

The impact of immigration on the concept of African marriage

A pastoral theological study

ME Baloyi¹

Abstract

One of the issues characterising South Africa after the apartheid regime is the rural-urban migration. Apart from this becoming a fast-growing practice, it also poses a serious challenge to the service delivery of urban municipalities because of the extended need for human settlements. It is evidenced that young people, educated and uneducated, are leaving their rural homes into metropolitan towns and cities in search of employment and education opportunities. The biggest movement is towards towns and cities; Gauteng Province is the most likely destination because it is regarded as the economic hub of the country. Statistics indicate that this is a growing trend which, despite challenging metropolitan municipalities, also poses serious challenges towards African marriages as most unemployed females are left behind in rural homes or join their husbands in the city, where their lives slowly drift away from the typical African marriage that is expected by the elderly in the ancestral homes. This article provides pastoral guidelines towards the relevant problems.

Keywords: Immigration; African Family; Community; Procreation; Cohabitation

1. Introduction

The marriage institution, particularly in Africa, has been and is still faced with many stresses and challenges. Same-sex marriages, cohabitation, and Western thought on practices like lobolo and others are some of the factors eroding African marriage. Apart from these challenges, the influx of people migrating from rural traditional villages to towns and cities receives attention as a challenge to African marriages.

According to Kgatla, the forced removal of Black masses during apartheid homeland formation intended to avail certain geographical areas for exclusive white use.¹ As a result, many Black people tried to move to cities for employment, only to find themselves sent back to their dry and overcrowded lands due to the influx of control regulations they faced. One of the primary aims of the African National Congress conference in Bloemfontein on 16 December 1943 against this ideology was to adopt the Freedom Charter, which included freedom of residence and movement.² The dream of reversing this was realised after the first democratic elections

¹ Prof Baloyi is a Research Professor at the Research Institute for Theology & Religion at the University of South Africa (UNISA). He can be contacted baloye@unisa.ac.za

of 1994. However, the opposite is now happening; Botha³ argues that there is an influx of Black people moving back to cities such as Pretoria (Tshwane), where some are homeless migrants who have landed on the streets through circumstances beyond their control. These people migrate from rural or other towns and villages in search of employment.

Some educated young try to move in big numbers from rural areas to towns and cities. Djamba⁴ argues that socioeconomic factors—the search for a better life and employment—determine migration in South Africa. However, opportunities to earn a better salary exist for educated people. It has been observed that better education to position oneself for these opportunities is only available in urban areas.⁵ The move that many people, the young in particular, are making to urbanised areas usually means that the elderly are left behind in rural villages, perhaps at their own request or because the properties in the city or town smaller is size. This means young families or couples live independently, away from parents and elders. In the wake of the newspaper article entitled *Elders' tough lessons still vital in our lives*,⁶ I felt the need to write this critical research article. The article's author (Godfrey Malibe) argues that although the lessons our parents imparted while growing up were at times harsh and forceful, they were important in giving our lives direction.⁷ His arguments quickly reminded me of how much the urbanised youth who live alone in towns and cities, particularly new couples, lack advice from parents and the elderly. I also asked myself whether the fast-growing number of divorces and other marriage-related challenges destroying our youth in towns and cities today would still occur in the presence of our elders and parents.

Although South African data shows that much rural-to-urban migration is temporary, its attractiveness forces many people to move their families from rural villages into small towns and cities (Hunter et al., 2017; Rambe, 2018). This is most evident in the growth of squatter camps, suburbs, and other dwelling areas.

