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Marriage in the Baganda Community (Uganda)

Observations and Questions

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Abstract:
The article deals with the issue of customary marriage among the Baganda (sing. Muganda), the largest ethnic group in Uganda, in contradistinction to religious wedding within the Orthodox community. It describes the customary marriage process within that particular ethnicity, demonstrating the great influence and deep roots of the local people in their tradition. It notes the attitude of the faithful towards the religious marriage and problems related to their perception of it. It concludes with some suggestions on the aim of the Church to deal respectfully with the African traditions and discusses how the customary marriage could be an event united with or absorbed in the sacrament of marriage.

The Baganda tribe in Uganda first encountered Christianity through western missions some 150 years ago, and for almost 100 years has been part of the Orthodox Church under the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

As far as the institution of marriage is concerned, however, the traditional customs, rites and understandings surrounding marriage remain in full force, such that traditional marriage continues to be the norm, while marriage according to the rites of the Orthodox Church is a rare exception, performed only out of some necessity, such as when a young man wishes to seek ordination in the Church. In such a case, however, the man will almost certainly already have his own family, and everyone in the community will know him as married, since he will already have celebrated the tribe's traditional marriage and will likely have produced children. A Mugandan Christian does not perceive the family as founded in religious marriage and the brief Church ceremony with its biblical references finds little res-

onance with him or her. The word *embagga*, which refers to a wedding in a Church, is never used among the Baganda people to denote the status of 'being married.'

The present paper seeks to describe the traditional marriage customs and rites of the Baganda people, to highlight how these differ from customary western conceptions, and finally to pose the question as to how far traditional marriage can be embraced by the Church and used as a stepping stone to lead to a sacramental understanding of the matrimonial bond.

The typical traditional marriage is a two-stage process and may be concluded at any time, depending on the arrangements between the persons involved. It should be noted that the bride is not included in this process. The bride, like her mother, are mute and passive onlookers. On the contrary, the rest of the family, the wider family circle and the community, observe and take an active interest in the proceedings. Each phase of the marriage process is characterised by a series of inviolable rules for the parties involved.

Before any move is made, it is necessary for the two young people to establish that the clan (the kin group) of both father and mother of each is different. If it emerges that the clan of a parent of the one party is the same as the clan of a parent of the other, then the prospect of marriage and any romantic relationship is immediately broken off. It is impossible for persons belonging to the same clan to be joined in marriage. Every male and female *muganda* knows the clan to which they belong. Each clan has its own symbol, for example, a specific bird or animal. Altogether there are fifty-four clans in the Baganda tribe.

The prospective groom initiates the nuptial process. He will certainly be well-acquainted with the bride-to-be and it is highly likely, if not absolutely certain, that the two will have been not only friends but also sexually involved for some time before. Sexual intercourse between two young people in love begins at a very early stage. Refusal of intercourse is perceived by the other as an absence of love and affection. Failure to respond to a sexual invitation means ending the relationship without much discussion. Virginity, while valued in conjunction with other attractions of the bride, is of no significance on its own.

The first stage of the marital process (*okukyala*) begins when the young man writes a letter to the bride-to-be's father stating his desire to marry his daughter and asking for a meeting with him to discuss the matter at a specific date. He will never, however, give the letter to the father himself. In the meantime, the young woman will already have met with her aunt, her father's sister, and will have made her aware of her relationship as well as of the young man's intention to marry her. She will also have told her mother. None of the three women would ever divulge this secret to the father. In other cases, the man may start the whole process without the girl's knowledge.

The young man then arranges to visit the aunt (*senga*). He expresses to her his intentions towards the young woman and talks to her about himself and his family, and finally hands over his letter addressed to her brother, the father of the young woman. Where there is no aunt to approach, he will discover which relative is close to the girl's family and who will play the role of the aunt-*senga*. The aunt listens to the young man—always in the absence of the girl—then takes the letter in her hands, reads it and arranges the meeting.

At this point, the main role is transferred to the aunt. She has to act quickly and shrewdly in order to collect the necessary information, confirming first that the young man does not belong to the same clan as the bride-to-be. Her investigations will expand to include a search into any history of illness in the aspiring groom's family and into the family's general standing. She will learn how the community perceives the suitor and will evaluate his wealth and income. She will discover if the family has ever suffered from infectious diseases or has a history of skin or eye ailments, if anyone has heard that he has a disability, if all his family members have had children, if he has had any previous marriages or affairs and any other relevant data. If it is found that a member of his family has committed suicide, then all further discussion is immediately brought to a halt. Marriage with the young man is ruled out.

