
Gospel and Marriage Workshop

Marriage and culture in West Africa in the light of the Scriptures

Michael Jemphrey

© 2015

A Gospel and Culture workshop was held for Scripture Engagement workers and local church leaders in West Africa, focussing on the subject of marriage. 30 participants and five staff from French-speaking Africa met in Kara, Togo, from 1-5 September 2014.

The workshop brought together the domains of Scripture engagement and anthropology, demonstrating the relevance of the translated Scriptures in addressing local cultural issues.

The week in summary

- Morning devotions based on the theme of marriage.
- Discussion of **contextualisation and syncretism** in the Bible and church history.
- Overview of **marriage in the Old and New Testaments**.
- Presentation of anthropological **research methods**.
- **Case studies** of marriage challenges from different countries in West Africa.
- Study of several problematic areas of **marriage in West Africa in the light of the Scriptures** (polygamy, levirate marriage, divorce and remarriage, bride price and the cost of weddings).
- Research in groups of **six delicate questions** in the realm of marriage and **proposals for contextualised local practices**.
- Production of **radio programmes** to present each challenge and proposal to the local populations.

Setting the Scene

The scene was set for the workshop by presenting the tree diagram below for investigating cultural behaviour.



Fruit:
Consequences

Trunk:
Observed Behaviour

Roots:
Causes

When addressing cultural issues, it is vital to look not only at observed behaviour and its consequences but also at the root causes.

There followed a case study on levirate marriage in Mali which stimulated participants to think of analogous customs in their own cultures and set the stage for discussions about contextualisation.



Typical Supyiré wedding celebrations in Mali

Contextualisation and Syncretism

We looked at contextualisation and syncretism. All Christian translation and church planting involves some change but the important question is whether all changes are brought into captivity to Christ. Even the best intentions can go wrong. Paul and Barnabas' miracle was misunderstood (Acts 14) and they were just about able to prevent sacrifices being made to them as Zeus and Hermes. It was not difficult for participants to provide further examples of syncretism including that of a Cameroonian pastor who sought to introduce a contextualised rite which his congregation interpreted in pagan terms.

So is the answer to avoid all risk by changing nothing? No, for that leads to parts of the culture left untouched by the Gospel, and church members living double lives, a different form of syncretism. As Hiebert writes (2011:35), all three dimensions of culture – goodness, truth and beauty (engaging respectively the will, the intellect and the emotions) – need to be converted for Christ-centred contextualisation to take place.

Research Methods

Two key methods for cultural research were presented: **participant observation** and **interviews** (informal, semi-structured and structured). Participants practised by informally interviewing each other.

Marriage in the Bible

Two sessions were devoted to reviewing Bible teaching on marriage, looking at the principles found in the following passages:

Old Testament	New Testament
Genesis 1:26-31; 2:18-24	Matthew 19:1-12
Genesis 24	Mark 10:1-12
Deuteronomy 22:13-19	Mark 12:18-27
Deuteronomy 24:5	1 Corinthians 7
Ruth 4	Ephesians 5:21-33
Isaiah 54:1-8; 62:3-6	Colossians 3:18-19
Song of Songs	
Proverbs	

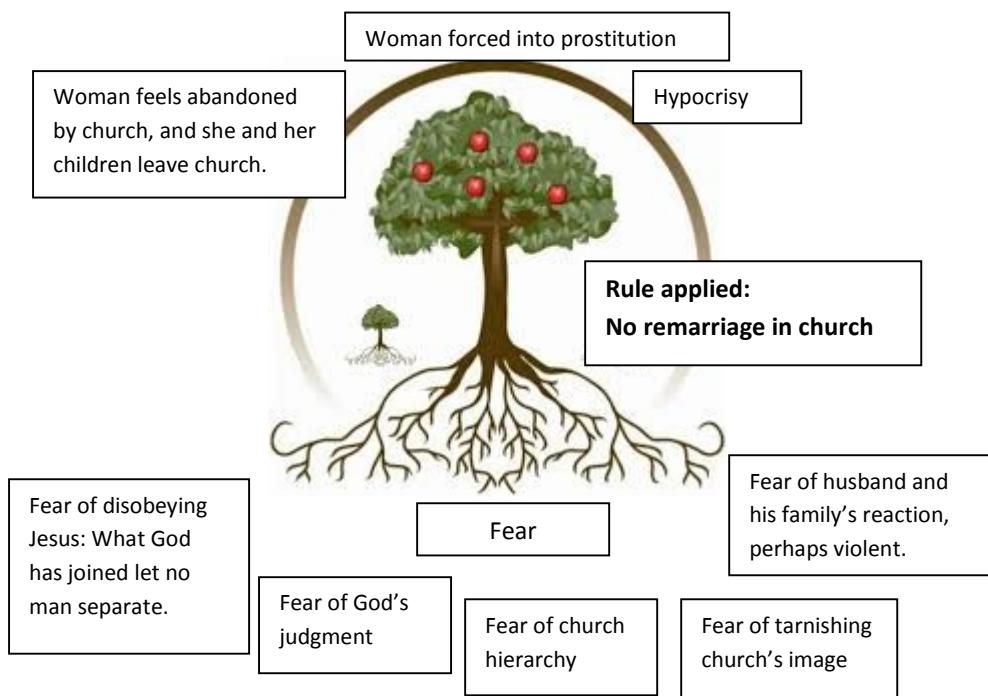
Discussion Topics

Several cultural issues in marriage were suggested and the participants made further suggestions. Each topic was written on a sheet of A4 paper and placed on tables around the room. The participants took four stones each and placed them on the topics they wished to discuss.

