mainly in the third world have not yet embraced the concept. The big question is whether African Christians will embrace homosexual marriages or they will opt for what they believe are more African forms of marriages.

SAME SEX MARRIAGES AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The Christian church has for many years advocated for celibacy and where the body is weak, monogamy in line with the Biblical teachings in Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians Chapter 7:1. Monogamy is given impetus by other biblical teachings such as the story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, the teachings of Christ on divorce and the guidelines of Paul in the New Testament. Genesis chapter 1 & 2 says God created a man and a woman for companionship. The woman is from the man’s rib and as such they are one being.

Genesis 2:24

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

This verse to many Christians for a long period has been authoritative in nuptial matters. It is seen as an expression of God’s plan for marriage from the beginning. It also forms the basis for the advocacy of monogamy. This view is supported by other verses like 1 Timothy 3:2 which says that an overseer must be the husband of one wife only and the teachings of Jesus that a man who divorces his wife makes her adulterous and that whoever marries a divorcee also commits adultery. These verses are read together to define the Christian marriage as monogamous and lifelong. The Christian vows are that the couple will be together until death do them part.

Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians chapter 7:1 says that it is good for a man not marry which give proponents of celibacy a biblical base for their views. However, because of the evils in the world, Paul advises the people of Corinth to have one wife and the women to have husbands of their own because of the immorality prevailing in Corinth. Thus from a Christian perspective it is agreeable to remain celibate or to have a monogamous marriage. This notwithstanding, Christians have been caught up by the emerging realities of the LGBTQ, postmodernism and the agitation of human rights groups. They have advocated for same sex marriages and

achieved many legal milestones such as *Bostock Vs Clayton County* of 2020 on employees who prescribed to LGBTQ and the 1997 *Romer Vs. Evans*, 517 in which the US supreme court which struck down an amendment to the constitution of Colorado state that was seen as biased against homosexuals, lesbians and bisexuals. There are also 38 countries including Brazil, New Zealand, Netherlands, Germany, France and Belgium who have legalised same sex marriages and although the church in Africa is yet to accommodate it in full, mainstream churches like the church of England and Roman Catholic Church in the west have embraced it. This points at the prospects of the Christian church increasingly solemnizing same sex marriages.

The Lambeth conference, a meeting of Anglican bishops worldwide is a dependable voice on the Anglican church view on homosexual marriages. As early as 1988, the church recognised the need for a study on same sex Christian partners. In resolution 64, the conference urged for an empirical study on same sex orientation from a scriptural perspective in consideration of genetic, psychological and social cultural factors that lead to homosexuality. Each province was urged to hold this matter seriously as it was a matter of concern to the church, (Anglican Communion office, 2005).

As the agitation for the acceptance of homosexuals took root, some bishops joined the Continuing Anglican Movement in 1992, to fight against the recognition of homosexuals as ordinary Christians. This widened the gap in the Lambeth conference. In July 1998 the Lambeth Conference passed Resolution 1.10 on Human Sexuality. Among the key resolutions were that, the church affirmed that scriptural marriage was between one woman and one man in a lifelong union and those that were not called to marriage have a right to abstain. It also recognised there were homosexuals in the Christian congregations who needed pastoral care and moral direction by the church to guide them into the transforming power of God. The church agreed to listen to them and assure them of God's love for them despite their sex orientation. However, the church rejected homosexual practices on the basis that they are incompatible with the scriptures. The church would not bless same sex unions or ordain people involved in same gender unions, (Anglican Communion office, 2005).

The Anglican communion continued debating on this topic and appeared to reject homosexual approaches in favour of the Scriptures. However, in May 2003, the Diocese of New Westminster a part of the Anglican Church of Canada allowed the blessing of same-sex unions by the church making history as the first Anglican Church to accept homosexual marriages. On the 2nd of November the same year, Gene Robinson was elected the first gay Anglican Bishop, he was consecrated as the Bishop of New Hampshire, (Peacock 2022). This opened the doors for more gay and lesbian bishops and clergy to be ordained. It however split the Anglican communion particularly the bishops from America. Later celibates in civil unions and transgender people were ordained.