The young man himself will already have done his own research prior to being with the girl. At this stage, however, his main concern is to raise a substantial amount of money, enough to cover the costs of the preordained formalities. He will not initiate any marriage proposal unless he has secured the resources needed for the process. He will calculate how much he can raise and who will help him and with how much money. If he borrows money, secrecy is imperative. The lender must not know the purpose for which he is lending his money. If he knows the purpose and potentially tells the community, then this means that the lender himself has the same rights on the bride (!). The young man therefore acts with the greatest secrecy if borrowing funds.

After the aunt has completed her inquiries about her prospective son-in-law and his family, she goes to her brother, to whom she not only gives the letter-request from the young man but also informs him of everything she has found out, always disclosing the clan to which the suitor belongs. No other members of the family are present at this meeting, not even the girl's mother. Following the father's acceptance of the request for a meeting with the young man, he writes a reply himself, in which he not only accepts the proposed date but also gives an indication of the gift that he will be expecting from the groom-to-be. Traditionally this is some common item, such as a photo of the groom's clan symbol (*totem*), but it might be a water storage tank or a rocking chair or even a motor-cycle. Equally,

the gift could be a large photo of the Baganda king (*kabakka*), whom every *Muganda* honours. Among the Baganda people, it is rare to ask for cows as a gift. Even money isn't common as a gift. If the requested gift is an animal, it is most likely that the bride is from a different tribe, where such a request is common, for example, the Baniakole tribe (in SE Uganda). When the groom receives and reads this letter via the aunt-*senga*, he will accept the demand for the gift without demur.

There are, however, gifts which are not explicitly requested, but which are understood and expected. These are a white robe (*kanzu*) with a black blazer, which is the official attire of a Bagandan, for the young woman's brother (*muko*), and a cockerel. For both the aunt and the mother of the bride he will bring a dress, the official Bagandan women's dress (*gomez*). These obligatory gifts include a good quantity of local banana-based alcohol (*mwenge*)—10–20 litres in traditional casks (*endeku*). Thus the first phase of the marriage process is concluded.

The second and decisive stage (*okwanjula*) starts a few weeks or months later at a time appointed by the bride's father. On the agreed date, the father along with his own father and brother sit in armchairs beneath a large canopy in the courtyard of the girl's house. Other relatives and friends stand behind them. The mother and the girl herself watch from the door or from inside the house. Thus they all await the groom and his relatives and friends. Two paid and well-experienced interlocutors are on hand to lead the dialogue between the two families.

The groom along with his relatives and friends arrive at the house at the appointed time. They will usually be about seventy people in all, and a similar number are present on the bride's side. They stay standing at some distance from the bride's group. The young man's parents are absent. They have stayed at home, fervently hoping that their son's actions will have a positive outcome. The speaker on behalf of the bride's family welcomes the company of the groom with lots of good wishes and various speeches take place, since speeches are very common wherever Baganda people meet and congregate. When these are over, the speaker turns to the bride's company and asks "And who is the man that is asking for ... [and he pronounces the girl's name]? Does anyone know him?" At that point, the aunt raises her hand and shouts out, "I know him". The speaker then invites her to point him out to the assembled company. She comes forward with a flower and approaches the group on the other side. Then, grasping the groom by the hand and raising it on high, she places the flower on his blazer lapel and cries out, "This is him!" After that, she leads the groom to the young woman's father, to whom he is formally introduced. The young man is accompanied by his best man and his sister and also by another 5–10 people he has chosen, and who stand a few steps behind him. Following the introduction, he is ushered to an armchair and his sister and his best man are given seats at his side. The girl's relatives then escort the

bride from the house. She is wearing an attractive *gomez*. Thereupon, she sits on the ground on a traditional mat in the space between the two families, while her mother watches from the house door.

The young groom, dressed in his white *kanzu* with his black suit, stands up, approaches the girl's father, kneels down and asks him for the young woman to be his wife, promising everlasting love, devotion and protection and to supply every good, emphasising that she will be his wife all his life. He then asks for the gifts to be brought forward and he places them in front of the woman's father. The father indicates his acceptance of the gifts and so the whole ceremony of "traditional Baganda marriage" is completed through this Blood-Pact (*okuta omukago*).

A rich meal follows. In the past, a curtain would separate the members of the two families to avoid someone being exposed to an accident caused by a member of the other family, for example, for food to stain clothing as they were eating. Once the main meal is over, a dessert will be offered to set a seal on the wedding process. The dessert will be one that can be cut into portions and given to everyone present. At this point, everyone resorts to socializing as co-witnesses to the Blood Pact, and the entire community now confirms that the two are spouses. The dessert portions (a type of cake) are distributed to relatives and friends of the groom by the bride, while her brother serves her own relatives and friends.

