Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2026, Vol 12, No 1, 1–22
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2026.v12n1.a17
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459
2026 © The Author(s)

The Kikuyu Christian marriage's dilemma: A contrapuntal perspective from 21st-century Kenya

Humphrey Mwangi Waweru
Kenyatta University, Kenya
waweru.humphrey@ku.ac.ke
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9891-0381,

Abstract

There is little or no doubt that cultures are like an equatorial forest with many different types of trees; hence, they remain diverse. Kikuyus are believed to be the most populous and well Christianized group of people in Kenya today. However, of late, the community is experiencing a cultural rejuvenation in contemporary society, creating a dilemma in marriage and culture in the 21st century. Before the arrival of the missionaries in Kenya, most of the Kikuyu Africans were practising polygamous marriages. Marriage was a cultural pillar prior to the advent of the nineteenth-century missionaries. On arrival, the missionaries did not hesitate to take up the battle against the Kikuyu traditional marriage system and imposed their belief in monogamy on their African converts, compelling them to shed off second wives, retaining only the first wife. Those who could not quickly do so underwent a paradigm shift and moved to African independent Churches (AICs), which were termed as sects by the missionaries. Existing studies on polygamy in African Theology barely focus on the dilemma African Christians faced. Hence, this article, using African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS) theory, examines the cultural dilemma the Kikuyu Christians encountered regardless of their church affiliations. Examining the marriage dilemma in the Kikuyu community, we do not only fill the gap in the studies of marriage, whether polygamous or monogamous, in African Christian Theology but also shift the focus of studies on these marriages from a continental perspective to a local cultural perspective (LCP), which has been overlooked in many studies. The article will further examine the logicality and compatibility of both monogamous and polygamous marriage within a biblical perspective within the theology of marriage in an African context.

Keywords

Kikuyu; indigenous; knowledge; system; religion; polygamy; monogamy; marriage; culture; dowry; Christianity and spirituality

Introduction

In Africa today, there are many people who pursue studies and embark on higher learning simply for academic excellence; such scholars will always research or study from the perspective of us versus them. Many African theologians, past and present, are known to indulge in Christian thinking, analysis and study to boost their hungry egos and for selfish motives like promotions. At times, interpretations are important; they matter. Such times are times of cultural crisis. Can we really afford that at this point of African cultural rejuvenation provoked by indigenous knowledge systems, which are tearing early Missionary Christian perspectives and teachings apart? For a long time, African Theology has engaged scholarship to justify its presence rather than its value. Contrapuntal theology, on the other hand, advocates balance for identity, rather than for presence.

It is with this background in mind that this article intends to use AIKS to chart, evaluate as well as to find out the way forward in African Christian marriage today among the Kikuyu people. Africa is a fast-changing continent, a continent full of problems and challenges of all kinds. Africa has been described as "enigmatic", a continent that is the richest of the seven continents in natural resources and yet her people are not only the poorest, but also the least educated and relatively marginalised (Tokunboh Adeyemo 2001). Does the African theologian have the luxury of empty rhetoric, speculations and irrelevant studies? Or do we have the luxury of the statuesque as established by our forerunners? In this article, we will try to respond to some of these concerns and pose a challenge to our African theologians. This has become our task, as we interact on a daily basis with our contemporary African Christians who are interested in knowing the relevance of African Christianity to them and their situation.

We equally acknowledge that Africa has more spoken languages than any other continent, which are basic endowments of the human species, making culture a possible asset. The verbal languages allow us to assert our humanity in exerting our freedom to name ourselves and interpret our world in which "we live" as well as "move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The missionaries had taken away the African power of naming and interpreting their world, which eroded African dignity, resulting in resistance as liberation theology. This awkward African situation was spelt

Volkmann, J. (2026) At the heart of our life's stories lies the heart: On making (fictional) sense of reality. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*. 12(1). DOI: 10.17570/stj.2026.v12n1.a1.

van der Westhuizen, H. (ed.). (2022) *Letters to a young theologian*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

out by Placide Tempels (1959:36), who opined that it was they who were "able to tell the Africans, in precise terms, what their innermost concept of being is". Hence our motivation and rationale to investigate the African concept of marriage in the 21st Century. So, the purpose of this article is to reflect on what it means to be cultural in a context of cultural crisis, a context where a reflection of life matters.

Several factors have prompted this study of the rejuvenation of marriage practices among the Kikuyu Christians. Whether as polygamous, serial marriages, or monogamy, people are departing from the missionary norm of one man, one wife or vice versa, which is the biblical principle, established as monogamy through two becoming "one flesh" (Gen 2:24, Mt 19:5–6). There is a need to investigate this scenario from a contrapuntal perspective. For Sawyerr (1997), African Christians are facing a clamant demand of re-interpretation of Christian faith in a context of their own to accommodate the African primal worldview. Such can only be done through indigenous knowledge systems in pursuit of a definitive African theology in a contrapuntal perspective, which will promote a decolonised contextual understanding of the gospel in relation to African Christian marriage. To achieve this endeavour, the study engages the Kikuyu marriage practice as a pillar of culture in a postcolonial endeavour.

