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A Comparative Ethical Analysis of Marriage Vows in Selected African Traditional Marriage Traditions and Christianity

Analyse Éthique Comparative des Vœux de Mariage dans Certaines Traditions Matrimoniales Africaines et dans le Christianisme

Patience Tserah Webnda¹

Abstract

Marriage occupies an important place in both Christianity and African traditional religious traditions, serving as a framework for personal commitment, family responsibility, social continuity, and moral order. This article examines the ethical significance of marital vows and related forms of marital commitment in Christianity and selected African traditional marriage traditions. Particular attention is given to the distinction between explicit verbal vows and the ritual, symbolic, familial, and communal practices through which marital commitment may be expressed. The study employs a comparative theological-ethical and descriptive approach, analysing the traditions across five ethical categories: fidelity, permanence, responsibility, community, and sacred obligation. In Christian traditions, marriage vows are generally expressed through explicit promises made in a religious ceremony and understood as solemn commitments before God and the Christian community, although their theological interpretation and ritual form vary among denominations. In selected African traditional contexts, marital commitment may be communicated through family negotiations, bride wealth, ritual exchanges, blessings, communal declarations, and appeals to the spiritual world; these practices should not necessarily be equated with verbal marriage vows but may perform related ethical functions. The study argues that Christianity and selected African traditional marriage traditions share significant ethical concerns, particularly fidelity, responsibility, respect, communal accountability, and marital continuity, while differing in their sources, forms, and scope of marital obligation. The comparison further demonstrates that contemporary ethical questions concerning gender, fertility, polygyny, individual consent, and marital permanence require careful engagement with the diversity within both traditions. The article concludes that a comparative approach provides a more nuanced understanding of marital commitment and contributes to contemporary African Christian ethical reflection on marriage.

Key Terms: Marriage vows, ATR, Christian Religion, Covenant, Permanence

Résumé

Le mariage occupe une place importante tant dans le christianisme que dans les traditions religieuses africaines, servant de cadre à l'engagement personnel, à la responsabilité familiale, à

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la continuité sociale et à l'ordre moral. Cet article examine la portée éthique des vœux matrimoniaux et des formes connexes d'engagement conjugal dans le christianisme et dans certaines traditions africaines du mariage. Une attention particulière est accordée à la distinction entre les vœux verbaux explicites et les pratiques rituelles, symboliques, familiales et communautaires par lesquelles l'engagement conjugal peut s'exprimer. L'étude adopte une approche comparative, théologique, éthique et descriptive, en analysant les traditions selon cinq catégories éthiques : la fidélité, la permanence, la responsabilité, la communauté et l'obligation sacrée. Dans les traditions chrétiennes, les vœux matrimoniaux s'expriment généralement par des promesses explicites prononcées au cours d'une cérémonie religieuse et comprises comme des engagements solennels devant Dieu et la communauté chrétienne, bien que leur interprétation théologique et leur forme rituelle varient selon les dénominations. Dans certains contextes traditionnels africains, l'engagement conjugal peut être communiqué par des négociations entre familles, la dot, des échanges rituels, des bénédictions, des déclarations communautaires et des invocations au monde spirituel. Ces pratiques ne doivent pas nécessairement être assimilées à des vœux matrimoniaux verbaux, mais elles peuvent remplir des fonctions éthiques connexes. L'étude soutient que le christianisme et certaines traditions africaines du mariage partagent d'importantes préoccupations éthiques, notamment la fidélité, la responsabilité, le respect, la redevabilité communautaire et la continuité conjugale, tout en différant quant aux sources, aux formes et à l'étendue de l'obligation matrimoniale. La comparaison montre également que les questions éthiques contemporaines relatives au genre, à la fécondité, à la polygynie, au consentement individuel et à la permanence du mariage exigent une attention soigneuse à la diversité qui existe au sein des deux traditions. L'article conclut qu'une approche comparative permet une compréhension plus nuancée de l'engagement conjugal et contribue à la réflexion éthique chrétienne africaine contemporaine sur le mariage.

