Globethics Repository



The African Christian Family Life (134B)

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Kaoma,Kapya
Publisher	Regnum Books International
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-01 04:21:24
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166488

(134B) THE AFRICAN CHRISTIAN FAMILY LIFE

Kapya Kaoma

Introduction

As a child, I remember embarrassing my father in the presence of fifth graders. My father was teaching a class on the 'family' as understood in the West: father, mother and children. Since we lived within the school premises, my father invited me to his class. He then asked me the following question, 'How many are you in your family?' As a first grader, then, I failed to answer his question; something that did not only embarrass me but also confused me. With indignation, he answered his own question – telling the class that we were six. 'Well, that's not true. We are more than that,' I thought as I left his classroom. As an African, my *ulupwa* (family) is made up of all my relatives as well as those who share my *mukowa* (*totem*), and not just my biological siblings as my father told his class. Our home was filled with people, and many more visited us nearly every month. We were all told they were *ulupwa* (family) since we shared the same *mukowa* (totem). We were repeatedly reminded that *ifikolwe fyesu* (ancestors) were also part of the family.

My childhood encounter was again repeated during my time in England. As a single person then, people asked me whether I had a family. Yes, I had a family – though not married – I had both small and big fathers (*batata mukalamba nabatata mwaice*), both big and small mothers (*bamayo mukalamba na bamayo mwaice*), sisters, brothers, etc. – they made our family. People would remind me that they wanted to know whether I was married and had children. All I would say is, 'No, I am not married but I have a family.' I am sure they thought I was too backward in my outlook – little did they know that I sought to teach them about the diversity of families in the world. It is from this perspective that African Christian family life should be addressed.

The concept of Christian family life presupposes the existence of African Christianity. The question is: Can we speak of African Christianity or Christianities? What is the relationship between the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, the Pentecostal theology and the theology of African Initiated Churches? In the light of marriage, are plural marriages and customary marriages Christian? And how can Christian family life appear in contemporary Africa amidst so many denominational theologies and socio-economic and political challenges?

In order to address these questions, I seek to define family life within the African framework. Whereas some Christians link the family to marriage and procreation (father, mother and children), and others to community, in this chapter I argue that the Christian family life needs to model the concept of the family of God. This model suggests a radical concept of Christian family life since it invites Africans into loving relationship with other members of God's family.

The Colonial Transformation of the African Family

As a teacher, my father was taught to view the family as father, mother and children. Yet at home, the family was something wider that we were born into. His students did not accept his interpretation either; they were part of the bigger 'family' of many fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins, aunties, sisters, brothers and so on. Whereas 'the biological factor is necessary in constituting kinship relations,' in African cosmology, other societal factors can 'equally form new relations that are akin to blood ties'.[1]

---

[1] Peter Assenga, 'The African Family Spirit: A Nexus of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation', *African Ecclesiastical*

One example is the concept of *Mukowa*. All those who shared our *mukowa* (totem) were equally part of the family. This is because in Bantu cosmology, identity is established 'through *mukowa*. Totems symbolize belongingness; they define and interconnect families, clans and kingdoms… What genealogies are to westerners, totems are to the Bantu'.[2] In fact, when two people meet, their first obligation is to establish their relatedness through *mukowa*. In Chishinga, Ushi and Bemba cosmologies, 'people who share the same *mukowa* cannot get married no matter how distant they might be'.[3] This understanding moves the family from the sexual realm to that of relationships.

African family life in the face of colonialism

In 1960, Anne Barnett wrote, 'In Africa today, the Christian home and family life are being subjected to severe tests. Past customs are discarded and new situations are encountered for which there has been little preparation.'[4] Reflecting on the September 1959 Christian Council of Kenya's conference on the Christian family, Barnett outlines some issues churches faced then. Polygamy, bride price, the upbringing of children, sex education, Christian home life and family planning were among the many issues the conference addressed – albeit from the western worldview. To Barnett, African cosmology was dying; hence Africans needed a new way of living. Barnett, however, did not define what constitutes the Christian home and family life – apart from monogamy and children.

After fifty-fives years, the issues the church sought to address are still alive. Yet the context is different. Barnett wrote, when Africa was under colonial rule, and her statement about the 'past customs' being 'discarded' was not entirely true, since many Africans experienced modernity from a traditional cosmological perspective.