Peacock, (2022) observes that in January 2014, the United Kingdom parliament legalised same sex marriages by the Marriage Bill, 2014 and allowed the church to conduct same sex marriages except for church of England and the church in Wales. In 2016 the Archbishop of Canterbury, the seat of the Anglican Church apologised to the LGBTQ community for the hurt the church had caused them.

It is now evident that the Anglican church will continue blessing same sex marriages although the Lambeth conference is currently divided. Already a liturgy has been put in place for the service of the same sex marriages. This means that those opposed to homosexual marriages are likely to lose as the minority homosexual wins. The plight of African Christians who abandoned polygamy for the Christian monogamy is now in jeopardy. Do they continue rejecting homosexual marriages or they should take them up?

The Roman Catholic Church on the other hand takes marriage as a sacrament. According to Wizlo and Kuzelewska (2021) the Roman Catholic Church accepts everybody in their congregation but have no room for homosexual marriages. Marriage is based on God's natural laws and the scripture is clear about same sex marriages. It was God's plan from the beginning to create male and female. It is also the only right way to bring forth and raise children.

From 1975, the Catholic church has debated on the homosexual question. One thing that has come out is that as much as the church stands by the scriptural teachings against homosexuality, it is against homophobic tendencies of discrimination and mistreatment of homosexuals. In the words of pope John Paul II, people inclined to

homosexuality should be treated with compassion and dignity avoiding any form of unjust discrimination, (Wizlo and Kuzelewska 2021)

The Catholic Bishops of Pennsylvania look at marriage from the original direction given in Genesis. According to them marriage is all about love and procreation. It should be life long and life giving, (Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, 2004). For them, the primary cell of humanity is the family. For this reason, sex should only between a man and a woman in marriage as that is the will of God and only way in which two beings that have been joined to one being truly fulfil each other through their differences as in marriage they become one and equal.

Homosexual unions are not the uniquely complimentary relationships that God intended as seen in Genesis 2:24. His plan was a mutually loving, procreative unions that would reflect His intentions during creation, (Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, 2004). Same sex unions cannot enter into true conjugal unions and thus would be wrong to equate the same as marriage. This is an indication that these Bishops' understanding of marriage has no room for same sex unions. To them, thinking of same sex marriage devalues Christian marriage.

Despite the resolutions of the 20004 conference the Roman Catholic Church released the "*Declaration Fiducia Supplicans*" in the Pastoral meaning of blessings (Vatican, 2023). The declaration observes that blessings are meant for that which conforms to God's will as expressed in the church's teachings. It however recognizes the presence of couples in irregular situations in their congregations who requires blessing. Pope Francis has called upon Christians to desist from judges who only "deny, reject and exclude". Thus the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* agrees that those in irregular relationships should receive blessings from the church. Such blessings are a call to God so that all that is good, true or humanly valued in the lives of these people may be healed and elevated by the Holy spirit. Such is the blessings of the same sex marriage in the catholic Church.

Ravizza (2024) observes that same sex marriages build stable families and communities which can contribute to the common good of the church and the society. She looks at same sex marriage as a sacrament that graces the couple itself and the society at large. This is an indication that the plight of homosexual marriages is gaining momentum in the world.

There are many more Christian denominations in the world such as Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church and the United Church of Christ that have embraced the LGBTQ philosophy but this paper has largely dwelt with the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church because they are the largest Christian denominations in the world and in Africa. They are reliable indicators of how the LGBTQ concept has permeated Christian denominations all over the world.

AFRICAN MARRIAGE TRADITIONS

Marriage among the Africans is a sacred and mandatory rite of passage. Achembe (2019) identify polygyny as the most prevalent form of marriage in Africa. A man who could afford would marry many wives while in rare cases, a woman would marry more than one husband at a time. Achembe (2019) identifies 5 different types of marriage in Africa. Among them traditional marriages, Christian marriages, Islamic marriages, court or registry marriages, and women to women marriages.