In recent times, there has been a resurgence in the practice of marrying many wives in Kikuyu Christian religion or even divorcing and re-marrying, and this has given rise to an unhealthy confrontation between the Church and the proteges of African indigenous traditional practice of marriage. There is a need to study this phenomenon and the way this affects the life and ethos of the churches within the Central region of the country. There is already a way the traditional religion is emerging afresh, creating a confrontation between the Christian way of doing things and the way the gospel is being appropriated and understood in the context of Kikuyu culture (Waweru 2011). So, a dialogue that results in a counterpoint is necessary in this study.

Such manifestations are visible in the "everyday" experiences of ordinary Christians, or in the activities of those believed to be practising Christians. There is a contrapuntal conversation taking place; it is not a new thing to hear someone quoting the Bible not to preach, but to justify,

a cultural practice (Waweru 2011, 2020). Their songs, praises, sermons and testimonies in marriage ceremonies must be re-examined closely to determine inappropriate ways of relating the Bible to culture or vice versa and, finally, the contextual engagement as a way forward in African Christian marriages within postcolonial Africa. The question one needs to ask is: what edits what? The Bible or the Culture; such questioning is the backbone of the motivation of this study.

Who are the Kikuyu people?

The scholarship on the question of marriage among the Kikuyu lies in the ambivalence about excitement and confusion. Examining the historiography of the Kikuyu people's practice of marriage is ambiguous and sometimes misleading. There are those who believe the Kikuyu people originated from Mûkûrwe wa Nyagathanga in Murang'a County (Kenyatta 1938) as a religious narrative, while others believe that the community immigrated from Ethiopia (Muriuki 1974) as a historical narrative. It is ambiguous and confusing because of the diversity of those treating the subject of the Kikuyu people, being both African scholars and some traditionalists, especially the super-ethno-nationalists. For Waweru (2009), marriage is an important rite of passage not only in Kikuyu society, but in African primal worldview. As Oduyoye (1997) opines, marriage is not an individual affair but a cultural-religious practice in African philosophy and religion.

Nevertheless, it is exciting because an African scholar may encounter a spine that may devour the purity of thought, which may result in taking either side in scholarship. This study is taken on the principle that there is danger in a single story because, in the mythical narratives of the Kikuyu, one finds enormous errors of omission and commission done by romanticising, narrativization of facts, emotions, frustrations and a deliberate attempt at "colouring" the origins as well as decorating facts; hence, contrapuntalism is the key (Waweru 2006). One interesting thing is that the Gikuyu man never had sons but only daughters, who miraculously got husbands except for one. The marriage of the nine daughters affirms the importance of monogamous marriage; nevertheless, the single lady who never got married, finally had more children than her married sisters,

the narrative is clear, she hopped from one man to the other. Could this be the origin of polygamous marriage among the Kikuyu people? My guess is as good as yours.

The above explanation of the context of the study within the Kikuyu community is enigmatic, because if one examines the existing literature, one notes scholars leaning towards their own ideas, while doing little to engage the opposing side in dialogue. In view of the importance of the Bible among the Kikuyu people, it is the most common book in every home that is written in the Kikuyu language. Apart from the Bible, it is difficult to find a mother tongue text within Kikuyu homesteads. This text is read at home, at prayer meetings, and in schools. Schools here refer to all levels of formal education from primary to high institutions of learning. So, marriage among the Kikuyu people is aligned with the teachings of the Bible. Kenyatta (1938:163) argues that sexual relations were only important for procreation, making sexual orientation before marriage a taboo.

The Kikuyu or the Agîkûyû, are an ethnic group who speak a Bantu language known as Gîkŭyŭ, and the majority of them inhabit Central Kenya, and many other parts of the country and the world at large; you can hardly miss a Kikuyu in any part of the world. They are of the larger Bantu-speaking grouping called Gema (Mt. Kenya region people). They practice polygamous as well as monogamous marriages, determined by individual status in life. The Kikuyu people are agriculturalists, mainly farming tea and coffee in central Kenya, while those in the Rift Valley mostly do subsistence farming. Some equally practice livestock and poultry, depending on their immigration routes and settlements. They believe in *Ngai, Mwene Nyaga* (God the owner of the Ostrich) as their creator God and practice male circumcision, with a few pockets of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The Kikuyu are deeply ritualistic; if one is eating or drinking, they will jokingly do libations, but they seriously mean it as a way of life. They thrive on the concept of communalism, yet with the basic principle of capitalism. It is on the Kikuyu myths that we hinge our article, with, of course, specific reference to their philosophy on marriage as the bottom line of cultural practices among them, for "marriage is a religious cultural practice" (Waweru 2009:249).