How then can Christian family life be understood? In the last decade or so, 'defending traditional family values' is repeatedly used from the USA to Russia to Africa. Yet what constitutes the 'traditional family' is assumed rather than defined. While the African 'traditional family' includes all relatives, in the West the term refers to the nuclear family. For example, Daniel Aleshire writes, 'It was one of those good and tough days of our family – particularly for four year-old Jonathan and his mother.'[5] Like my father, Aleshire's understanding of the family is limited to his wife and child. To explain the diversity of families, Thomas E. Breidenthal proposes a shift from family to household. To him, what constitutes a household is 'a very high degree of familiarity,' which is found in all households. Breidenthal writes,

> Christian marriage is not the only form of Christian householding, if only because marriage and family life is not the only form that human life together takes. The range and variety of Christian households is wide and rich, and in affirming the natural goodness of life together, Christian faith must begin affirming this diversity. This does not mean every form of householding is acceptable, because not every living arrangement stands up to the demands of justice and love.[6]

Review Vol. 51, issue 1-2 (March-June 2009): 52-77, 59.

[2] Kapya J. Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth: Christian Ecological Ethics of Ubuntu* (Zomba, Malawi: Kachere Series, 2013), 73.

[3] Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth,* 74. See also Karla O. Poewe, 'Matriliny in the Throes of Change: Kinship, Descent and Marriage in Luapula, Zambia, Part One', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 48, no. 3 (1978), 210. In other African cultures, however, marriage between people who share the same totem is encouraged.

[4] Anne Barnett, 'Christian Home and Family Life in Kenya Today', *International Review of Mission,* Vol. 49, issue 196 (October 1960): 420.

[5] Daniel Aleshire, 'Family Life and Christian Spirituality', *Review and Expositor*, 86 (1989), 209-214.

[6] Thomas E. Breidenthal, *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness* (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1997), 93.

Although he accepts same-gender households, he argues that polygamy is not appropriate for Christian households.

If demands for justice and love are the basis for Christian households, Breidenthal's rejection of polygamy while accepting same-sex relationships is another example of how western Christianity favours its values over those of others. Africans, on the other hand, are likely to accept polygamy over same-gender households. Regardless, the exportation and imposition of the limited 'nuclear family' as a default Christian family has led to the disintegration of the African family – leading to many social problems such as street children, destitution and various forms of violence – from domestic to sexual.

The African Christian family life

The question of Christian family life assumes the existence of a distinct Christian definition of the family. In Africa, this distinct element is linked with the colonial or missionary era. In the colonial cosmology, the African traditional concept of the family was demeaned and abandoned in favour of the nuclear family: father, mother, and children. This shift followed a shift from the land-based to the urban-based economy. Since rural life depended on the land, the African traditional family worked to secure one's wellbeing. In the money economy, however, an individual's meagre income was just enough to sustain one's life – forcing Africans to ignore their obligations to their kin.

Besides, in matrilineal communities such as the Chishinga and Bemba cultures, maternal uncles were said to be responsible for their sisters' children. Yet colonial governments only recognized wife and biological children as the man's 'family' members. Since missionaries shared this limited understanding of the family, they confirmed and somehow sacralized it. They divided the African family into two; the father, mother and children became primary members, while the rest, including one's own parents and siblings, were now 'extended family' members. One's primary responsibility was to the first; responsibility to the extended family was deemed secondary.

It is critical to realize that the concepts of 'extended family' and 'nuclear family' were of a colonial and missionary origin. As Peter Assenga contends, the Chagga of Tanzania lack these concepts since an 'African belongs to a web of relations far beyond the nuclear family'. One 'is born into a community of relatives (not only a household consisting of a father and a mother, with or without siblings)'.[7] As a family member, an African is socialized to put 'others before one's own needs'.[8] This understanding is in line with the teaching of Jesus. In the Kingdom of God, we don't have extended family brothers and sisters – rather, we are all primary members of God's family.

African Christian Family Life – Is it about Marriage?

Discussions on the family in Africa have conflated the family with marriage. Generally, heterosexual marriage is perceived as the African family. This is understandable since the Christian family life is associated with the story of Adam, Eve and their children. In the Christian Bible, this assumption is linked to the Holy Family – Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Although Jesus grew up in the socio-cultural context in which the family went beyond father, mother and children, missionaries presented the heterosexual and monogamous marriage in the Church as the Christian family.

In many African societies, however, the family and marriage are two distinct institutions. Whereas marriage was part of the family, it was not the family per se. Among the Bemba, Chishinga and Ushi people of Zambia, *ulupwa* (family) is not '*in'ganda yandi*' (implying marriage). Whereas sex or marriage

[7] Assenga, 'The African family spirit', 62.
[8] Assenga, 'The African Family Spirit', 69.

constitutes *'in'ganda',* it does not define the family. On the contrary, marriage builds and expands family life since it brings two families together.