In their explanation of women to women marriages, Achembe (2019) explains that a rich barren woman can marry other women. The bride has sex with a lover or lovers in order to give children to her female husband. The children born in such a marriage bear the woman's husbands name. Achembe (2019) explains that such marriages are not lesbian or amorous. It is worth noting that in many communities in Africa, if a man was unable to sire children, then another man, a confidant could assist him to have his own children.

When a wife was unable to bear children, the husband would more often than not marry a second or third wife. If the husband died, then the barren wife or a wife that had no male children would be allowed to marry another woman with whom to have children. The two women had no sexual relationship of any form. The bride was assigned a man from the family who would satisfy her conjugal needs and sire children who would take up the name of the deceased husband. In some cases, women would marry wives for sons who were never born, (Kamau, 2024).

The coming of missionaries in Africa posed a great challenge to African culture and religion. According to Mokkhoathi (2020) African Religion was ridiculed as heathenism and the practitioners forced to accept Christianity. Mudimbe (1988) says that the missionaries did not negotiate with pagans. African cultures were to be discarded in favour the missionaries' culture. The missionaries came with their Euro-Christian cultures that were then believed to be godly and progressive as compared to the African cultures which to missionaries were barbaric, retrogressive and satanic. Falaye (2016) observes that the missionaries in Africa did not only spread the gospel but were imposing their culture.

Among the practices targeted by the missionaries was polygamy, a practice like afore mentioned that was not only desirable but also honourable among the Africans. Falaye (2016) states that polygamy was condemned and wrongly equated with adultery, sin, evil and devilishness. For these reasons polygamy had to be quashed in favour of monogamy and celibacy. Falaye (2016) however notes that the European themselves are involved in sequential polygamy and polyandry where one person marries different partners but at different times.

Polygyny has faced many other challenges in Africa. Umaru (2024) avers that formal education and career progression delays marriage which results in little marriage time resulting in monogamy. Social restrictions and economic realities such as gender rites have also discouraged polygamy. There are also laws that have been enacted to protect monogamous marriages, (Umaru, 2024).

The African Christian marriage Act. in Kenya for instances makes polygyny for people married before a licenced minister or registrar a crime. Chapter 151, 10 states;

"...so long as both of you shall live although no other rite of a civil or religious nature shall now take place, and that hereafter your marriage cannot be dissolved during your lifetime, except by a valid judgement of divorce...if any of you contract another marriage while your marriage to each other remains undissolved, you will be thereby guilty of bigamy and liable to punishment for the offence". , (National council for Law Reporting, 2012).

Such laws popularise monogamy and shuts the door for polygamy. Culture however is intrinsic, it will not be eliminated by centuries of domination but can be suppressed (Kivel, 2013). Polygamy in Africa has remained the preferred marriage practice among many Africans but conditions prevent most African Christians from contracting it. In 2014, the Kenyan parliament passed a bill legalizing marriage to multiple wives. The marriage Act. no 4 of 2014, section 2,3 and 6 allows a man to have many wives simultaneously. This is however limited to customary marriages and Islamic marriages (Kenya Law.org 2024). It is important to note that the Kenyan Law defines marriage as a contract between consenting adults of alternative sex. This shuts out homosexual marriages.

Against this background and the resurgence of African cultural practices, polygamy is likely to get some impetus. Various reasons have been advanced in support of polygamy, Falaye, (2016) looks at restoring dignity to women. To him, polygamy has a place for widows, the handicapped and solves the challenge of unwilling spinsterhood. Polygamy restores dignity to women who have been widowed as they would easily be taken advantage of by men if they were left on their own. This also caters for the children of the widowed lady as the children would grow with a father figure in the family. In the event of childlessness marrying a second wife would be a better option than divorce.

Temporary separation is common occurrence in marriages. When a family is separated for a long time, the likelihood of the man remarrying is very high. This however does not deter the first wife from coming back. If she had children before the separation, then the man must customarily remarry her because, according to many African communities' traditions, it is taboo to divorce a mother as all children belongs to the community.