The result of this poll was:

Polygamy	16	Concubinage	8
Levirate marriage	15	Forced Marriage	7
Divorce	14	Betrothals	4
Bride price ("le dot")	13	Responsibilities of parents	4
Cost of a wedding	11	Contractual temporary marriage	3
Mixed marriage with a non Christian family	10	Marriage by capture	2
Remarriage	10	Abandoned wives	2
Violence between spouses	9	Homosexuality	1

Overviews of the most voted-for topics were followed by discussion in groups. The most controversial turned out to be **remarriage of a divorced person in church**, and the case was evoked of a wife abandoned by her husband to bring up their children alone who wished to remarry in church. For most churches represented at the workshop, the rule of no remarriage in church would be applied in such a situation.¹ We used the tree diagram to identify the causes and consequences of this application of the rule.



¹ This is a complicated issue to deal with because it is not only about cultural application of Biblical principles; it is also a question of Biblical interpretation and there are different views on the subject. See, for example, Strauss, Mark (ed.), *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

Three participants formed a panel for a semi-structured interview which explored the position of their churches in more depth. The other participants observed the interview and wrote down their observations and feedback. The comments covered both the substance of the topic and the methodology (some of the interview questions were correctly critiqued for not being completely objective). A synthesis of this feedback was presented the next day to the whole group.

Research in Groups

The week ended with a practical challenge. The participants were divided into six groups according to their region and were asked to choose a problem the church faces in relation to marriage:

1. Choose an aspect of your culture which you would like to see redeemed.
2. Describe the current practice.
3. Study the Bible to identify:
 - a) aspects which are acceptable, and
 - b) aspects contrary to Scripture or the law of your country.
4. Propose how the church can help bring about change. If necessary suggest new practices to substitute for the former.

The subjects chosen for contextualisation included:

- two on **barriers to marriage** (the caste system in one area and a complete lack of wedding tradition in another);
- two on **rituals** (blessings from parents and ancestors, and the custom of the bride passing through the ancestors' vestibule);
- two on **married life** (communication about finances – or lack of communication - and the custom that menstruating women should not cook, as eating any such food would drain away the strength of their husbands).

A theme emerged from the responses to these challenges. What is often needed is to approach the local community, explain Christian beliefs and seek to find a solution acceptable to all parties. This is more likely to succeed than adopting an aloof, condemnatory stance and it may prove to be a means of winning others in the family to Christ.

Radio Programmes

As a further practical exercise, each of the six groups was asked to take their topics and proposals and produce a short radio programme (using Audacity sound recording software).

The programmes would contain the following elements:

1. **Present the problem:**

Show that you understand what is happening in society and how it is affecting people.

2. **Explain what the Bible says:**

Read some relevant Bible texts in context and/or tell a relevant Bible story. Use local language Scriptures if possible.

3. **Suggest a practical application in the lives of your listeners:**

Be practical, speak with compassion, love and grace. Ensure your message is centred on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Four types of radio programme were suggested:

- **Monologue:** One person speaks. Some people have the gift for this and people love listening to them. They speak clearly, empathise with their listeners and use interesting proverbs and illustrations.
- **Dialogue/Discussion/Debate:** Questions are addressed to a panel of guests. Invite those who have researched the problem. Ask the kinds of questions that your listeners themselves would want to ask. (If the programme is going out live, you could allow listeners to phone in with their questions.)
- **Sketch/Drama:** A sketch is set in the local context which dramatises the problem, shows what the Bible has to say and demonstrates how the characters in the sketch find a relevant solution. Listeners are often drawn to this kind of programme and see their lives in the lives of the characters. It can get many people listening and engaged, including those who would not normally enter a church.
- **Songs:** Compose songs which communicate the message in a style that is attractive and memorable to those who listen.

On the final day of the workshop, we listened to each of the programmes and gave each group feedback on their research, proposals and radio communication strategy.

Conclusion

The course participants appreciated the opportunity to talk about these delicate challenges in gospel and culture. They had learnt new skills, changed their thinking on some issues and recognised there was much to be done when they returned home.

The workshop helped us to understand again that God is the God of all languages and cultures and how they are both different and complementary. They have positive aspects as well as negative aspects which need to be modified and substituted with Biblical responses so that the gospel can spread and take root in the local culture.

I have been helped to look at ministry from a cultural perspective in order to avoid syncretism. I can now conduct research using interviews and look at how to help the church and the community.

The workshop made me want to be much more objective in the way I take a position on something. I need to ask a lot of questions in order to identify what is hidden rather than directly condemn someone.

I realize that the church is living in permanent fear in the way we approach the questions of marriage. We worry more about the image of the church and of its leaders rather than seeking to resolve the real problems in Christian love.

The workshop has motivated me to go and do research on many things in my culture, teach in my local language, promote the Scriptures in my language, mobilize resources for radio programs and share this new vision with colleagues in my mission.

Michael Jemphrey, PhD, is a Bible translation consultant and an anthropology consultant-in-training with SIL in West Africa.

Bibliography

Copans, Jean. *Introduction à l'ethnologie et à l'anthropologie*. Paris: Nathan University, 1995.

Hiebert, Paul G. *Mission et Culture*. Saint-Légier: Emmaüs, 2002.

Strauss, Mark (ed.). *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

This document is available for download at: <http://www.scripture-engagement.org>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Forum of Bible Agencies International or its member organizations.