Amongst other challenges caused by immigration and urbanisation, the identity of African marriages is under attack. The Black churches can no longer pretend to be blind to issues affecting and destroying African marriages because of migration. From the onset, African marriages were not only a union of two people, but of two families.⁸

2. Problem statement

Govert Bijwaard and Stijn Doeselaar⁹ posit that there is enough evidence to prove migration leads to higher divorce rates. The same view is shared by Takyi,¹⁰ who argues that marriages in sub-Saharan Africa are facing high divorce rates. Different reasons can allude to this distress, but for the sake of this research, the author identified migration which usually separates husbands trying to find employment

far from home, forcing them to migrate or become migrant workers, as one of the threats. Furthermore, there is a view that being a migrant worker exposes some men to concubines or extramarital affairs, which presents opportunities to destroy their marriage. The deterioration and destruction of marriage due to absent husbands or fathers who became migrant workers is a challenge this article intends to grapple with, particularly within the understanding that marriage is one of the most regarded and respected institutions for African people.

This argument receives more emphasis from Gathogo,¹¹ who argues, “One cannot advise himself, nor rebuke his own wrongs, nor correct or train himself, nor can see his or her back, hence in Africa we cross over the valleys of life together.” This indicates that migration, one way of separating people from their families or clan, puts an African marriage under the severe stress of loneliness. Baloyi¹² adds:

One of the causes of the escalation of marital problems in an African context currently is the neglect or ignorance of the tradition of extended family relationships. The traditional African society value systems had been altered and shifted from a predominantly kingship system to individualism and the nuclear family.

This argument is echoed by Bhugra and Becker,¹³ who state that some migrants often encounter stress that may impact their mental well-being. The fact that marriage is under attack is a theological issue. It is expected that pastoral caregivers should face the challenges encountered by people within their immediate situations.¹⁴

3. Relevance of this study

Marriage has undoubtedly been one of the pillars and backbone of African society, without which one is not well accepted in the community.¹⁵ This suggests that anything that attempts to interfere with a marriage becomes an enemy for the couple, family, clan, and community at large. For theological intellectuals, pastoral caregivers and researchers within marriage, this study is important because it highlights one factor that destroys marriage, namely, migration.

4. Brief methodological considerations

The study was conducted by reading and analysing available literature and other media sources. Prof Pieterse¹⁶ refers to this as critical literature studies in his research entitled *Scientific-theoretical research approach to practical theology in South Africa*. This will include what other scholars term desktop research, where books, newspapers, articles, and other media-relevant news and programmes will be followed to compile data for this research. For Shannon and Novak¹⁷ (in Mike Allen), “Critical analysis continues to gain significant importance in academic re-

search due to its interdisciplinary appeal and application.” This is the methodological framework within which this study will be done.

5. Conceptualisation of African marriages and the influence of migration

For African people, marriage is a broad concept that includes challenging issues from different cultures and tribes. The pressures and challenges placed on single people testify that marriage was always held in high esteem, protected, and respected in Africa.¹⁸ That is why Kimathi¹⁹ termed marriage “a backbone” of society. In other words, the African expectation is that every child will grow up and get married. It is an unavoidable duty.²⁰ Baloyi²¹ adds that marriage is the joining together of one man and one woman in a lawful way as husband and wife, and as a result, the two become one; hence the basis of monogamous marriage. Although this is not the focus of this study, the author highlights that in many African tribes, marriage is extended to refer to the joining of one man to more than one woman or polygamy. Mbiti²² indicates that marriage is an experience without which one is not regarded as a complete man or woman. This is why marriage was termed “*tebitla la mosadi*”²³ (the grave of a woman). In other words, marriage is an important aspect of life that completes a person regarded as an incomplete human being. In general, many African scholars agree that the meaning here is that two people were joined together to become husband and wife with the sole purpose of procreation. Two main aims define the African concept of marriage: issues of procreation and the unity of the families (or clans) concerned. Although there are other aims, I will centre my arguments on these two for the focus of this research.