In line with Breidenthal above, belongingness defines and, to some extent constitutes, an African family. Just as a married person belongs to the family of both the living and the living dead (ancestors), so does the single mother, the divorcee, a child, and the single person. For instance, the Chishinga people say, *eko nafuma, kwaliba abantu* (where I come from, there are people) or *nalikwata abantu* (I have people). Usually, these words are meant to be a reminder to others that if something wrong happens to that person, his or her people will seek justice on one's behalf. In fact, the bigger the family, the bigger the respect one is accorded. Aptly stated, the family is bigger than the household; though every household is part of the family. Thus the Christian family life is inclusive – divorcees, single parents, widows, and people of various sexual orientations and gender identities are all members of this family.

Belonging to the family also implies wider socio-economic, religious, and cultural obligations and benefits. When disaster strikes, for example, all family members are equally affected. In this ethical system, the 'I' is minimized while the 'we' is maximized; sharing is both an individual and community virtue to which every individual ought to aspire. Whereas western civilization disconnected Africans from their families, in reality, Africans belong to a much bigger family than the church has accepted.

Apart from arguing that the African family life revolves around the ethics of *Ubuntu,* Desmond Tutu writes that if we accept:

> … that we do belong together, that our destinies are bound up in one another's, that we can be free only together, that we can survive only together, that we can only be human together, then a glorious world would come into being where all of us lived harmoniously together as members of one family, the human family, God's family.[9]

Similarly, Bujo argues that one 'becomes a person only through active participation in the life of the community'.[10]

In theological terms, the Christian family life is a kenotic process through which we empty ourselves (*kenosis*) for the sake of others in the world of violence, greed and selfishness. To live is to exist within the web of sacred communal relationships with one's kin, ancestors and the Supreme Being.

Is African Christian family life possible?

It is important to note that conflating marriage with family carries hetero-normative assumptions of patriarchy. It places masculinity at the centre of the family – raising gender justice issues as well as leading to the oppression of women and those who choose not to marry. For instance, can Christian family life exist in the absence of males, as is usually the case in contemporary Africa? Fulata L. Moyo writes:

> The increasing reality of female-headed households… and the religio-cultural teaching of men as heads of the family as well as the research finding that HIV/AIDS is more prevalent in societies which have gender imbalances, raise many questions for faith-based communities in Africa today. How do we define men as household heads in families of widows, and divorced and single mothers? How can faith-based communities transform the concept of headship so as to encourage mutuality and communion of partners who complement each other?[11]

---

[9] Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 23-24.
[10] Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 87. For the ecological implication of the family of God, see Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth,* 92-114; *The Creator's Symphony: African Christianity, The Plight of Earth and the Poor* (Dorpspruit, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2015).
[11] Fulata Lusungu Moyo, 'Religion, Spirituality and Being a Woman in Africa: Gender Construction Within the

Moyo's point is critical to the understanding of family life. With the increasing number of child-headed households due to wars, terrorism, AIDS and other disasters across the continent, where do we place child headed-households? How is the family to be conceived in the absence of both parents? How about sexual minorities?

The family is a social unity in which life is lived, shared and experienced. Being human means being connected to the wider family. Yet the African family transcends the physical – it connects one with the ancestors as well as with those to come and with the Creator. Since African family life is 'collective', possessing *Ubuntu* (to be truly human) means upholding traditional values of care for all members of one's family.

Towards an African Christian Family Life: Some Observations

Scholars in Africa, especially Roman Catholic theologians, have wrestled with the question of family life. Is the church's teaching on family life in line with the African life-world? What do we do with those who are married to more than one wife or husband? And what is the role of the African family in the life of religious brothers, nuns or celibate priests? In addition, are those who belong to other churches still part of the Christian family? If the family is *ecclesia domestica* (domestic church), what is the place of single people in the Christian family life?[12]

Brian Hearne explores these questions in detail. Accepting that the African family is becoming narrower each passing year, he proposes the church community as 'the new extended family, where the bond of grace sets up not only new relationship but also new kinship patterns, transcending ethnic, national and racial boundaries'.[13] Christian family life, he argues, ought to be 'geared towards the common wellbeing of both women and men and is based on more inclusive beliefs and teachings, especially acknowledging that both women and men are created in the image of God'.[14]

Hearne's argument seeks to replace the African traditional family life with the western Christian definition of the family. I propose a different route – Christianity needs to become African if it is to transform the continent. African Christian family life needs to revisit its traditional understanding of life in which families were intricately connected. Regardless, the emphasis placed on the nuclear family paints an heretical picture of Christianity. Christianity is a communal religion and no isolated Christian exists – we are one family, and one body of Christ. This understanding is closer to the African understanding of the family than to the western one.