Mots-clés : Vœux matrimoniaux, Religion Traditionnelle Africaine, Religion Chrétienne, Alliance, Permanence

Introduction

Marriage occupies an integral and important place in both Christianity and African traditional religious traditions, serving as a framework for personal commitment, familial responsibility, social continuity, and moral order (Mbiti, 1969, p. 130). At its core are marriage vows (covenant). To the Evangelicals, marriage vows are solemn promises through which couples publicly declare their commitment to one another and accept specific moral obligations concerning love, fidelity, mutual support, respect, and permanence. Elizabeth Bolaji (2022) concurs, asserting that a couple takes marriage vows to protect their marriage, cement their love, and bind their commitment to one another (p. 89). Similarly, Felix Oghenechuko Erhabor and Peter O. O. Ottuh (2023) submit that marriage vows express a couple's commitment, love, loyalty, mutual support, and lifelong unity in the marital relationship (p. 22). Marriage vows vary across cultures and religions, yet they generally highlight how couples ought to conduct themselves in marriage. African marriage traditions are diverse, and practices differ from one community to another. Therefore, it is necessary to speak of selected African traditional marriages. Christianity equally has many different practices across various denominations. Hence, this paper focuses on Evangelical traditional marriage practices regarding marriage vows.

In Evangelical traditions, marriage vows are typically explicit, verbal promises that a couple makes during a wedding ceremony. These promises are understood as solemn commitments before God and the Christian community. However, denominations vary in their theological

interpretation and ritual form. In contrast, in selected African traditional contexts, marital commitment may be communicated through family negotiations, bride-wealth, rituals, blessings, communal declarations, and appeals to the spiritual world; these practices should not necessarily be equated with verbal marriage vows but may perform related ethical functions (Mbiti, 1969).

While both traditions regard marital vows as sacred and morally binding, Evangelicals perceive marriage as a sacred covenant instituted by God, defined by love, fidelity, and companionship, yet distinctly confined to this earthly existence. Furthermore, marriage is a God-given institution that symbolises or mirrors the relationship between Christ and the Church (Khosa-Nkatini, 2026, p. 1). On the other hand, selected African traditional marriage traditions view marriage as a lasting institution that surpasses this life into the spiritual world.

This paper presents a comparative ethical analysis of marriage vows in selected African marriage traditions and in Christianity. It examines the meaning, moral obligations, convergences, divergences, and ethical implications of marriage vows within the selected traditions. By cross-referencing African traditional perspectives with Christian teachings, the paper seeks to contribute towards a better understanding of marriage ethics in the African context.

Conceptualizing Marriage Vows

The place and importance of marital vows in a marriage can never be overemphasised. H. P. Khosa-Nkatini (2026) asserts that the concept of marriage vows is deeply embedded in selected African marriage traditions, shaping how unions are perceived and practised. In African cultures, marriage extends beyond physical life, involving spiritual and communal elements that persist after death. He argues that customs such as widow inheritance, levirate marriage, and ancestors' veneration exemplify the cultural belief that marital and familial connections persist beyond physical demise (p. 4). Conversely, Christianity presents marriage vows as declarations that bond couples together, although the vows end at death (Matthew 22:30; Romans 7:2). After death, the Christian goes to be with the Lord in eternity.

On the concept of marriage vows, Bolaji (2022) contends that they are solemn promises made between husband and wife at a marriage ceremony, expressing commitment, love, support, and fidelity (p. 1). They emphasize a couple's determination to remain permanently united till death. The vows signify an unbroken bond between the bride and the groom. However, in some African traditions, what makes marriage binding is the completion of the customary rites: couple and family agreement, payment of bride-wealth (bride-price), rituals, and ancestral blessings (Mbiti, pp. 130, 137). In Christian circles, fidelity involves staying committed, faithful, loyal, and intimate to one's spouse. It honours the marital vows made to each other before God, the two families, and the faith community. In some African traditional contexts, fidelity means loyalty to the family, community, and ancestral lineage. Georges Dent (1999) concurs that marriage vows have religious significance and are central in both religious traditions, representing a solemn commitment between two individuals to love, cherish, and support one another (p. 593). It follows from the above that marital vows go a long way toward boosting the couple's spirit of determination to stick together through the union, whatever the circumstances.