Contrapuntally speaking, the Kikuyu believe in values of collective action, mutual aid, co-operation, and interdependence as necessary conditions not only for an individual's wellbeing but also for the successful achievement of even the most difficult undertakings. Those who live within Murang'a County, the traditional origin place for all Kikuyu people, have a philosophy of communalism, *Ka Muingi Koyaga Ndiri* (a crowd lifts the mortar); while those living in Nyeri County have a capitalistic philosophy Mugi ni Mutare (wise is advised); Kikuyu capitalism is practised at its best in Kiambu County with a philosophy, Urutagwo mwiruti (you help those who help themselves). Although today these philosophical statements are common among the Kikuyu and are quoted everywhere, particularly during marriage negotiations, they are identifiers of originality among the Kikuyu in terms of character, and they are clearly put on signboards as you cross a river demarcating a county boundary. This article uses AIKS in a contrapuntal perspective to articulate the dynamics of Kikuyu marriage in African Christianity as the subject, while the Bible becomes the object, embracing the ideology of Africans being incurably religious (Waweru, 2022).

A contrapuntal perspective on African indigenous knowledge systems

It is the core mandate of African theologians to demonstrate that from the onset, Africans had their own way of relating with God, even before the arrival of the Bible (Waweru 2025). African indigenous knowledge systems have finally become a reality in our theological studies, "making Africa the subject" rather than the object, as Western methods of research had indicated previously (2025:39). For us to understand any African cultural practice, we need to use African indigenous knowledge systems in a contrapuntal methodological approach to unearth the identity of religious experience within African societies. For White (2025), African theologies and churches are expressions of the African faith seeking to articulate and live out their Christian identity. Hence, postcolonial criticism is a critical theoretical approach, particularly interested in contrapuntal investigation of the uneven and complex power relations which resulted from the marginalisation of the African masses during colonialism. The Kikuyu

people practised marriage either polygamous or monogamous to develop their community in their diverse and complex contexts. This article uses AIKS in a contrapuntal perspective to articulate the dynamics of Kikuyu marriage in African Christianity as the subject, while the Bible becomes the object, embracing the ideology of Africans being incurably religious (Waweru, 2022).

Therefore, such a contrapuntal approach in African Theology will bring out the desired results in Christian understanding of Kikuyu way of life in the contemporary context of cultural rejuvenation. Such a move allows Africans to rediscover their reality of knowledge and, for the first time, "refrain from the colonial pathways mapped out by Western research methodologies" (Waweru 2025:40). The contrapuntal theory will account for the reciprocity and constitute "negotiations of identities in and through such contexts particularly in postcolonial Africa" (2020:7).

African theology has undergone a paradigm shift through Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) as a foundational principle in the investigation of African cultural practices, providing a context-specific, holistic framework in investigating African identity in relation to spiritual, social and religious dimensions of life. Incorporating AIKSs in investigative studies decolonises African theology, which for a long time had applied Western critical methods of research in their own contexts. For Waweru (2025:41), it was through mother-tongue language that Africans encountered an authentic dialogue between the gospel and African traditions. This article uses African indigenous knowledge systems to emphasise African cultural rootedness and primal worldviews, bridging Kikuyu traditional marriage practices with Christian contextual theology of the 21st-century. We therefore investigate the concept of marriage within the Kikuyu cultural identity. Such an investigation is less constrained than Western ways of research in the interpretations of the Bible, where empires had an impact on the history and culture of both traditional and contemporary contexts (Waweru 2020).

For Wimbush (1991:88), the AIKSs are characterised by looseness, even playfulness in comparison with the biblical text itself. Waweru (2025:43) argues that African indigenous research methods have proved that their

rootedness in life, culture, as well as nature, created new theological concepts. For the Kikuyu people, dowry is a cultural signature.

The concept of Kikuyu cultural identity in post-colonial Africa

A simple definition of Kikuyu culture is a people's way of life expressed through practical forms, reflective forms, as well as relational forms, marriage in particular, giving them a sense of cultural identity. The single most important factor that has shaped rejuvenation in Kikuyu land is their language. For Sanneh (1989), African languages have contributed to making African Christian mission a local enterprise. It is the use of the Kikuyu Bible that has unleashed the bottled-up frustrations of the Kikuyu, who had been subjugated in their own lands. In it they learned about the biblical figures who had two wives or more. The Kikuyu people are aware of their marriage practices which, consciously or unconsciously, shape who they see themselves to be. The coming of independence for most African Christians brought with it many hopes and optimism. The emergence of the autonomous, independent African states was for most people a dream come true in all areas of life, particularly in Central Kenya, where traditional practices in marriages had been abandoned. In the Kikuyu traditional society, polygamous and monogamous marriages were commonly practised based on the choice of the church one joined as well as the socioeconomic status of the individuals (Mbiti 1969, Kenyatta 1938).