At this juncture, someone calls the groom's parents to let them know that the *okuta omukago* is complete, filling their home with celebrations and good wishes. In earlier times, someone would run to the groom's house to announce the news to his parents. Nowadays a telephone call suffices.

After the dessert, the groom takes the bride with him and the company leaves. The bride takes nothing from her home, apart from her personal belongings.

Until a few years ago, the relatives would wait outside the house of the newlyweds in the morning to see the wedding sheet (*embuzi*) with the blood stain on it. Everyone would then break out with happy shouts and satisfaction while someone (an aunt) would take it to show it to the bride's family.

I have presented these details of the customary marriage process among the Baganda people, not for ethnographic or anthropological reasons, but to show the distance separating this conception of marriage from that of western Christians.

The first thing to notice is the absence of any reference to deity. The ritual is aimed at and concerns the human community alone. Furthermore, it is extremely important to note that in the Bagandan ritual, there is an absence of any concept of the *person* and all emphasis is placed on the collective entity of the clan. This stands at a great distance from the person-centeredness of the Judeo-Christian

tradition and the theology of the Church. Moreover, it is to be noted that the community is entirely male-dominated, with the young man—and not his father—taking the lead. He is the active warrior of the tribe, the man who will strengthen the clan and not an inexperienced and irresponsible youngster. The high status accorded him emphasizes even more the passivity of the woman. And, on this note, we may reflect on the distance that a Mugandan is asked to cover when listening to the apostolic call: "husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Eph 5, 25) or "there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ" (Gal 3, 28).

It is quite impossible for a Mugandan not to follow the customary marriage procedure. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of church believers will not have celebrated the sacrament of marriage in Church, even when they have grandchildren. In this light it is somewhat surprising that Bagandans, who have had experience of Christianity for 150 years,[1] remain utterly faithful to the patriarchal matrimonial rites and show little regard for the sacrament of the Church.

Mission literature contains a number of essays and articles on how to deal with the traditions and customs of catechumens and believers who come from pagan environments, customs that explicitly or implicitly also exist in Christian teaching. There is already an academic discipline focused on dealing with such juxtapositions of Christian faith and local tradition. There are a very few relevant and, I think, informative studies in Greek.[2] I do not know, whether any higher ecclesiastical authority in the Orthodox Church has previously engaged with this topic or if there are any relevant official documents. I know, however, that the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Confessions have convoked Councils on the matter and have repeatedly issued encyclicals on the subject in the course of the history of their missions.[3]

In studying the recommendations for resolving the distance between traditional and ecclesiastical rites, we can discern a development on the part of theologians as well as on the part of the clergy in overcoming the issues raised by the local

[1] Samwiri Rubaraza Karugire, *A Political History of Uganda* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), 62–63.

[2] Αθανάσιος Παπαθανασίου, «Αφρικανικός Γάμος και Χριστιανισμός: Εισαγωγή σε Ιεραποστολικά και Κανονικά Ερωτήματα», *Επιστημονική Επετηρίς της Θεολογικής Σχολής του ΕΚΠΑ* Λ΄ (1995), 825 [815–852] [Athanasios Papathanasiou, "African Wedding and Christianity: Introduction to Missiological and Canonical Questions," Scientific Yearbook of the Theological School of National and Kapodistrian University of Athens 30 (1995)]. Γεώργιος Βαγιανός, «Η Πολυγαμική Νοοτροπία», *Γρηγόριος Παλαμάς* 75 (1992), 631–775 [Georgios Vagianos, "Polygamic Mentality," Gregorios Palamas (Thessaloniki)].

[3] Adrian Hastings, "Response," *African Ecclesiastical Revew* 13 (1971), 193–203.

peculiarities of peoples and tribes on questions such as that of marriage. Most notably, we see a shift from the perspective of the colonial power, which demands obedience, to an increasing respect towards the traditions of the other. The Second Vatican Council undoubtedly played a major role in the shift towards respect for the person, love for the Other and his or her integration into the body of the Church. As an example of Western Missionary violence we may recall how the Kikuyu tribe of Kenyan were stripped of their traditions such as that of circumcision (*Mariika*), which they consider as a passage of boys into the circle of the tribe's warriors and sign of unity in Kikuyu community.[4]

We need to revisit the reasons for our believers not performing church marriage. Hastings, in his day,[5] argued that the main cause is a reluctance on the part of the African to commit to the words of the Church sacrament. I believe that today other factors are at the forefront. Here the issue of polygamy, a strong institution in many African communities, looms large. A further major issue is that of the place of children in the African family. These questions would certainly benefit from further study.