It is worth noting that besides being a union of two people, marriage in Africa is a communal union which extends to unite families, clans, and the community. Afoloyan²⁴ argued that marriage is not merely a key institution for Africans, but the one on which the social structures revolve. For many African people, not every relationship was accepted as marriage, but both the family and the clan had their own way of sealing an accepted marriage. Amongst the many ways of ensuring that all accepted the marriage, lobolo negotiations were regarded as necessary. Baloyi²⁵ extensively discusses how lobolo is one of the ways in which the family could involve other people in the relationship and the clan, which ensures that relatives and the community accept the marriage. Besides formalising marriage, lobolo was a way to ensure that the man could responsibly take care of the wife.²⁶ The so-called “*vaten-sit*” marriages or other forms of cohabitation were not and are still not allowed as formal marriages amongst Africans. That is why marriages that did not follow proper rites like lobolo agreements were not regarded as marriages by the family and the entire community. In other words, certain African rites and customs make

a marriage legitimate; any mention of marriage in this article refers to a marriage of this type. According to Kyalo,²⁷ it is an obligation that an African expectation that everyone is married is fulfilled.

African marriage cannot be easily defined outside the confines of the community. Lana²⁸ and many other African scholars agree that African weddings are not only for the couple concerned, but it includes their extended families, clans, and community they live in. Kyalo²⁹ agrees with Magesa³⁰ stating, "The value of marriage is communal and the couple's consent has validity only in this communal social context." This is how this concept is to be read and understood in the light of the well-known African idiom, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."³¹ This saying is echoed by Bishop Desmond Tutu, quoted by Hailey,³² who posited that "I am human because I belong." Mbiti³³ also argues that marriage provides new social relationships between families and relatives. Therefore, a successful marriage must transmit clan and community values to Africans. Although Africans understand the other purposes of marriage, like procreation, this does not exclude the aim of uniting the two families concerned. Hence, the agreement and approval of both families are crucial for one's marriage to endure. By extension, marriage is expected to promote family, clan, and community values.

Baloyi³⁴ argues, "Most parents would like to see their children successfully and happily married." It is excruciating for a parent if their child's marriage does not show progress, this explains why they may make other efforts to ensure that the marriage endures. It is the parents' pride when the young couple is happy in their marriage. This gives them an example by which they can motivate those who are yet to get married. However, if the opposite happens, it embarrasses them. Africans give birth to children who are expected to be acceptable in the family and community. Therefore, difficult decisions like divorce are not taken by either the husband or family alone; the parents involve the community's elders to impart their experience and wisdom to bear on the problem the couple is experiencing. The young couple is still regarded as inexperienced to make such decisions without consultation. Boonzaaier³⁵ correctly states, "Divorce is agreed between the parties (the families, not the individuals) concerned. Only if the parties are unable to reach an agreement does the case go to higher indigenous public court on appeal." Some problems that lead to the divorce of young couples today are minor, but because they do not seek the counsel of elders, the divorce goes ahead. This shows that children born into a family and community continue to be within the cultural confines of that community even after marriage. Hence, in the past, divorce was not common among African people.

Another important aspect is understanding that for African marriages to survive, procreation is one of its dominant aims. Many African scholars like Nhlapo,³⁶

Kalu,³⁷ Turaki,³⁸ and Mbiti³⁹ agree that since the sole aim of marriage among Africans is procreation, many childless marriages end in divorce or polygamy. Although many children were expected to be born into a marriage, it should also be noted that due to small living spaces and economic demands, the use of modern contraceptives in the cities and towns has been increasing, much against the expectations of the African marriage. This is one of the challenges that urban exposure presents to African families; no African family can dispute this. Communal and family pressures create many problems for childless couples. It is typically African to say, "It takes a village to raise a child"⁴⁰ because everything is communal from conception to birth and death.

Mkhiva's⁴¹ report on behalf of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) states, "Just as birth is a shared occasion for celebration, so is death a shared period for mourning and mutual assistance." These two arguments clearly indicate that a child born in an African marriage is born to the entire family and clan. A human being belongs to a community from birth until death. This explains why the concept of orphanages and street children is foreign to Africans because everyone, including those whose parents are bereaved, still belongs to a broader family or clan. When girls reached puberty, they were taught essential aspects of womanhood by an elderly woman, regardless of her relationship with the family.