Erhabor and Peter (2023) argue that the "most significant portion of the wedding ceremony is the vow exchange" (p. 22). In a religious context, marriage vows are often seen as a sacred promise, witnessed by a higher power, and are perceived as important for building a strong, lasting relationship. While to Evangelicals, marriage vows are made not just between the man and the woman, but also before God and the community of faith, in some African traditions, they unfold

before families, community, and the ancestors (Geisler, 2000, p. 277). The vows embody ethical principles such as commitment, love, fidelity, respect, loyalty, and responsibility.

In Christianity, vows are viewed as covenantal promises before God and the Church, reflecting the sacred bond between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Marriage vows emphasise commitment, permanence, and mutual love, making marriage both a sacrament and a lifelong moral commitment. In some African traditions, marriage vows are conveyed symbolically through rituals, libations, and communal affirmations (Leany, 2022, p. 75). In this light, marriage vows bind not only the couple but also all participants, including the ancestors, as every unit works towards the marriage to ensure communal harmony. Therefore, marriage vows, as a religious concept, function as an ethical framework that goes beyond the personal and reaches the sacred.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative comparative research design to examine the ethical dimensions of marriage vows in selected African marriage traditions and Christianity. It primarily relies on library research, using the Bible and books on *African Traditional Religion* (ATR), African Christian marriage traditions, and marriage ethics. It also gathers data from journal articles. The paper compares the convergences and divergences among the selected traditions and evaluates their implications for contemporary African society. The sources mobilized in the article are documented using APA referencing style.

Marriage Commitment in Selected African Traditional Marriage Traditions

In many African societies, marriage occupies a position of considerable cultural and social significance. Ama Mazama (2009) underscores this perspective by noting that it is an understatement to say that marriage is of utmost importance in African cultures. In effect, marriage is widely regarded across Africa as one of the most significant moments in a person's life (p. 409). Patrick Maina Kamau (2025) agrees, stating that Africans' lives revolve around the survival of the self and the race. Nothing guarantees this survival better than marriage (p. 353). In many African communities, marriage, which is primarily a union with partners of the opposite sex, is a mandatory rite of passage. Paul Kyalo (2012) similarly contends that, in the view of many Africans, the obligation to marry is the only means of human survival (p. 88). For this reason, it is a religious obligation. Members of society are expected to enter into this union at the appropriate time, and those who fail to adhere to this standard are deemed a disgrace to themselves, their families, and society. Marriage assures the continuation of the family and guarantees the steady strengthening of society. As such, making a marriage commitment is a crucial component of the marriage rituals expected of the man and woman undergoing the rite of passage. Marriage vows serve as a binding contract, requiring the couple to remain loyal and respectful to each other for life.

Polygyny is a common practice in Africa, and men enter into polygynous marriages for various social, economic, political, familial, and prestige-related reasons. In some contexts, polygyny is understood to provide many children, thereby ensuring the continuity of the family and community and symbolically sustaining their existence across generations (Kamau, 2025). However, Umaru (2024) observes that polygyny is becoming less common because of social restrictions and changing social norms. It is increasingly viewed as conflicting with contemporary gender and economic realities. Consequently, some African traditions have adopted social restrictions intended to promote gender equality and protect individual rights, particularly those of women and children. According to Umaru (2024), education, exposure to globalisation, and women's empowerment are among the factors contributing to this shift.

As noted earlier, children are valued in both traditions. In some Christian contexts, marriage vows have been broken because couples were unable to have children. Some spouses have divorced their partners, while others have entered into polygynous marriages in an attempt to have children. In some African traditional contexts, by contrast, polygyny is regarded as a normal practice through which the absence of children in a marriage may be addressed. Kamau (2025) further argues that, in most African societies, marriage is not considered complete until a child has been born. Children cement the marital relationship because their presence is understood as an indication that the union has been blessed. Similarly, a man is not considered a fully realised man, nor a woman a fully realised woman, until they have given birth to a child. Marriage is understood as a sacred, cosmic drama in which members of the community participate. The families of the bride and groom, together with their respective subunits, participate in the marriage rituals, during which the man and woman publicly exchange marriage vows (Kamau, 2025).