Consequently, to replace African family life with western Christian family life will not fully address the crisis of Christian family life on the continent. This is because an African Christian is not fully planted in the western worldview but lives between the two worlds – that of ancestors and that of post-colonial Africa. To this end, Christian family life ought to revolve round the concept of the family of God which has wider application than the western understanding of the family. In God's family life, we are all members, regardless of our socio-economic or religious differences. Since the Triune God is the Creator, sanctifier and sustainer of this family life, all Africans are full members as well as participants in the common life of the people of God. Unlike in the hetero-normatively defined family, in God's family, grandmothers, single mothers, fathers, sexual minorities as well as children all find acceptance. This concept puts greater responsibility on all Christians – we are called to care for all of God's people and especially the least of these (Matt. 24). As Jesus said, 'Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister

---

African Religio-cultural Experiences', *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* No. 61 (2004): 75.

[12] Brain Hearne, 'Christian Family Life: Some Pastoral Priorities', *African Ecclesiastical Review* Vol. 24, no. 5, (1982): 290.

[13] Hearne, 'Christian Family Life', 290.

[14] Moyo, 'Religion, spirituality and Being a Woman in Africa', 76.

and mother' (Mark 3:35; Matt. 12:48). Note that Jesus did not say they are extended family members but his siblings.

In addition, the concept of the family of God confronts the narrow definition and application of the Christian family life. It calls us to care not just for our brothers and sisters of the nuclear family, but for strangers and the outcasts; it has no Jew or Gentile, male or female and it is not sexually defined. To become the centre of love, peace and dignity, family life must become inclusive of all humanity and all Creation.

African Christian family life ought to be a place of peace and harmony. It ought to address all forms of violence that demean and destroy life. The over-empowering of males over women, and the boy child over the girl child are issues that African Christian family life ought to address. As God's family, both male and female, have a special role to play in the family. Here, African customs as well as Christian teachings which demean women or sanction violence against women must be confronted. Moreover, Christian family life should address the issue of 'girl child rape' (child marriages) that continues to destroy African girls.

Furthermore, the Christian family life ought to confront the violence associated with sexual minorities. The Church can aid the acceptance as well as the protection of our fellow human beings who do not fit into our colonial-gender-defined roles. Besides, the church needs to explore ways of providing pastoral care to inter-sex children, and their families.

Finally, the Christian family participates in the life of the justice-loving God. Our narrowly defined family life is in contrast to the African family life as well as to the gospel of Christ. A good African Christian family ought to uphold the positive values of both traditional life and the Christian faith – it must participate in the *missio Creatoris Dei* (the mission of the Creator God). These religious values form and inform how Christian family life is upheld – it calls us to love our neighbours as ourselves while looking out for the Earth and the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters. And there are billions of them.

Bibliography

Aleshire, Daniel. 'Family Life and Christian Spirituality.' *Review and Expositor*, Vol. 86 no. 2, (1989): 209-214.

Assenga, Peter. 'The African Family Spirit: A Nexus of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation.' *African Ecclesiastical Review* Vol. 51, issue 1-2, (March-June 2009): 52-77.

Barnett, Anne. 'Christian Home and Family Life in Kenya Today.' *International Review of Mission* Vol. 49, issue 196, (October 1960): 420-426.

Breidenthal, Thomas E. *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness*. Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1997.

Bujo, Benezet. *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality.* New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001.

Hearne, Brain. 'Christian Family Life: Some Pastoral Priorities.' *African Ecclesiastical Review* Vol. 24, no. 5, (1982): 289-299.

Kaoma, Kapya J. *God's Family, God's Earth: Christian Ecological Ethics of Ubuntu*. Zomba, Malawi: Kachere Series, 2013.

Kaoma, Kapya J. *The Creator's Symphony: African Christianity, The Plight of Earth and the Poor.* Dorpspruit, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2015.

Moyo, Fulata L. 'Religion, Spirituality and Being a Woman in Africa: Gender Construction Within the African Religio-cultural Experiences.' *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* No. 61 (2004): 72–78.

Poewe, Karla O. 'Matriliny in the Throes of Change: Kinship, Descent and Marriage in Luapula, Zambia, Part One.' *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 48, no. 3, (1978): 205-218.

Tutu, Desmond. *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time.* New York: Doubleday, 2004.