In contrast, boys were instructed to care for livestock or taught about circumcision by older males whose relationship was sometimes very distant. Even when reaching marriage age, the parents and elderly people in the village would ensure that the son or daughter makes the right choice for marriage. If a son or daughter chose to marry into a family where the moral life was doubtful, or witchcraft was suspected, they would not easily approve of the marriage. This would be done in consultation with other extended members of the family. This suggests that the African *ubuntu*, which helped shape our forefathers' lives, is being replaced by Western individualism, which is detrimental to African people. Some Western scholars are critical of this view as it suggests that a person has no individual value. This critique is addressed by Msomi,⁴² who posits that this indicates that the true value of a person is in a life of relating to others.

The migration intended in this context is caused by a male going out of his rural village to seek employment in the city, which forces him to live there while the ancestral home becomes a place of visit during month-end, holidays or extended leave. This presents the temptation of cohabitation in the city, which has seen many marriages crumble. The fragmentation of the family or long-term separation due to migration is one of the issues that led many African men to resort to cohabitation while away from home to satisfy their sexual desires. Ashimolowo⁴³ argues that

extramarital affairs are part of the social ills that result from migration. Although no legislation currently regulates cohabitation in South Africa, Mashau's research reveals a growing trend towards the practice of young people and older people who, by migration, find themselves far from their families or spouses. According to Gathogo,⁴⁴ cohabitation is when a man and woman live together as husband and wife, whereas they are not married according to the African marriage customs. In the African context, it is a union where the two people do not follow their culture's customary channels or demands. Vearey⁴⁵ argues that it is because of urban growth and migration that HIV/AIDS infections are growing. In this way, besides cohabitation being an enemy of traditional African marriage, it has also become a vehicle through which sexually-related diseases are transmitted. This makes the relationship between migration and health practical.

The truth is that there is a decline in marriage amongst both Black South Africans and a growth in cohabitation. Therefore, I do not hesitate to share Katz's⁴⁶ sentiments that the decline in marriage is associated with an increase in cohabitation and that African people have never received or accepted cohabitation as a form of marriage. It has become common practice for many African people to live as married people in both formal and informal Gauteng settlements without their parent's knowledge. A few case studies are mentioned in an article titled *The use of Imago Dei as pastoral healing vision against women killings in South Africa*. On page two of the Sowetan Newspaper, the case of the 22-year-old killed in Mokopane, the killer was referred to as the "boyfriend." Secondly, Khumalo's⁴⁷ report about a 44-year-old mutilated and murdered on 19 May 2011 also referred to the killer as a "boyfriend". The culprits are called "boyfriends" because no formal marriage ever occurred between the two parties.

Life in the city, suburbs, and informal settlements, where most migrant workers live, is different from life in the rural village because the uncles and aunts who used to guard the marriage union with their traditional advice are left in the village. This means the husband has the freedom to be on his own in the city. This different exposure tempts some men to 'forget' that they left their wives back in their rural homes. According to Cox,⁴⁸ the belief is that women raised in rural areas have better morals, and respect their husbands due to their upbringing. Hence, the belief that if a man brings her rural wife to the city, she will behave like a city woman who is loose, independent, and constantly threatening to leave if she does not get money. Cox quoted one of his respondents, who shared, "Most people in the city disregard the culture of African people. Even those who claim to practice it mostly talk about their own modified cultures, not the culture."⁴⁹

As a result of the communal life that an African marriage should become, the issue of migration, especially when the new couple leaves their village and goes

to live in a town or city, creates isolation from their parents and community. It is always anticipated that far away from home, the young couple will miss the elderly's advice they previously received from the village; hence the challenges often become difficult to solve. This is evident from divorces escalating because of a lack of access to the elderly and parental advice. In addition, this is why most minor differences usually end up in court. In this context, I support what President Jacob Zuma (quoted by Williams)⁵⁰ opined:

Let us solve African problems the African way, not the white man's way. Let us not be influenced by other cultures and think that lawyers are going to help. We have never changed the facts. They tell you they are dealing with cold facts. We are Africans, we cannot change to be something else.