Although there is no single pattern for initiating marriage across African cultures, it is common for a young man's parents and other close relatives to contact a young woman's parents to discuss the possibility of their children marrying. If the girl's parents agree after consulting their daughter, marriage negotiations begin (Mbiti, 1969; Umaru, 2024). Umaru (2024) further observes that young people in some African cultures have the freedom to choose their partners. The shift from parental arrangement of marriages to individual choice of a marriage partner reflects a global trend and is therefore evident in some African traditions, where individuals are expected to choose their own life partners. Nevertheless, parents continue to choose partners for their children in some cultures. Generally, parents who select spouses for their children look for individuals who demonstrate good character, a positive reputation, industriousness, and respect. These virtues are regarded as important ethical considerations when selecting a spouse for a son or daughter and may be valued more highly than physical appearance and attractiveness (Umaru, 2024, p. 172). The point emphasised here is that both parents and children may participate in choosing a husband or wife and that good behaviour is a major quality desired in a marriage partner. Furthermore, marriage between close relatives is prohibited in some traditions because it is regarded as incest. During marriage negotiations, the prospective husband and wife may be encouraged to spend time together, although they are not expected to engage in sexual intercourse before the wedding. Virginity was traditionally demanded in some contexts, and a higher bride price was paid for brides who were virgins. Conversely, girls who were not virgins could be sent back and subsequently married as second wives (Nyamache et al., 2022). On this point, Mbiti (1969) concurs with Nyamache and Asatsa (2022), who report that, in Wolof culture, one cow is given to the bride's aunt and another to her parents when the bride marries as a virgin.

Traditional African Marriage Ethics

Traditional African marriage is embedded in the indigenous religious practices of African communities. It carries ethical and moral principles transmitted from one generation to another, particularly through oral tradition. These traditional ethical principles guide community life and are expected to be respected by all members. They include deontological obligations concerning conduct and responsibility within the community. In some African traditions, values such as the sacredness of marriage, honesty, hospitality, respect for elders, respect for the sacredness of life, communal living, liberty, social justice, and consciousness of the divine are upheld as moral principles (Ikechukwu, 2025). These ethical principles are generally not codified in written documents but are transmitted orally through the elders of the community. This suggests that every community possesses social ethics that guide how marital commitments should be undertaken and

maintained. Odeleye (2020) argues that the traditional ethics of some African cultures are expressed primarily through myths and folktales, marriage ceremonies, songs and dances, liturgies and shrines, proverbs, and concise sayings. Similarly, Gehman (2010) maintains that African Traditional Religion is an integral part of African culture. It represents a traditional way of understanding the world, including African marital values and beliefs. These social ethics are binding on community members, and commitment to marriage is among the obligations they establish.

In selected African cultures, marital commitment is expressed through rituals such as the payment of dowry or bride wealth, adorning the bride and groom, drinking and sharing wine from the same cup, conducting marriage negotiations, and praying for ancestral blessings upon the couple. Ndu-Udeji (2021) observes that these rituals are prescribed by the culture and traditions of particular African communities. Because marital commitment is expressed in different ways across communities, each culture has its own structure of marital rites performed to seal the union. Leany (2022) explains that, in ancient Roman wedding customs, the bride was usually taken from her parents' home on the evening of the wedding and escorted in a procession to the groom's home. As the bridal party set out, five torches (*cerei*) were lit to symbolise indivisibility, fertility, and reverence for the five gods who oversaw marriage. Such rituals were intended to attract the blessings of the gods associated with marriage. During the procession, the bride held a spindle and distaff while the groom threw nuts to the children, and the rest of the party sang the *Talassio*, a song intended to invoke the gods of marriage. Sometimes, the bride also portrayed reluctance to leave her ancestral home. Upon arrival at the bridegroom's house, she anointed the doorposts with oil, fat, and a wool garland before entering. She then touched the ceremonial fire and water and exchanged them with the groom. The final ritual involved both families eating together. These ritual symbols demonstrated ancestral continuity, social ties, fertility, and communal harmony. The rituals formed part of the broader ceremonial process through which marital commitment was expressed. Prayers, gifts, and sacrifices were offered to the ancestors on behalf of the bride and groom to secure blessings for the union, including many pregnancies and safe deliveries.

