

**Cultural and Social Situation of the Family Today
An African perspective with particular reference to Uganda**

(Anthropological, legislative and political aspects)

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and of

The Creation of the Pontifical Council for the Family

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CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SITUATION OF THE FAMILY TODAY

(Anthropological, Legislative and Political Aspects)

An African Perspective with Particular Reference to Uganda

This presentation gives an African perspective of the Christian Family today, in light of the challenges it faces. It is premised on the fundamental assumption that the **Christian family**, like the **African family**, is **marriage-based**. The paper presents evidence of substantial **convergence** of underlying Christian and African values, governing marriage and family. It ponders over the challenges facing marriage and the family as hitherto understood to be, under both Christianity and African tradition: it draws conclusions, and makes recommendations for possible actions to be taken to address such challenges.

Section One: Introduction

Section One draws from the **working document** for the **20th Pontifical Council Plenary Assembly** to highlight the **four essential conditions** for a **Christian marriage**, which are that, the prospective spouses:

- Have **real freedom** to decide, each one for himself/herself, to get married;
- Are committed to **fidelity** (or faithfulness) in an **indissoluble union**;
- Are prepared to **welcome children**; and
- Undertake to **give their children a Christian upbringing**.

In addition, Section One points to significant **challenges** facing marriage and the family; they fall into **two** categories:

- **First**, challenges arising from **socio-economic** conditions and **human weakness** e.g.,
 - ✓ **low levels of education** and **poverty**;
 - ✓ **co-habitation, single parenthood, trial marriages, habitual resort to abortion and sterilization, and escalating cases of broken marriages**;
 - ✓ **promiscuity** and **extra-marital** relationships with associated **sexually transmitted diseases (STD)**

- **Second**, challenges related to **amoral secularism** along with advocacy for the **legalization of homosexuality**, in direct **refutation of the conceptual foundation of marriage and the family as a union between man and woman**

The Section points to the **Church's response** to these challenges, which includes **rejuvenation**, improved **pastoral guidance**, and **inter-religious scholarship and dialogue**.²

Finally, **Section One** gives an outline of the remaining Sections:

- **Section Two** examines the **ideal traditional African family as a social institution**;
- **Section Three** examines the **impact** on the traditional African family by **Christianity, Islam**, and **civil legislation**;
- **Section Four** focuses on the current **challenges** to the Christian family, including those precipitated by a growing **amoral secularism** and advocacy for **“same-sex” marriages**;
- **Section Five**, which draws **conclusions** and makes **recommendation** for the way forward.

² See, for example, the project, **Churches' Research on Marriage in Africa (CROMIA)**

Section Two: The Ideal Traditional African Family

Section Two is a presentation of **the ideal** traditional African family:

- **First**, it gives the **rationale** for **recapturing the past** and addressing **the male/female domination issue** in the African society;
- **Second**, it defines the **scope** of the presentation, and examines the traditional African family in terms of **concept and practice**.

2.1 Preliminary Observations:

Recapturing the past, and the male/female domination issue

Reference is made to the past: **not** to romanticize it, but to **recapture the fundamental ingredients** of the **African value system** on which the **ideal** family was established and on the basis of which it should be appraised today.

The male/female domination issue is addressed in order to **correct** the often **mistaken** perception that **male domination** is an **all-pervasive** and **repressive** feature in the African society and family. While men do, in many situations, play a lead role in the African society and family, there are facts which dispel the contention that the African woman is, always a repressed player.

Leadership Role by African Women

African women do provide leadership as the following facts show:

- The **spectacular rise by women** to high office and power, including as Heads of State and Commanders of the armies;³
- The tradition of **matrilineal descent**, in some African societies, such as the Ashanti, where succession follows the maternal line, i.e., **from maternal uncle to nephew**;
- The presence of **powerful female institutions** behind the **throne**, e.g., of the **Queen Mother** (“*Nnamasole*”) and of the **King’s Sisters** (“*Ba-Nnalinnya*”), as well as the important roles (counseling, representative) of the **paternal aunt** (*ssenga*), in Uganda, especially in matters associated with the marriages and families of their nieces;
- The persistent **teaching role** of the **mother** over her children;
- The many cases of **female-led families**, such as:
 - ✓ When the wife is better equipped to shoulder the family burden,
 - ✓ During long periods of absence from home of the husband, and when he is unemployed or ill,
 - ✓ In cases of widowhood.

³ For example: Queen Candace, Empress of Ethiopia, in 4th Century B.C. and Queen Ann Nzinga of Angola, in 17th Century A.D., who were both Heads of State and **personal Commanders** of their **national armies**;

(b) Scope, concept and practice

(i) Scope:

This presentation refers primarily to the situation in **Uganda**, and especially in **Buganda**, about which we are best informed.