The precolonial Kikuyu chiefs were mostly the first converts of the missionaries who believed that it was inappropriate for traditional rulers to be monogamous in marriage, because of their position as leaders in their society. One direct benefit of the translation of the Bible into the Kikuyu language was the opportunity it gave for theological discourse to be carried out in the Kikuyu language. The discovery of Jacob as a polygamous leader in the Bible, with four wives, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah (Gen 29), made the Kikuyu chiefs remain Christian believers; despite the many wives they had married, they subjected their subjects to monogamous marriage. Kikuyu Wealthy members of society were also expected to be polygamous, even though they converted to Christianity. Nevertheless, the poor who were incapable of handling many wives due to financial constraints became the champions of monogamous marriage, and they had to be content with

monogamy. Culturally, thinking as an African, we could argue that, just as the fish is accustomed to surviving in water, human beings cannot survive without culture. For the Kikuyu, marriage is the clearest example of a culture-creating capacity, given by God.

The traditional concept of God among the Kikuyu is that God is the supreme being and He is generally called *Ngai*. However, when the Kikuyu apply the name *Murungu* referring to God, it would mean *Ngai*, but to a whole range of spirit-like beings. They believe that there is not only one Ngai, but a plurality of Him expressed in marriage. *Ngai*, is given good qualities because He is seen as a father who is concerned about His people, and He tries to maintain order and harmony among polygamous marriages and particularly between the children and the whole family. After independence in 1963, marriage remained a matter of choice and status. Besides, the traditional Kikuyu society being agrarian, engaging in polygamy guaranteed them the wealthy Kikuyus' kind of free labour. It was unfortunate that land went into the hands of the rich; such a move not only enhanced poverty but also encouraged polygamous marriage as a steady supply of labour. Such a move resulted in polygamy becoming a common thing among the most ordinary Kikuyus, even though they converted to Christianity. The African preachers then turned to liberation theology (Waweru 2024), lack of land for farming also led many Kikuyus to shun polygamous marriages due to the high level of poverty experienced post-independence. Having many children would have meant more school fees and more expenses to feed the families. For Ayandele (1966:335) there are many reasons the indigenous societies in Africa practised polygamous marriages such as farming, high rates of infant mortality, social, economic and political standing, and elaborate funeral rites, as well as the capability to pay dowry (Waweru 2009). Those who had become committed Christians started preaching polygamous marriages as a vice, the practice of having many wives.

The Kikuyu elites considered marrying many wives unrealistic, making polygamous marriages communally construed and considered unnecessary and a major factor to block you from becoming a Christian. People would now commune with God as individuals rather than as a community. For Waweru (2020: 180) Africans were an oral people; their wisdom and valuable knowledge were passed on from one generation to the other

through storytelling, proverbs and wise sayings, which could have been applied to discourage any unwanted practice. Hence, even men of status and reputation who used to receive wives as gifts were quickly discouraged. The practice of arranged marriages in Kikuyu society was shunned, becoming a thing of the past. So, parents no longer arranged spouses for their children. Christian Men who disliked arranged marriages were now free to marry women of their choice within their environment, regardless of their tribes or churches.

African writers, like Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1965, 1982), John Mbiti (1969; 1991), Jesse Mugambi (1990; 1995), theologians, historians, sociologists and anthropologists, among others, have documented how the European and American missionaries rid Africa of her values and cultural practices and imposed Western cultural values on their converts (Waweru 2011). Polygamous marriage is one of the cultural practices that the missionaries contended against. They believed that polygamy was incompatible with civilised society and Christianity. Their strong opposition to polygamy, sacrifices as well as Female circumcision led to crises in missionary Churches that resulted to the formation of Alliance schools in Kenya in 1926. The well-known African theologian Waweru Humphrey (2011, 2020, 2022, 2024) opines that to understand any aspect of the social life of an African people, economic, political, or even religious, one must essentially attain essential knowledge of their system of kinship and marriage. Lack of such an understanding, according to Lamin Sanneh (1983) had resulted in Rev. G.O. Griffin, expelling ten Church leaders of the Methodist Church in Lagos, Nigeria, for being in polygamous marriages. The move by Griffin, resulted to the birth of the United Methodist Church. The controversy was a blessing in disguise, for it opened a new avenue for the formation of African initiated Churches (AICs).

The move by Griffin, was not unique, because the Kikuyu Africans had also formed African Independent Churches (AICs), surprisingly after they had openly admitted that they were in polygamous marriages and were not willing to leave their wives. It is now clear that the mistakes of the early missionaries resulted in the proliferation of African-initiated Churches (AICs), which the missionaries labelled as sects.

Hence, this article seeks to lay bare the rejuvenation of polygamous marriages in the Kikuyu land in the 21st-century, even after centenary celebrations of mission work in the central region. It is no secret that the traditional missionary churches are busy celebrating a centenary within the Mt. Kenya region, while Africans are busy getting back to their roots. It is a fact that the majority of the Kikuyu, though not publicly declared, are keeping secret lovers, appearing only when one dies; the many cases in courts stopping burials speak volumes.