The fact that the faithful do not easily enter into the sacrament of marriage has been the case ever since the beginnings of Christianity in Africa and applies to all churches and Christian confessions. The main reason is the African belief that the marriage process ends with the tradition of the tribal marriage. In recent times, however, a further very important reason for not conducting the sacrament of marriage is financial.

Africans, like other peoples, do not easily accept something that does not belong to their tradition, and they also consider it very important not to appear different from their peers. Innovation is foreign to their way of thinking. The situation is very evident in the outward appearance of everyone at the sacrament of marriage. While in a traditional marriage everybody comes dressed in the most traditional outfits, at the Church sacrament they come dressed in a more European way and in a manner more foreign to the ways of the tribe. Moreover, the emphasis is not so much on the essence of the ceremony, that is, on the presence of the couple before God and on the prayers of the people of God for the persons about to be married. Christians, I am afraid, are more interested in the points of ritual and the formal certificate of marriage—the very opposite of what the apostle demands when he writes "of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter" (Rom 2, 29).

Accordingly, the Bishop, the spiritual father or the catechist has to insist on

[4] E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, T. I. Ouso, J. F. M. Williams, *A History of East Africa* (London: Longman, 1977), 70.

[5] *Ibid.*

the point that the sacrament is much more a presence of the "two persons in one flesh" (Eph 5, 31) before the Lord and the community, than a religious ritual.

Even the sequels to the sacrament, the meal, the gifts, the position of the important people, the long speeches of the relatives, all show on the one hand the effort to retain elements of traditional marriage and on the other hand they reveal the important tendency to show off power and wealth and to obtain recognition in the community. All these things, however, come on top of the already burdened financial situation of the people involved and certainly the groom, due to the expenditure of the traditional ceremony.

For my part, and I believe many would agree, I think that only a good knowledge of the deeper bonds and ideas of the Africans on the matter of marriage can produce suggestions of ways to promote true participation of the faithful in the sacrament of marriage. The catechist in the Orthodox faith and the Priest who addresses the community, have to show to their believers how to reject European customs and ideas, and how to bind traditional habits and practices to the Orthodox Christian faith.

In the case of Baganda, the approach on the part of the clergy could very well start with the important fact that nothing in the matrimonial ceremony in the tribe refers to God. It is all about the racial identity and its preservation. The catechist thus has the opportunity to explain about the bond of the two people, namely, that just as they express it before the members of the family and the clan, so they are seeking the blessing of God and the recognition and the prayers of the people of God for the path they have both chosen to walk together. The invisible world and the sovereignty of God are intensely experienced realities in African societies and the exhortation of the catechist will find fertile ground.

In addition, the Church's acceptance of the traditional wedding process creates an excellent opportunity for catechism about the sacrament of marriage. This respect for tradition, at least in the Church of Baganda, is already declared in no uncertain terms, since at the entrance to the Church, before the sacrament begins, the bishop asks the representative of the family and of the husband's tribe "Has everything been done, as it should?" and everybody understands that this means has everything been done as dictated by the customary law of the Baganda people. The representative of the family gives an affirmative answer and only then does the couple enter the Church, with the bishop leading the couple in and the bridal procession and congregation following.

At the same time, it is essential for the priest to be close to the bridegroom during all stages of the traditional marriage rites and for people to be encouraged to go to church dressed in their traditional attire rather than wearing European clothes. I would also propose, that the Priest celebrating the sacrament present an

icon to the newlyweds at the conclusion of the ceremony, so that they can display the holy icon rather than a wedding certificate.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that this process is easy. Marriage in the Church is something that has not yet entered collective consciousness and so it is important for those concerned to engage in constant explanation of the sacrament. In Greek society, the sacrament of marriage has with the passage of time become accepted collectively at a subconscious level, and so is regarded as in no need of explanation. This is not the case in a missionary context. This is why marriage catechism needs to start in catechism school and to be part of catechetical instruction from the community priest. This requires, however, not only educated priests and catechists, but also teachers who will not simply teach rules and doctrines, but who can inspire the people with words of faith, and manifest the way of Christ and of his Saints.[6] Our priests need to show to their people that the ecclesiastical ceremony of marriage has a depth, an important core, that speaks about the real life of the people. They have to set aside lifeless ritual and show forth the living water of the marital prayers of the Church.

As long as catechism is lacking or occurs only haphazardly, the faithful African will retain his doubts about participating in the sacrament. Ingenious priests are needed with great love for their flock.