(ii) Concept and Practice

The traditional **African family** was a **respected institution in society as the basic unit of kinship**: it was protected by custom. It had, and still has, the following distinctive features.

- It is **marriage-based**, where **marriage** is by **consent**, and consists of **elaborate** and **penetrating ceremonies**, culminating in a **solemn union**. A properly arranged marriage is preceded by **preparatory programme**, consisting of **acquaintanceship**, formal **introduction** of the prospective husband by the girl to her parents, and a **retreat focused** on the impending family life;
- It **welcomes children**, who bring **fulfillment** and **honour** to their parents, as well as **responsibility** for their **education**.
- It is **“extended”**, to include close relatives, who **reinforce** and **enrich** it with additional **human resources**, and improved **public standing** and **influence**.

Section Three

The Impact of Islam, Christianity, and Civil Legislation

Islam, Christianity and Civil Legislation, **affected** the traditional *status quo* on marriage and the family in predictable ways.

- **Marriage**, as exclusively a union **between** man and woman, was **reinforced** by Christianity and Islam. This **principle** is **upheld** under Civil Legislation; and it is maintained under the **pending bill** on the subject.⁴ **Same-sex** marriages are **prohibited**⁵; **homosexuality** and **sodomy** are **condemned**⁶.
- There is religious and legal agreement over the principle of **freedom**, to decide on one's own to get married⁷.
- Both Christianity and Islam **welcome children** and hold the parents **responsible for raising them up**. This position is **upheld** under State **policy**: there is **no** prohibition or forced restriction on children; and the **educative role** of parents is recognized even in government institutions.
- Christianity preaches the **indissolubility of monogamous marriage**, while Islam provides for **polygamy and divorce**.

⁴ **The Marriage and Divorce Bill (2009)**

⁵ **The Marriage and Divorce Bill (2009)**, sections 18 & 34

⁶ **The Marriage and Divorce Bill (2009)**, sections 147(3) (b) & 147(3) (c)

⁷ Assurance on Islamic teaching on marriage has been given by a devout Muslim who is a lawyer by profession, a trade union leader, and a former Member of Parliament.

The foregoing respective religious positions are well **accommodated** under **civil legislation**.

- **First**, the law **caters** for matters of common **agreement** by:
 - ✓ **Restricting** marriage to **only** between **man and woman**,
 - ✓ **Ensuring** the spouse's **freedom** to decide on marriage,
 - ✓ **Not** enforcing any **prohibition or restriction** on children.

- **Second**, the law **accommodates** religious **differences**⁸:
 - ✓ by **conferring**, upon the appropriate **religious** authorities, **power** to conduct marriage ceremonies **in accordance** with their teaching⁹, and
 - ✓ by constitutional **guarantees** for **freedom of worship**, as well as, by **legalizing** and providing financial **grants** to **denominational schools** etc.

The Catholic Church has made good use of this liberal policy, e.g., formulating **instructions** for intending spouses and establishing Catholic **affiliated** schools, and other educational institutions and programmes: it should be **encouraged** to do more.

⁸ Differences: (i) as to whether, marriage should be **monogamous** or **polygamous**, **indissoluble** or subject to **divorce**; and (ii) regarding the **religious upbringing of children**.

⁹ **The (Uganda) Marriage Act (1904)**, section 20 (1)

Section Four

Challenges to the Christian Marriage and Family

We address **two emergent types** of challenges to the Christian marriage and family of today:

- Challenges associated **with societal change** from **traditional to modern**; and
- Challenges arising from **amoral secularism**, including the particular case of the campaign for **“same-sex”** marriages.

4.1 Challenge associated with societal change.

Societal change **from traditional to modern** is leading to a **diminishing educative role** of the children **by the family**, particularly the **mother**, when left overburdened with domestic cores (and, sometimes, also professional work), due to the **dispersal** of the extended family along with their helping hands.

Consequently, the family educative role **diminishes** or **vanishes**; and the children are, thereby, **deprived** of valuable family-based **formation**, rendering them **vulnerable to a host of challenges** which impact **negatively** on **marriage** and **family life**. These challenges include **pornography, drug abuse, and promiscuity**, with the attendant risks of **sexually transmitted diseases (STB)**, notably **HIV/AIDS**, and having so called **“unwanted babies”**

Corrective innovations:

Delegation, preservation of family role

The Church and the State in Uganda cooperate in instituting **corrective innovations** to **redress** this diminishing family role through **delegation, preservation and facilitation** of the family role.

- The Church undertakes a **delegated** family educative role through its **denominational** schools and programmes (seminars, retreats, drama etc.); and
- Some parental educative role is **preserved** where the parents have an active presence in educational institutions, e.g., through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs).¹⁰

4.2 Challenges from amoral secularism.

A new and growing **threat** to the Christian family is **amoral secularism** which **denies** the underlying religious and cultural values of society, consequently opening the way, for instance, for the institutionalization of working conditions and a lifestyle which are **inhospitable** to family life generally, and Christian family life in particular.