Conceptualising marriage in Kikuyu Christianity

It is easy during times of post-colonialism and post-independence to give in, to despair and watch, when things don't happen as anticipated, with a fatalistic attitude. Africans who had abandoned their second, third wives due to the pressure of missionary Christianity found themselves in rude shock. "Polygamy" is a very simple term to define in African Traditional Religions (ATR). It is a common practice for men to marry multiple wives simultaneously during their lifetime, whether in public or in private, as opposed to monogamy, which is the practice of having a single wife at a time during one's lifetime. The term is derived from two Greek words: *poly* meaning "many" and *gamos* meaning "marriage" (Zeitzen 2008:3). Together, the term means marrying many wives. In various societies, the word may equally refer to polyandry, which is also interpreted as one wife with many husbands, while polygamy would imply one husband with many wives. We also need to query the idea of divorcing one wife and marrying another one, yet remaining faithful to the children of the first marriage: is that monogamous or polygamous? In Kikuyu culture, a woman who has children is inseparable from the clan she got married into; even if she divorced, she would always find herself coming back during the ceremonies of her children.

In Kikuyu land, which is currently referred to as the Mount Kenya region (Kirima), marriage (*uhiki*) involves several steps of negotiations, which normally are a way of creating a relationship or a fellowship with new friends. However, despite marriage negotiations being different things to various cultures, it remains a universal phenomenon. The payment of dowry gives the children identity and allows a woman to remain part of

that family despite her husband divorcing and marrying another woman (Waweru 2009). According to Pearsall's (2022:1) theory of marriage, regardless of who is marrying, the occasion had particular significance; it legitimises offspring, strengthens kingdoms, as well as creating a harmonious relationship between cultures of different communities. The theory further highlights the functional features of marriage, tracing the origin of polygamy as the male attempts to build and enforce a patriarchal power structure. In Kikuyu culture, polygamy theory suggests that the male person benefits more than the female person. The gender propagators of this theory argue that polygamy gives the male person access to women and their bodies, resulting in more children, giving the men an upper hand in kin connections. Polygamy is a way of supporting masculinity, public importance and domestic potency (Pearsall, 2022:4). In Kikuyu society, it may be different, for women in polygamous marriages to benefit more than men. However, whatever benefits there may have been outweighed by men's egoistic interests, because women and children bear the men's names and are seen as parts of the wealth the men own in Kikuyu society. The Kikuyu community prior to colonialism considered it a favourable avenue for all women to marry (Waweru 2009:247), while Oduyoye (1997:12) opines that marriage in African culture was not an individual affair, but one for the whole community. The only negativity it carried along was that it was one-sided in the sense that in polygamy men are free to marry many women while women are not free to have many husbands. However, as Kenyatta (1938:63), puts it, marriage gave African women the ability to manage the economy with much prestige.

For Waweru (2009), reflecting on God's intention in marriage refers to myths of creation, where male animals' behaviour is polygamous in nature; it is rare to find the Kikuyu animals' behaviour being sexually monogamous. Such an evolutionary theory has subjugated the biblical account that Adam and Eve were monogamous (Gen 1:27). On the contrary, both biological and biblical evidence show that *Homo sapiens* have always been polygamous in nature from the onset. The observation would lead us to say that, biologically, most human beings have the tendency of polygamous behaviour rather than monogamous behaviour in nature. Human beings may be socially monogamous depending on the

environmental circumstances of upbringing, but sexually all human beings are intrinsically polygamous.

In an interview conducted by the author of this article in a congregation of 200 men's breakfast at ACK St. Marks Kamiti in Kiambu on Saturday, 23rd November 2024, none of the male Christians present had a single-woman sexual experience in their lifetime. This fact is clarified by the fact that polygamy is often used as a synonym for polygyny, perhaps because polyandry is uncommon in many cultures, making polygamy and polygyny used interchangeably. In Kikuyu culture, women were allowed to have an extra child outside marriage (Kenyatta 1938); probably this was due to the understanding that women too are sexually polygamous. While women are as polygamous as men, property attachment to marriage may have made polyandry frowned upon in Kikuyu culture. Nevertheless, the issue of the Kikuyu people having women as leaders of men is well documented in most mythical stories of the Kikuyu (Waweru 2020). The theory that women too are polygamous may appear controversial as well as politically incorrect due to the missionary preconceived notion of monogamy as a norm in Christian marriage. Polygamy was a common practice in Africa, particularly among the Kikuyu before the advent of missionaries in the Kikuyu land.

Marriage remains a communal activity in African culture; among the Kikuyu people, dowry plays a major role. For Waweru, dowry is a rubber stamp for marriage in the Kikuyu cultural world; it is the fundamental activity that confirms the relationship for both parents as well as for the married couple. The two "families regard each other as athoni" (in-laws), after dowry negotiations (2009:249). Among the Kikuyu people, ruracio (bride wealth) was never paid in full because relationships are never created all at once but slowly by slowly. For Goody and Tambiah (1973), the bride wealth given by one family is taken as a gift by the other family of the girl. Such an exchange cements the relationship of the two families. A woman in the Kikuyu community is valued at 100 goats, but only 90 are required, since finishing paying is taken as arrogance. The purpose remains clear: it is the officialisation of marriage.