Marriage Vows in Christianity

In Christianity, adherence to marriage vows is also an important ethical principle that is taught and emphasised. Evangelical Christians regard the Bible as the highest authority for morality and maintain that the moral actions of individuals should align with Scripture. Accordingly, Christians understand marriage vows as moral commitments through which both spouses pledge themselves to married life. This explains why Christian teaching often warns that violating marriage vows can have harmful consequences for couples. Although officiating ministers emphasise this responsibility during marriage solemnisation, many Christian couples nevertheless violate their vows. In this regard, Erhabor and Ottuh (2023) argue that some Christian couples lack an adequate understanding of the moral implications, significance, meaning, and components of marriage vows. Consequently, they often treat these vows carelessly, without sufficient regard for their moral consequences. Such factors have contributed to significant challenges in many Christian marriages. Some couples have experienced domestic abuse, while others have divorced because of neglect of their marital commitments. Therefore, the Church and Christians must continue teaching the importance of understanding, keeping, and observing marriage vows as moral principles that spouses should uphold to promote marital permanence.

According to Nigosian (2008), Christianity is a worldwide religion that takes its name from the title Christ, attributed to Jesus. The title derives from the Greek word *Christos*, meaning

“Anointed,” which corresponds to the Hebrew term *Mashiach*, from which the English word *Messiah* is derived. Christianity emerged from Judaism in Palestine during the period associated with Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar, who ruled from 63 BCE to 14 CE. Christianity is also distinctive among the major religions in revering and including in its sacred writings the entire collection of Jewish Scriptures, comprising the Old and New Testaments. For Evangelicals, marriage is a sacred union deeply rooted in tradition and faith. Marriage vows are central to the Christian marriage ceremony because they symbolise the commitment, love, and devotion shared by two individuals. When couples stand before God, their families, and their community to exchange vows, they make solemn promises to one another in the presence of God and the faith community, which serves as a body of witnesses (Carter, 2025). These vows are not merely words; rather, they constitute a covenant that signifies the beginning of a lifelong journey together.

In Christian marriage, vows typically include explicit promises to love, honour, and cherish one another, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, until death separates the spouses. These vows are informed by biblical teachings on marital morality, such as Ephesians 5:21–33, which encourages mutual submission, instructs wives to submit to their husbands, and commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church (Carter, 2025). From this perspective, the ethical principles that couples need to practise to honour their marital vows include mutual submission and love. By exchanging vows in the presence of God and witnesses, couples invite divine blessings into their union. They pray, and the Church prays for them, that they may receive the grace needed to honour their marital commitments. They acknowledge that marriage is not merely a legal contract but also a spiritual bond requiring mutual respect, understanding, forgiveness, and unwavering commitment. Through their vows, couples publicly declare their intention to build a strong foundation for their relationship, grounded in faith and love. These promises also serve as reminders to remain committed to one another during challenging times (Carter, 2025). Keeping marriage vows is essential to building a strong and healthy relationship. When couples commit to loving, honouring, and cherishing one another, they establish a foundation for a successful marriage. By keeping their vows, they demonstrate their commitment to one another and their willingness to work through the challenges and difficulties encountered along their shared journey. Remaining faithful to marital vows also fosters trust and security within the relationship. When both partners know they can rely on one another to keep their promises, they develop a sense of security and safety within the union. This, in turn, enables the relationship to thrive and grow (Carter, 2025).

Comparative Ethical Analysis

At this juncture, the paper examines areas of convergence and divergence between the two marriage traditions. The focus is on the ethical and religious values associated with marriage vows in African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity. The following sections identify the principal areas of convergence between the two traditions concerning the theology of marriage vows.