Although this address was not about marriages in Africa, I wish to emphasise that, as Africans, we have lost our own ways of solving our disputes and believe the only way to resolve our issues is in court. Some minor family disputes and differences can be dealt with on a family level by elders instead of being reported to a legal court. When the parental involvement that used to shape the inexperienced husband and wife is removed, it creates an open space that cannot be easily filled in the township or city life where most people resort to Western individualism for many reasons, including:

- The cultural diversity characterises town or city life; neighbours are usually from various cultures which one cannot easily accommodate; thus, language barriers are evident in towns and suburbs.
- Individualism from the West is fast becoming the norm for African people; hence the younger generation quickly loses its roots; even the respect they should afford their parents and the elderly is slowly lapsing. This is why most young people no longer regard the elderly from their home villages as their close family. Young people only know their immediate family members as relatives and do not regard other distant people as their relatives. The African concept of ubuntu then comes under scrutiny. I agree with Msomi,⁵¹ who argues that the trend of Western individualism (a result of immigration and urbanisation) erodes life in the community and denies people the richness of growing in relationships with other persons created by God.

It is common knowledge that most migrants seeking employment have been forced to stay longer away from their spouses, resulting in divorce.⁵² According to Baloyi⁵³, even when there were significant problems in the marriage, the husband did not decide to divorce his wife without the consent of the family members and elders like uncles and aunts in the community. The first step would be a family gathering

to discuss the issue and take it further to the village elders before reaching a final decision. Bigombe and Khadiagala⁵⁴ state:

While the durability of marriages in traditional structures was strengthened by the control maintained by kinship ties, new migration patterns have increased the prospects of divorce, separation, and the opportunity for multiple partners. Migration is a rational response to poor employment opportunities, but this trend has loosened traditional social control mechanisms that regulated social reciprocities and responsibilities within families. Migration breaks the social bonds of amity that sustain families (Bigombe and Khadiagala).

The central argument here is that since rural life is characterised by having elderly people and relatives who intervene or are invited to assist in a marriage problem, life in the city or town does not have those provisions. As a result, it becomes easy for a man to divorce his wife. Even those who have brought their wives to the city or suburbs miss the elderly advice of the uncles and aunts back home regarding their marriage.

Migration has positive effects, such as good opportunities for education and employment, but it must be noted that it also accelerates separation and divorce. Another contributing factor to the rise in divorce is the lack of elderly voices and advice from the community elders and other people in shaping and helping the younger generation with their marital challenges. Bigombe and Khadiagala⁵⁵ refer to this as “Changes in the structure of African families still reflect the enduring tensions between traditional and modern values and structures. There have been widespread accounts of families abandoning key traditional practices in favour of modern ones, the major trend remains the creation of systems of marriage and family organization that draw on both traditional and modern norms.” The cultural and traditional traits and advice used to protect African marriages are being forgotten or ‘left behind’ by people in the rural areas.

African people live communally and in extended families. Migration to the city does not necessarily imply that one has no family to care for in the rural villages. Baloyi’s⁵⁶ article entitled *Distance no impediment for funerals: Death as a uniting ritual for African people* argues that many African people have two homes, one in the city and the other in the rural area. Migrants travelling many kilometres every weekend to bury their loved ones in a village implies that they have a home in the city and another home in the village. This is because the ancestral home is where the extended family members, together with the unemployed wife who is left at home (and takes care of children), will continue to live, while the employed husband in the city has a second home for work purposes. With the property rates

and caring for those who remain back at home, one's salary is split between two families. The argument is that the siblings in the rural home expect the brother, who works and lives in the city, to care for them, meaning the little money he earns is inadequate. The author argues that staying in the city is already costly and adds to the burden of caring for the siblings at home, which is an additional burden.