Therefore, dowry is a religious practice believed to contain mystery powers that allow a marriage to flourish as well as legitimise children born within

it. A woman, married and dowry given, was initiated into the lineage of the husband and, in case of death, her burial was taken as the responsibility of the husband's family. The significance of dowry or bride wealth cannot be underrated, since it allowed the woman to remarry in the same clan in case the husband died.

The problem with dowry is that in case of polygamous marriage, the husband had to be rich to give bride wealth to more than one family. Many men who are not well-endowed fear getting two or three wives due to the burden of paying dowry and maintaining ûthoni (in-laws) from both sides. One needs to understand the Kikuyu customary laws in order to be able to negotiate the dowry, which is one of the trickiest things due to its concept of marriage. So let us investigate the concept of the cultural worldview.

When God was distributing the world to the populace, he gave the Kikuyu people a territory full of good tidings of nature (Kenyatta 1938: 23; cf. Ngugi 1965:2 Waweru 2005:159). It is notable that marriage has been at the heart of Kikuyu cultural practices, a common debate within the churches in Kikuyu land from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, in the face of the insistence of the Christian new converts' teachings on monogamy. Such consistent teaching on biblical values in marriage resulted in the polygamy controversy in African Christianity, which ended up at the Lambeth Conference in 1868, where it was stated in Resolution 23 that "polygamy poses one of the sharpest conflicts between the faith and particular culture." The resolution further recognized monogamy as the will of God for humankind. Resolution 5 of the 1888 conference stated how the church was to handle polygamists. Polygamists were not to "be admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such a time they shall be in position to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their saviour. This viewpoint was strongly promoted by the missionaries sent to Kikuyu land and in Africa at large, without any biblical justification for it.

At the 1926 conference of the Protestant Missions in Belgium, participants blamed the failure of Christian missions in Africa on Africans' inability to do away with their cultural practices, among which was polygamy (Ayandele 1966). But the paucity of literature on polygamous marriages in Kikuyu land is lamentable, and I hope that research and scholarship in this

area of African Theology will receive the necessary attention and correct the "strange omission" from African scholarly critiques of missionary history as an indigenous initiative in mission, which actually failed to recognise the crucial role played by polygamous marriages in African Christianity.

The missionaries' arrival in Kikuyu land by 1900 was very rigid, declaring monogamy as the only true Christian marriage, which resulted in dissensions and conflicts with Kikuyu converts, so that when the Kikuyu people later found freedom to establish indigenous churches, an African Independent Pentecostal Church (AIPCA) was established in Central Kenya, which admitted polygamists as members. My father, Joseph Ndamaiyu Githinji, was among the very first Africans to join this church with his second wife, while my own mother, the first wife, remained in the Anglican Church. They believed that polygamy was not inconsistent with Christianity, particularly the Old Testament. They welcomed polygamists into their congregations unconditionally. Interestingly, the arrival of Pentecostalism and Charismatic movements did not make any difference; when it emerged in the 1960s and 70s, the movement, being evangelical in its worldview, continued to uphold the nineteenth-century missionaries' teachings on monogamous marriage. Unfortunately, the new religious movements were divided, with some supporting polygamous marriages while others agreed with missionary teachings to uphold monogamous marriages, making marriage a source of contradictory teaching within African Christianity.

A Biblical perspective of African marriage

The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is silent in terms of how many wives one would marry; however, an African walking through the Bible barely reaches half of it without quickly discovering oneself. Such a discovery includes a common language of God giving the institution of marriage in the New Testament, expressing companionship of a man and a woman for the purposes of procreation as being noticeable. In Genesis 1:27, we are told: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them". From the very beginning of humanity, God demonstrated marriage as a union between a man and a woman with equal dignity as humans. Marriage demonstrates

that God, from the very start of life, did not create men and women as essentially androgynous beings, waiting for specific accessories of male and female to be added at the end. But from the start, beings are either male or female all the way down, in every single cell in our bodies, anything else will be termed a deformity in creation. Both male and female are different, uniquely different, in their physiology as well as their psychology, but such differences do not make any of them better than the other. But they complement each other better in a better way in marriage, whether polygamous or monogamous. Waweru (2022), in an article entitled *The Bible in African Hands: a contrapuntal perspective*, argues that Africans and Kikuyu people in particular accepted the biblical view more freely when the Bible did not demand renouncing the cultural practices that gave them identity.

Whether in African culture, Kikuyu or otherwise, God has directed that "It is not good that the man should be alone"; a helper completely fit for him has been created (Gen 2:18). Hence, God has ordered that "A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). This order, without excuse, instituted what we call marriage today. In this case, it involves both leaving behind their parents to establish a home with each other. In the Gospel of Matthew 19:6, Jesus equally declared them "no longer two but one flesh", stating that we should never attempt to separate them. Despite the many challenges people face in marriage, Jesus is simply reinforcing God's vision of marriage in creation. They are in covenant with each other for "as long as both shall live." in African marriage, a man becomes one with his wives in the African spirit of *Ubuntu*. It is an important rite of passage as a matter of communal concern (Waweru 2008, 2009:247).