Emphasis on Purity and Character

Sexual purity, good character, and proper conduct are among the virtues expected of Christian couples. These virtues are also valued in selected ATR cultures among those preparing for marriage. For instance, among the Kanuri people in northeastern Nigeria and the Wolof people of Kenya, the bride's virginity is valued. The marriage of a virgin brings honour to both the bride and her family, and a higher bride price is usually required. In the Wolof context described in the cited literature, one cow is given to the bride's aunt and another to her parents.

Blessing

Marriage in both traditions is not merely an individual affair but a communal one. In each context, the families and communities of the bride and groom are involved in the marriage process. Both traditions regard marriage as an esteemed achievement, a means of maintaining lineage and kinship, and a source of social stability and moral order. In Christianity, the exchange of marriage vows symbolises a lasting marriage and demonstrates the couple's responsibility and maturity. A similar understanding is evident in some ATR communities. Marriage is therefore regarded as a blessing in both traditions.

Moral and Spiritual Importance

Marriage is highly esteemed in Christianity. Those who marry are regarded as blessed or favoured by God, the divine and Supreme Being. The families of the couple come together and do their best to ensure that the couple enters into the covenant relationship smoothly. In both traditions, the making and exchange of marriage vows and commitments constitute the climax of the ceremony, signifying the couple's commitment to the marriage. This understanding is also evident in some ATR traditions.

Continuity

In both traditions, sexuality is understood as properly expressed and enjoyed within the confines of marriage. Moreover, marriage and procreation are closely connected in selected ATR traditions. Consequently, sexual fruitfulness is expected to result in procreation. Procreation enables organisms to reproduce and perpetuate their kind. Marriage is therefore understood as the institution through which procreation occurs, thereby facilitating continuity across generations. On the other hand, Christianity and selected ATR traditions also diverge in their understanding of the theology of marriage vows. The following areas illustrate these differences.

Nature of Vows

Christian marriage vows are formal promises made explicitly and verbally by a man and a woman before God and the community, symbolising the permanence of marriage. They emphasise fidelity, mutual support, love, commitment, and lifelong unity, often grounded in biblical moral principles. Vows function not only as a moral commitment but also as a sacred bond in marriage, reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Church. Nevertheless, their theological interpretation and ritual forms vary across Christian denominations. In selected African traditional contexts, by contrast, marital commitment may be communicated through family negotiations, bride wealth, rituals, blessings, communal declarations, and appeals to the spiritual world. Thus, although both traditions recognise marital obligations, they may express and establish those obligations through different ritual and theological frameworks.

Celibacy

Another area of divergence between the two traditions concerns celibacy. For Evangelicals, there is room for individuals who have not been given the grace or ability to marry. These individuals may be understood in relation to the biblical teaching about eunuchs, including those who have chosen to live as eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:12). Such individuals may be respected and valued within the Christian community and society. In contrast, in selected ATR traditions, a person who does not marry may be regarded as irresponsible or immature because celibacy and singlehood have little or no recognised place within that particular tradition's

understanding of marriage. This distinction, however, should not be generalised to all African traditional religions, which are culturally diverse.

Marital structure

In Evangelical Christianity, marriage vows are made between a man and a woman who enter into a covenantal marriage. Through these vows, they promise to remain truthful, faithful, respectful, and loving towards their spouses. This understanding generally implies a lifelong monogamous relationship. In contrast, some African traditional marriage traditions recognise polygyny, in which a man is married to more than one woman. The original comparison also refers to marriage between a woman and multiple men; however, this form of union should not be treated as equivalent to polygyny or as a uniform feature of African traditional marriage.

Spiritual foundation

Furthermore, Christianity has a monotheistic conception of God. Christians believe that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and supreme and that worship is due to God alone. In some African traditional contexts, however, adherents recognise the Supreme Being alongside ancestors and deities. This implies that Christian couples seek divine sustenance directly from God, whereas, in selected ATR traditions, couples may seek preservation and blessings through relationships with ancestors and deities. Adherents of these traditions venerate ancestors and deities and may depend on them for protection and blessings.

Duration of marriage vows

Evangelical Christianity teaches that married couples should keep their vows to one another, emphasising the marital bond between husband and wife. In contrast, some African cultural traditions understand marriage as a lasting institution whose significance extends beyond death. In these contexts, marital commitment is not merely a bond between two individuals; it also embodies a communal and generational obligation that guarantees continuity, identity, and stability within the family and society.

