

## **An Essay on the Marriage Institution: Time for reform or extinction?**

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### **Abstract**

In this essay, it's argued that the high rate of divorce across the world could be attributed to myriad determinants, many of which are advanced in divorce courts but the chief culprit is the marriage institution itself. Happy couples begin their misery once they get formally married; before that they bask in love and bliss. Romance is curtailed, not nurtured, by the marriage institution. The institution exerts immeasurable pressure on both couples, starting with the overburdening cultural and religious demands. It's argued further that since marriage is a cultural invention, it can be re-designed in order to exert less pressure and stress on couples, or alternatively it can be left to atrophy and become extinct. *Change is the only thing that is permanent* is a cliché or a platitude that could illuminate the transformation of the marriage institution.

**Key words:** *marriage, institution, romance, culture, religion, stress*

### **The essay**

You may kiss the bride. Applause. Lights out. Marriage, irrespective of the myriad definitions, sets off as the acme of love, esteem and profound consideration. It's a promise of endless love, commitment and regard for each other; an embodiment of perfect and sublime intentions for each other. The Bible is apt to this end: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). The calculus is wondrous: one plus one equals one! If you doubt it, the couples finish off each other's sentences. They share the same emotions and thoughts, even at a distance. Telepathy is normal to them, because they are one.

In traditional Africa, however, they are not one. A man introduces a woman to his community and she becomes a part of it, just like himself. The community trumps the individual in Africa. Invariably, after the marriage rituals, each individual applies themselves diligently in the age-old and timeless roles. The man provides the means of sustenance, and the woman builds the family for the man and the community. For example, among the Gikuyu, a Bantu ethnic community, a man breaks virgin forests for his wife to farm on. He hunts and gathers for his family as the wife nurtures his progeny for posterity. They are not one, in fact, each has their role to play.

A man of means, could also increase the number of wives in his homestead. My maternal uncle had three wives, and fifteen kids, say an average of five each. He owned a huge farm in Central Kenya, including coffee, a preserve for white colonists during Kenya's occupation by the British.

A well-heeled man by the standards of the 1950s. The culture allowed a man to marry more than one woman. A married woman could not marry another man. However, an unmarried woman or a widow of means could also marry more than one woman to bear her kids.

In most African languages the verb "to marry" is unidirectional, that it is, it flows in one direction only. That means that a man marries a woman but a woman cannot marry a man; If the sentence begins with "a woman " then the verb is passivized to " married to". She is married by x. This situation has consequences. In the African way of thinking and doing things, in another words culture, a man has a great deal of homework to do in order to procure a wife. He and his parents, including the community martial a great deal of resources to help him get a wife. They pay bride price to the girl's family as token of goodwill and expression of their ability and commitment to take care of the new bride. The girl assumes a new identity as the "wife of x" and daughter of the new family and community. She joins the clan of the man and bears him kids for the clan. She graduates to a higher status than "wife of x" to "mother of child Y", usually the elder child. The same higher qualifications follow the man, from "husband of z" to "father of child Y". But this is the ideal. What happens when the kids are not forthcoming? We tackle the prickly issue later.

In the context of Islam, a man may acquire up to four wives on condition that he has the ability to cater for them and their offspring. The reverse is not allowed; a woman, her ability notwithstanding, will not be allowed to acquire a man or several men. Evidently, the possibilities for women, in both Islam and traditional Africa, are limited.

In the Hindu tradition, a man does not choose his future bride. His family hunts for a suitable young lady, most preferably from a well-heeled family, to be yoked to their son. The girl's family then pays the dowry to the boy's family. The very reverse of African marriages. Neither the boy nor the girl has a say in the nuptials. Their parents decide for them for they "know" what's best for their children. The newly-weds will adjust and love each other as times goes on. The culture dictates that. This is the ideal. But are we in an ideal world?

First, let's take a look at the natural world and the marriages therein, after all natural things are the best, or aren't they? The chimpanzees are inarguably our closed cousins, with only a 2% difference in our DNA. These fellas do not have partners for life. The alpha male dominates the females for a season, then another male topples it and takes its place. The females pledge no particular loyalty to any male. Although cheating has been recorded, especially among the bonobos, the ultimate sex machines, most females are available only to the alpha male. This behavior ensures that the best genes from the pool are passed from one generation to the next. Little room is left for weak males to breed. What about the lions in the plains?

The lions are brutal when it comes to partners. Lionesses, though famously brave and fierce, mate only with the main lion heading the pride. She nurtures the cubs as long as the king lion is at the helm. Once the king loses in a show-down with another lion, the game of death begins. The new king kills all the little cubs in order to mate with the females and have his own bloodline. This is brutal. But once the carnage is over, the females are now fertile and ready to

mate and breed new cubs for the new king of the pride. It's the circle of life. It's nature, not culture.

But in some situations, there are evident manifestations fidelity to one partner, especially among the birds. The turtle doves, for instance, have one partner for life. The same can be said of penguins. So, why can't humans be like love birds or penguins? Let's try and understand the issue.

It's romantic, and perhaps arrogant, to delude ourselves that we are at the pinnacle of the food chain of nature since we have evolved from our chimpanzee cousins to fly to the moon and back. To our credit, we have devised collective behaviors, what is called culture, to help us better survive in our respective environments. These behaviors have shaped the way we think and act individually and collectively. In Africa, *Ubuntu* or *Ubumuntu* is the norm, the *humanity norm*. To be is to belong to the community. I am because you are, and vice-versa. The community is more important than the individual. Your business is everyone's business. Your marriage is their marriage. What did I just say?