6. Evaluation and the way forward

The absence of parents traditionally regarded as bearers of wisdom to help the younger generation understand life and its challenges seems to have left a gap that cannot easily be closed. The researcher agrees with Larney⁵⁷ and Lotter, who emphasise the importance of trading morals and ethical values from the elderly to young people. Although this is true for most people, it is even more critical for Africans who live communal lives. The elder and parental voice that helped shape the lives and minds of newly married couples played a pivotal role in reducing divorce, separation, and other marital challenges. Since this voice is absent for many couples who have migrated, it is expected that the difficulties of African marriages should be addressed for these marriages to survive. Marriages are in danger, as Kyalo⁵⁸ argues:

It could be argued that in this context today, such marriages have no relevance because it pries on people's individuality but it should be remembered that the sacredness of the value attached to this union and the commitment which is made to one another deserves that the institution is protected and connected to the community.

The truth is that many marriages that adopt the individualistic style of life are not easily accommodated and protected by the community back in the village. Hence, there have been many differences between the wife and the in-laws whenever the couple visits their rural home. In most cases, the differences between the in-laws can be summarised by the saying "*N'wana loyi anga na mikhwa or mikhuwa,*" meaning this girl does not have manners. In the Tsonga language, *mikhwa or mikhuwa* refers to the same thing, i.e., manners. This remark suggests that the girl is not accepted based on the practised traditions where she comes from. This is similar to the concept of "*mukbada*" often used in Muvhango, a soapie airing on SABC 2 at 21h00 from Monday to Friday.⁵⁹ Although the issue of *mukbada* promotes ethnic divisions, which is not the focus of this study, it also shows that rural people still have difficulty accepting urban women as wives. His family's non-acceptance of his wife causes many problems for the young man. Some are even compelled to have two wives (the urban wife and the rural wife, who the parents

and the family accept), in which case the resources required to care for them are limited. It is disturbing for the young man to realise that the relationship between his wife and his family is bitter.

Communal life is part of African culture, without which we lose our identity. I know that not every culture is perfect, but there are good deeds in every culture that must be preserved. Traditional values like ubuntu and communalism are essential, and there have always been negative effects when not considering these traditions among African people. For instance, today, we face challenges like orphanages, which are uncommon with Africans because the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," shaped our lives. Identifying orphans was difficult because a child was the child of every parent in the community. Children of immigrants only know their biological parents as parents and do not know who to turn to should their parents die; hence the issue of street kids is a growing phenomenon.

It cannot be denied that African marriage should conform and respond to African norms and values; hence encouraging the new couple to run away from their traditions is not good. One example of emphasising that young couples should conform is the new trend in which cohabitation is usually punished by forcing a husband to pay lobolo when his wife dies. This is fast becoming a practice that African people use to punish their sons-in-law who lived with their daughters without marrying them through African traditions such as lobolo.⁶⁰

For young marriages to be accepted and dignified by our traditional people, young people must be ready to communicate and share their lives with their own people. Perhaps it is good that a young man who intends to marry agrees to journey with his parents and family to introduce them to his intended wife. One African says, "One log does not make a bridge." This implies that one cannot advise oneself, rebuke one's wrongs, or correct or train oneself. Even in the marriage context, African people need each other for advice.

7. Conclusion

This research unveiled that, amongst other factors, migration caused by seeking employment plays a role in destroying African marriages. Migration might have good intentions, but since most wives are left in their ancestral homes, temptation usually creeps in to destroy a marriage between distant partners. The lack of elderly advice due to living in the city or town is also a common problem. This is because for African marriages to survive the storms of life, elderly people (aunts and uncles) intervene and guide them whenever there is a problem. In contrast, when life is in the city, and the elderly are left in the rural village, consulting them for their experience and advice becomes challenging. However, it cannot be ignored that colonialism and apartheid, which saw a majority of Africans or Black people forced

from the cities, can also be blamed, but that happens through the perspective of migration. Therefore, pastoral caregivers and theologians cannot leave the problem to other disciplines; they should also put forward suggestions on how African marriages can survive the storms of migration.

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