Contemporary Ethical Implications

The contemporary ethical implications of marriage vows in selected African traditional marriage traditions and Christianity are significant because marriage continues to shape family relationships, gender expectations, and community life. Although the two traditions differ in their theological and cultural foundations, both emphasise commitment, fidelity, responsibility, and the well-being of the marriage. The central concern, therefore, is how marriage vows should be understood and practised in contemporary society. The following implications are particularly relevant.

Fidelity and Marital Commitment

Traditional African marriage expectations generally place strong emphasis on permanence and the preservation of marital relationships. Similarly, Christian marriage vows require spouses to remain faithful, respectful, loyal, and loving towards one another. These moral virtues, however, are challenged in contemporary society by increasing concerns about marital unfaithfulness, disrespect, and the influence of social media, particularly where it negatively affects sexual behaviour and marital relationships. Both the Bible and African cultural traditions teach ethical principles that emphasise the significance of marriage vows. Hebrews 13:4, for example, underscores the importance of honouring marriage. Spouses should therefore take their marriage vows seriously and remain truthful and faithful to one another.

Spousal Roles

Another implication for contemporary society concerns spousal or gender roles within marriage. Some African traditional marriage systems emphasise male authority and female submission. Similar views are held by some Christians who interpret passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:3, 8–9 and Ephesians 5:22 as establishing male authority and female submission within marriage. Ethically, however, biblical teaching and cultural values should encourage mutual respect and responsibility in marital relationships. Such mutual respect demonstrates responsibility and maturity among marriage partners.

Reduction in Domestic Abuse

Keeping marriage vows also has important implications for addressing domestic abuse. Contemporary marriages face the challenge of spousal abuse, which remains a serious concern. The incidence and effects of abuse can be addressed more effectively when spouses practise mutual respect, love, care, and appropriate forms of mutual submission. Furthermore, misinterpretations of biblical passages, such as the belief that divorce is prohibited under every circumstance, and certain traditional beliefs, such as the expectation that a spouse must endure abuse for the sake of the children, can cause further harm and may even result in the death of a spouse. Therefore, spouses should honour their marital commitments while recognising that marriage vows must never be used to justify abuse or prevent a victim from seeking safety and appropriate assistance.

Familial and Community Responsibility

African traditional marriage generally has a strong communal orientation, with marriage connecting not only two individuals but also their families and wider communities (Mbiti, 1990). Christianity also values responsibilities extending beyond the couple to include children and members of the extended family. In contemporary society, this communal orientation can have both positive and negative implications. Support from the extended family can be invaluable during times of crisis. On the other hand, excessive interference by family members can undermine marital privacy and autonomy. Ethical teaching should therefore encourage a balance between communal responsibility and respect for the couple's independence.

Conclusion

A comparative ethical analysis of marriage vows in Christianity and selected African Traditional Religion traditions reveals shared commitments to fidelity alongside differences in their foundations, particularly divine covenant and ancestral continuity. Both traditions present marriage as a sacred, binding, and morally obligatory institution that emphasises fidelity, responsibility, and community. However, while Christianity frames marriage vows within a divine covenant that emphasises permanence and the unity of the spouses, selected African traditional marriage traditions ground marital commitments in ancestral continuity, fertility, and communal harmony. These differences reflect the distinct cultural and theological foundations of marital ethics in the two traditions. Both regard marriage vows as guiding principles that shape personal virtue, foster social cohesion, and sustain spiritual continuity within communities.

The paper has argued that Christianity and selected African traditional marriage traditions share significant ethical concerns, particularly fidelity, responsibility, respect, communal accountability, and marital continuity, while differing in the sources, forms, and scope of marital obligations. In selected African traditional marriage traditions, marriage is generally understood within a communal framework in which the union of a man and a woman extends beyond the couple to include their extended families and communities. Christianity, on the other hand,

presents marriage primarily as a sacred covenant in which spouses commit themselves through marriage vows to love one another, demonstrate mutual respect, and maintain lifelong commitment before God (Mbiti, 1990).

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