The economic factor, however, is of no less importance. The future bride and groom remain Africans in every way, regardless of any ideological or religious mantle. The missionary is always called upon to touch upon and approach precisely that important element: being an African. He is expected to find a way to connect his own life in Christ, in the way of the Eastern Orthodox Church, with something that can be united with African tradition and culture.

If identification with African tradition and culture brings an increased sense of meaningfulness, transparency, superiority and uniqueness, then it is pointless to suggest that on the economic level Church marriage should focus on simplifying and streamlining things. It would be like suggesting to our Grandfather whose elder son was getting married, that he should be happy with a private ceremony in a chapel followed by a meal for close family only. Any Greek would laugh any such idea out of court. The missionary catechist and priest is called to find a solution in another direction. If the aim is assimilation and for the sacrament to be expressed in the way of the other, our African brother, then the solution must be found linking the universal with the specific, the sacrament of marriage with the particular characteristics of African identity. A good suggestion might therefore be for the

[6] Cf. Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), *Mission in Christ's Way: An Orthodox Understanding of Mission* (Brookline Mass. and Geneva: Holy Cross and WCC, 2010), 77.

wedding ceremony to conclude with participation in Holy Communion, with the following wedding meal then becoming a manifestation and celebration of the continuity of the tribe and its common relationship with Christ and His Church.

The attempt to establish an unbreakable bond between tradition and church, as an innovation, can succeed and gain acceptance through a persistent and long-term effort of catechetical work in the church community, where the catechist will be perceived not only as a teacher but also as a shepherd and father (*tata*). All efforts will be in vain, if the teacher of the principles of Christian religion and the priest do not develop a personal relationship with the members of their flock. And, of course, at this point, we return to the major problem of the Orthodox missionaries, namely, the training and promotion of educated and inspiring people, who are aware that there is distance between the path of the Eastern Church and the moralism and intellectualism of other Christian traditions.

The blessed Irenaeus of Kenya noted: "First of all, the Orthodox must be systematically taught about the Principles of Christian religion. This is something that is lacking. The presence of Protestants and Roman Catholics does Orthodoxy a great disservice. It distorts the original teaching, the Orthodox *ethos.* Part of them always stays in their previous Church."[7] Even though 25 years have passed since he made this point, I think the question of prior indoctrination remains.

Small and seemingly simple steps can be made, though in practice it will not be simple or easy to implement them. By way of example, I would mention the need for the newlyweds and guests to come to the Church in the same attire they wore during the traditional okuta umukago and stop imitating European practices, which are alien to the tradition of the faithful. Moreover, the wedding feast at the okuta umukago could possibly be replaced with something more modest, in expectation of a great meal after the end of the sacrament, that is, a few days later.

Special mention must be made of the cases of polygamy. Polygamy has traditionally been a sign of wealth and power in the community. Since the beginning of this century, things have changed. Traditional polygamy is more history and memories that belong to the past than a current reality. This change is due both to education and to economic considerations. Unfortunately, nowadays, traditional polygamy has been replaced by adultery, where people have no commitments or responsibilities. This was not difficult, because in African culture, marriage was never considered strictly exclusive and extramarital affairs never had stigma attached, unlike in European societies. Both polygamy and adultery have always been treated with considerable laxity. In fact, the extra economic burdens that the

[7] Μητρ. Ειρηναίος, «Ήθελα να τους δω όλους», *Πάντα τὰ Ἔθνη* 55 (1995), 80-81. [Metr. Irenaeus (Talambekos) (of Kenya and Irinoupolis). "I wished to see them all," *Panta ta Ethni* (All Nations)].

modern way of life brought with it made it easier to slip into adultery and abandon the institution of traditional polygamy.

However, both traditional polygamy and modern adultery raise many important questions for an ecclesiastical view of marriage. These concern the problem of children from different mothers, the problem of the relationship of the husband with the woman with whom he has a sexual relationship, the problem of participation in Holy Communion.

It is a major issue that the man who is guilty of polygamy is excluded from the Common Cup, while the serial adulterer with children from his extramarital affairs is admitted to Holy Communion. Unfortunately, as far as I am aware, the Church, even now, still avoids discussing these issues, preferring to ignore them, or leaving them to the local priests to deal with.

Polygamy and adultery are a major problem in the reality of the African missionary, complex and difficult to solve. It is an indication of its difficulty that there have been a large number of conferences, decisions, circulars and Western missionaries' meetings about this issue over the centuries of their existence. The many debates on the subject over the years make clear that the issue is complicated and difficult. ■

Keywords:
Africa, Uganda, Baganda, wedding, ethics, culture, community, tradition, mission, inculturation

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