Paul equally urges married people to be kind to each other, being tender-hearted and forgiving as God in Christ forgave them (Eph 4:32). Because of the wonderful confines and boundaries and commitments of the covenant of marriage, husband and wife may feel the impulse and temptation to be mean to each other. Such behaviour will result in polygamous marriage. In God's vision for marriage in the African context, there is no place for meanness or contempt between a husband and wife. Does that mean life together won't be difficult? Not at all; God, in His sovereignty, appointed difficulties in marriage that create more unity and love for both male and

female. This is because marriage is for better and for worse. Hence, God's specific call to the husbands is to love their wives regardless of any struggles, hardships and challenges (Col 3:19), for Paul: Marriage is a profound mystery (Ephesians 5:32). The biblical perspective created a new impact among the Kikuyu people on thinking of marriage in the postcolonial era. The people in Kikuyu became concerned with biblical teachings on marriage. It was and has remained an academic exercise among scholars and theologians.

Many are the times, we tend to treat culture as a finished product, set in the past and commanding absolute allegiance in the present, but as Mbiti (1969), Jesse K. Mugambi (1995) and Waweru (2011) suggest, culture is taken to mean the ways of thinking and behaviour, sharing a substantial social grouping of persons, which give them identity in relation to other social groupings. Hence, it is logical to say that all people participate in one culture or another, with particularity in marriage as social beings in Africa. Every human being comes from a woman, and therefore how we treat women is transmitted to the next generation (Okure 2001:47).

Both African theologians as professional readers of the Bible, and ordinary readers are known to never transact with the Bible empty-handed (Waweru 2025). It is important to situate a cultural definition of marriage among the Kikuyu people and therefore understand it as culture beyond the usual visible, material and tangible aspects of language, artefacts, food and clothes, but go further and define it as the patterns of social relationship: how men, women and children relate in family as well as in marriage, how they ought to relate, and how they see each other in one whole family. Culture among the Kikuyu people is "all-embracing and inescapable"; this is why there is a total rejuvenation of it in the 21st century, now expressed in marriages as a dynamic, adaptable, and open to transformation both within itself and in response to new and external factors. In this respect, we see the Kikuyu culture as an open-ended kind of tradition, history, identity, and continuity in both monogamous and polygamous marriages. Making culture to be seen also in the present and progressive tense of marriage, whether monogamous or polygamous. Marriage makes culture a process of human beings living together and sharing life according to a certain understanding of their world.

Marriage rituals within Kikuyu culture

In almost all African cultures, marriage is a community affair rather than an individual's affair. For a marriage to be recognised within African culture, negotiations between the two sides are key, for they climax with dowry payment (Waweru 2009). Among the Kikuyu, marriage is seen as a process which finally culminates with the creation of a strong bond between the two negotiating sides. When negotiations are completed, there is the exchange of gifts in the name of bride wealth, commonly known as *ruracio* (dowry) (Waweru 2009).

Marriage is generally a religious practice among the Kikuyu, who believe that religion is "a spontaneous awareness and response to a living power", "wholly other" (Waweru 2009:249). In marriage, dowry becomes a present and urgent reality. Dowry is not just an exchange of gifts; it is an initiation process, shifting the woman from her original clan, age group, and lineage to that of her husband. Hence, bride wealth among the Kikuyu is sacred and offers a special freedom to women, not only to become stewards in their newfound homes, but also to gain legal status in case of death of the husband. For Kirwen (1997:13; cf. Mt 1:1ff), dowry gives legitimisation to the children born within a marriage in the lineage of their father. As Mbiti (1991:108) argues, bride wealth is simply symbolic, but a serious undertaking by the concerned families, where vows and covenant agreements are sealed as the husband and wife are bonded together. After such sealing, the women are then declared stewards, making them the managers of all food supplies in their families (Waweru 2011). Such a prestigious position of women in marriage gives the women the much-desired "ability to be the matriarchs of the family" (Kenyatta 1938:63) for Nthamburi (1987), dowry creates a fellowship, between two clans. Hence the main reason why the Kikuyu have sought to maintain their traditional ways of religious practices, even after the arrival of missionaries (Waweru 2009: 251).

In many polygamous marriages, many men are unable to pay bride wealth, which places both their wives and children in very precarious situations, particularly when it comes to inheritance. The children more often than not lack moral authority to receive future bride wealth from their children. So, while the main purpose of marriage is procreation and continuity,

the lack of procedure leaves the family confused and stranded in case of cultural practices.