CONCLUSION

Christianity is the largest religion in the world with a population 31.2% of the world population asserverating to be christians, (Saroha, J. 2019) 49% of Africans affiliate themselves to the religion. The religion controls most of the socio-cultural activities and as much as many Africans Juxtapose Christianity with their culture, they

publicly display and adhere to Christian norms. Thus despite polygamy being the preferred mode of marriage among Africans, most Christians are limited to monogamy by either religion or law. The entry of LGBTQ to the society through the church is therefore a challenge to Christians as many Africans find it sacrilegious. However, Africans might not escape homosexuality once it is established in the church. The church has shaped African culture for above 100 years and there is no reason to believe that such past will be vacated. The growth of Islam, the fastest growing religion in Africa and the resurgence of African religious traditions, both of which support polygamy might give a life line to polygamy for as observed, Africans are legalizing polygamy. Without polygamy, same sex marriages are likely to be a marriage option for African Christians.

REFERENCES

1. Achembe N. (2019) Love, Courtship, and Marriage in Africa, in a Companion to African History, First Edition. John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
2. Aldrich, R. (2004) Homosexuality and the City: An Historical Overview. Urban Studies, Vol. 41, No. 9, 1719-1737, August 2004 iSk Carfax Publishing WW Taylor & Francis Group
3. Anglican Communion office (2005). The Lambeth Conference: Resolutions Archive from 1988. <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127749/1988>
4. Carsten J., Chiu. H., Magee H., Papadaki, E. and Reece, K. (edited) (2021) Marriage in the Past, Present and Future Tense. London, UCL Press.
5. Chesnel, J. (2021) Homosexuality and Politics in the Western World. Gender in Geopolitics Institute. Igg-geo.org
6. Ember, C. Gonzalez, B. and McCloskey, D. (2021) Marriage and family. Human Relations Area Files. <https://hraf.yale.edu>
7. Falaye, T. (2016) Polygamy and Christianity in Africa. Global Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Vol. 4, No.10, pp.18-28, October 2016
8. Hodes, J. (2018) Evolutionary Origins of Homosexuality. G&LR Magazine, <https://glreview.org/article/evolutionary-origins-of-homosexuality/>.
9. Kamau, P. (2024) Resurgence of Agikuyu Cultural Practices and their Influence on the Anglican Worship in Murang'a County, Kenya. Phd, Thesis, Kenyatta University.
10. Lawrence-Hart, G. (2019) The Socio-Cultural Significance of Polygamy in Africa. International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities ISSN: 2713-4698. Volume 5, Issue 1. Pages 01- 06. July, 2019
11. Mills, R. (2006) History at Large. Queer is Here. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture. doi:10.1093/hwj/dbl006 Oxford University Press for History Workshop Journal.
12. Mokhoathi, J. (2017) From Contextual Theology to African Christianity: The Consideration of Adiaphora from a South African Perspective. DOI:10.3390/rel8120266
13. Mudimbe, V. (1988). The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge. London: Indiana University Press.
14. National Council of Law Reporting (2012) African Christian Marriage and Divorce Act. www.kenyalaw.org
15. Peacock, R. (2022) Timeline: Lambeth Conference and the same-sex story. <https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/factsheets/timeline-lambeth-conference-and-the-same-sex-story/>
16. Pennsylvania Catholic Conference (2004) Human Sexuality, Marriage and Same-Sex Unions. <https://www.pacatholic.org/wp-content/uploads/humansexuality.pdf>
17. Ravizza, B. (2024) The Sacrament of the Same Sex Marriage. An Inclusive Vision for the Catholic Church. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
18. Umaru V. (2024) Biblical Principles of Marriage for Building Mutual Marital Relationships in Contemporary Africa with A Particular Reference to Hona Culture. African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research 7(4), 172-186. DOI:10.52589/AJSSHRCOQLS62I
19. Vatican (2023) Declaration Fiducia Supplicans on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings. <https://www.vatican.va>
20. Wizlo, M and Kuzelewska, E. (2021) Same-Sex Marriage and The Catholic Church in Europe. Any Chance for Understanding? Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric 66 (79) 2021 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)