¹⁰ In some countries, notably Norway, Christian-inspired social policies, to preserve and facilitate the parental role, have been adopted, whereby long maternity leave are given to both spouses, and financial grants are made for the children's care.

Substantiating evidence of the detrimental impact of amoral secularism on family life can be deduced from the lives and testimony of former executives etc.¹¹; and from research findings in East Africa, which show that there are **more cases of divorced and re-married persons in the urban areas** (i.e., among the employed) **than in the rural areas**¹²

Associated with **amoral secularism**, is the ongoing **forceful drive**, backed by powerful **external sanctions** for **legitimization** and **legalization** of **same-sex marriages**, ostensibly in the cause of **human rights**.

¹¹ For example, John Perkins (2004), **Confessions of an Economic Hit Man** (Publisher: Berret-Koehler).

¹² Kitembo, Benezeri, Laurent Magesa, and Ayward Shorter, editors (1977, 2nd edition, revised (1988), **African Christian Marriage** (Limuru – Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications).

Section Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

5.1.1 Convergence of underlying moral values; and the need to address situations catered for under traditional polygamy.

The preceding sections show that, **with the exception of polygamy and divorce:**

- There is appreciable **convergence** on the **underlying moral values and principles** on marriage and family **between** Christian teaching and African tradition;
- Uganda follows a **liberal civil policy** on marriage and family, whereby the Church's teaching and practice are recognized and secured **under law**; however the Church still has to contend with many challenges including:
 - ✓ The need for in-depth and comprehensive interpretation of Christian marriage and family in the African context;
 - ✓ The need to address situations of genuine concern, catered for under polygamy in Africa, such as: childlessness, incompatibility, and impairment e.g., incurable mental illness;

- Furthermore, there is also the need to study proposals being made for special dispensation for **freeing** an individual from an **ill-conceived illegitimate marriage** and **re-marrying in Church**, while retaining **non-conjugal, extra-marital responsibilities** of the previous marriage, notably providing protection and support (i.e., granting a dispensation for **“poly-marriage”** but **without “poly-sex”**, as proposed in Kisembo et al p.114).

5.1.2 Contending with Amoral Secularism

Unimpeded rise of amoral secularism **challenges** Christian teaching, not only on marriage and family, but on a wide range of subjects. This challenge has to be addressed in its entirety; and it calls for a **well informed and authoritative response.**

5.2 Recommendations

The recommendations are in two categories: first, recommendations addressing the **traditional challenges** to the Christian marriage; and those directed at the emerging **amoral secularism** and the associated permissiveness.

5.2.1 Common challenges: unfaithfulness, abortion, etc.

It is necessary to establish and reappraise the underlying causes of the common problems about Christian marriage and family (e.g., unfaithfulness, abortion polygamy, divorce etc.) with the view to find practical and effective remedies which are in conformity with Church doctrine. The following course of action is recommended:

- (a) To set up **statistical data banks** on the various identified problems e.g., cohabitation, polygamy, divorce, broken marriages etc., and on their underlying causes, such as:
 - Inadequate education and preparation for marriage;
 - Human weaknesses;
 - Socio/economic challenges (e.g., peer pressure, terms and conditions of work).
- (b) To **review and reappraise** the current position (of Church and State), with respect to socio-economic policy.
- (c) To make appropriate suggestions on the way forward.

5.2.2 Amoral secularism and the resultant permissiveness

Amoral secularism calls for **an informed, comprehensive, authoritative and widely circulated Church response.**

It is also recommended to undertake the following:

- Develop and publicize a programme of study underpinning the fundamental Christian values and principles, and **highlight where they converge** with African tradition and custom;
- Develop a programme of study on Christian marriage and family, underscoring, not only their **spiritual character**, but also their **positive role in society**;
- Revive and/or develop viable and sustainable **Church sponsored** institutions and programmes to serve also as **entrusted delegated agencies** or **support mechanisms** of the parents and community, in the inculcation of moral values and principles in the young ones; and, finally

➤ Develop and promote **civic and political education programmes** guided by the Church's messages¹³, and also by **socio-economic policies and programmes**, successfully implemented which are **favourable to marriage and the family**. Such Church sponsored programmes should be directed at:

- ✓ Attracting the active **participation** of the **leadership class** among: the youth (including in elite schools, tertiary institutions and universities), civic organizations, the business community, professionals, and political leaders;
- ✓ **Policy evaluation and reform** intended to promote **morally based education, marriage and family**; as well as for **upholding socio-economic policies** and conditions of employment in the public and private sectors, which will enhance prospects for **a guaranteed living wage** for the worker and **practical support for the family**.

¹³ For example: Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* on Social Justice, the conclusions of *Vatican Two* on Church and State, and the work of the *Pontifical Council for the Family*