Conclusion

This article sought a neutral ground, neither an advocacy for polygamy nor an argument for monogamy. It is an assessment of the current situation in Kikuyu land in the 21st century on monogamous and polygamous marriages. The Kikuyu people's position highlighted in this article reflects a popular cultural rejuvenation among the Kikuyu in Kenya. It has created a dilemma which the elitist members of the society have encountered in the recent past, which the Church in the Central Region of the Country is struggling to resolve. The position, as pointed out earlier, is strange to the biblical perspective of marriage. It is a relic of the imposition of the missionary culture of advocating serial marriages rather than many wives at the same time. The missionaries of the 19th century imposed a new culture on the Kikuyu people and, more so, on Africans, which has continued to affect family values in our society today. The question is: if you marry one wife and divorce her, and remarry another one and another, still divorcing, are you different from the one with many women at a go? It is the argument of this study that people who find themselves as polygamists either before baptism or post-baptism should not be forced to send away their wives and children.

The African family values consider all children legitimate, whether from polygamous or monogamous marriages. Such an argument is in tandem with Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:24, which requires the people of God, in whatever state each was called, to be let remain within God. Christians should avoid unfounded claims in the teachings of the Word that would leave families more disintegrated than even before. There must be a distinction between personal opinions and what the word of God requires. My own experience with the Kikuyu is that they are a kind people who value community living very much together and, in such a way, may end up in love with other women in the society unexpectedly. A key value in African culture is oneness, where life is centred on the community. You are because we are, and because you are, therefore, we are (Mbiti 1969).

Nothing else demonstrates oneness in the Kikuyu community than the pillar of marriage.

References

Adeyemo, T. (2001) Africa's Enigma, in Faith Development, Partnership Between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa. Derke B et al. (eds.). A co-publication of the World Bank and the Regnum Books International (2001). p 31–38.

Ayandele, E.A. (1966) *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842–1914: A Political and Social Analysis*. London: Longman.

Kenyatta, J. (1938) *Facing Mt. Kenya*. Nairobi: Heinemann.

Kirwan, M.C. (1979) *African Windows: An Empherical Study of the Problems of Adapting Western Christian Teachings on Marriage to the Leviratic Custom for the Care of Widows in Four Rural African Societies*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.

Kwame Bediako, (1992) *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa*. Oxford: Regnum Books.

Mbiti, J.S. (1969) *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Heinemann.

—. (1991) *Introduction to African Religion*. Nairobi: Heinemann.

—. (1995) *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christianity After the Cold War*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

Mugambi, J.N.K. (1989) *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity*. Nairobi: Longman.

—. (2001) Foundations for An African Approach to Biblical Hermeneutics, in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*. Mary N Getui (et al). Acton Publishers: Nairobi. 9–29.

Muriuki, G. (1974) *A history of A Kikuyu, 1500–1900*. USA: Oxford: University Press.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. (1965) *The River Between*. London: Heinmann.

—. 1982. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.* London: Heinemann.

Nthamburi, Rosemary. (1987) On the possibility of a New Image for an African Woman. *Voices from the Third World* 10(1):103–110.

Oduyoye, Mercy. (1990) *Who will Roll the Stone Away?* Genva: WCC Publication.

Okure, Teresa. (2001) Invitation to African Women's Hermeneutical Concerns, in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*. Mary Getui et al. (eds.). Acton Publishers. Nairobi.

Pearsall, S.M.S. 2022. *Polygamy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Placide Tempels, (1959) *Bantu Philosophy.* Paris: Présence Africaine.

Sanneh, Lamin. (1983) *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*. Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books.

—. (1989) *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture, the African Dimension*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Waweru, H.M. (2006) Reading the Bible Contrapuntally: A Theory and Methodology for a Contextual Bible Interpretation in Africa. In *The Swedish Missiological Themes: Svensk Missions Tidskrift*, 94(3):333–348.

—. (2007) Postcolonial and Contrapuntal Reading of Revelation 22:1–5. In *Churchman*, 121(1*)*:23–38.

—. (2008) Jesus and Ordinary Women: An African Perspective. In *The Swedish Missiological Themes Journal: Svensk Missions Tidskrift,* 96(2):139–159.

—. (2009) Dowry in an African Marriage: An Alternative Voice. In *The Swedish Missiological Themes: Svensk Missions Tidskrift,* 97(2):245–261.

—. (2011) *The Bible and African Culture: Mapping Transactional Inroads.* Eldoret: Zapf Chancery.

—. (2020) *African Theology in a Postcolonial Perspective*. Limuru, Kenya: Franciscan Kolbe Press.

—. (2022) The Bible in African Hands: A Contrapuntal Perspective. In *The African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, 3(2):1–19.

—. (2024) *The Apocalypse of John and Liberation Theology in Africa*. London: Lexington Books.

—. (2025) African Indigenous methods for Christian Mission and Theology in Contemporary Africa. In White, P. (ed.). *Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis: Exploring Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches*. Routledge: New York. pp 39–56.

White, P. (2025) *Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis: Exploring Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches*. New York: Routledge.

Wimbush, V.L. (1991) The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an interpretive History. In C.H. Felder (ed.). *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress. pp 81–97.

Zeitzen, M.K. (2008) *Polygamy: A Cross-cultural Analysis*. Oxford, New York: Berg.