Marriage is an institution. It has rules and rituals that define it. Whether in the traditions or in modern law, marriage is clearly delineated. It's not just a conjunction between a man and a woman cohabiting in the same house. Institutions, though created by humans, do not always serve the best interests of their inventors, in the long term. The marriage institution makes demands from the members that demarcate and alienate them from their earlier identities. Both parties of the marriage are required to vacate their earlier proclivities and idiosyncrasies and assume a new identity, especially the women. Men are required to refrain from chasing skirts and ogling young damsels and instead they should focus on their bride and accord her the respect she richly deserves. The women are supposed to shelve all their carnal desires for other men in order to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their men. Remember, the couple is madly in love and they are unstoppable like the movie *Unstoppable* featuring Denzel Washington. Is this not ideal?

In Europe, divorce rates average around 50%, with Luxembourg recording a 88.9% rate out of every 100 marriages (Statistica 2019). The United States records 750,000 divorces every year (Legaljobs 2021). A survey by Daystar University indicated that 77.7% of Kenyans divorce before the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their marriage (Nairobiwire 2020). The same source observes that divorce rate in 2020 was at 17.7%, and rising. These calls for a number of observations.

One, African marriages required a dual analysis, namely marriages in the village and marriages in urban settings. By contrast, rustic marriages are more stable, not happier, than urban marriages. It's more unlikely that a rural woman would walk out of an abusive marriage than an urban woman. The economics undermine the options of rural women at all twists and turns. The urban woman has more room for maneuver. She walks out more readily from unproductive marriages.

Evidently, the marriage institution is in trouble globally, especially in ecosystems where women are emancipated. The touted stability of marriages in the developing or traditional societies seems to be more apocryphal than real. The apparent stability is rooted in women's lack of

alternatives. Where women have alternatives, the marriages are ephemeral. Famously, Elizabeth Taylor, a woman of fabulous wealth, beauty and elegance, is famed to have told all her husbands thus: *"Don't worry, I'll not keep you for long.."* (Economicstimes 2017). She was blithely married eight times to seven men.

For what God had put together, let no one put asunder. Who has put things asunder? And why?

In divorce literature, marriages break up due to a number of accusations and counter accusations. Most frequently, couples cite infidelity as the highest contributor to divorce. If you recall the example of nature, the alpha male is supposed to mate with all the females it desires but the latter are meant to be passive sexual receptacles. This may work well among disempowered women but elsewhere reciprocity is demanded. You are unfaithful to me; I'll be equally unfaithful to you. This is now confrontational. The man requires and cites natural reasons why he can gallivant and roll in the hay with women, but he cannot possibly imagine his wife doing the same. After all, do chimps or lions allow it? No. It's unnatural.

The other strong reason for divorce is sexual violence where males batter their wives. The reverse happens, especially in Central Kenya, but it's rare. Negligence, lack of financial support, emotional torture, infertility and desertion are other factors that exacerbate a divorce.

Let's take a closer look at the typology of divorce triggers. Infidelity (desire for other partners), physical and sexual violence, negligence (running away from responsibility), lack of financial support (responsibility), emotional torture (lack of interest in current partner), infertility (desire for children), desertion (running away from current partner). Now, we have 6 interrelated categories:

- Infidelity (desire for other partners)
- Physical and sexual violence/emotional torture
- Remiss (or negligence): Running away from responsibility
- Lack of financial support
- Infertility: Desire for children
- Desertion: Running away from current partner

Now, look at these six categories and ask yourself whether you don't feel tempted to agree that they are solid reasons to leave your partner. The reasons above are skewed more in favor of nature than culture. Marriage, a cultural invention, seems to run against the grain of nature where partners want to be wild again. They want a change after a while but marriage as an institution says no. In other words, the couples know what is best for them after some years but the marriage institution holds them in as it's captives. Couples howl like desperate wild dogs in a cave but they cannot escape.

In most cases, the name of a deity is invoked to scare the couple into remaining engulfed by the marriage. In others, age-old traditions are brought to bear on the consequences of exiting the prison of marriage. As a result, many scared souls dare not contemplate a divorce. They endure

the arrogance and tyranny of a social invention, their own cultural creation, that comes to eat its children in the name of stability and continuity of humanity.

Let's put it more bluntly. Marriages do not fail because partners are intrinsically bad. They fail because the marriage institution is unbearable for the partners. It has no room for time outs. It wears the partners down and makes them feel trapped. If humanity has to make meaningful progress the marriage institution has to be reformed or redefined in order to make it bearable, otherwise, it will be folded up and a new institution will take its stead.

Does that sound too radical? Consider this. In most modern societies today, men and women are living together in the marge of marriage. They even have children, but out of formal marriage. In Kenyan parlance it's "come we stay". The fear of the marriage institution is real. Even in the developed countries like France, this phenomenon is so prevalent that now the government recognizes cohabitation as a legal union. Children born in these non-marriage relationships are recognized by the State on the same footing as kids born within wedlock. Is this an ingenious strategy to escape the tyranny of the marriage institution?

But some would argue thus:

- My mum and dad were happily married.
- I've never heard my mum cry.
- In the olden days, marriages were very happy and stable.

These views could be true or uninformed. Human beings tend to idealize experiences as time goes by. Also, in most African families, kids rarely know their parents well. Fathers seem distant and unfathomable, while mothers appear to be lovingly strict and approachable. Some of the reasons for this dichotomy are tied to Kenya's colonial history.

Men were forced to work on European colonial farms in order to earn wages that would enable them pay forced taxes. The wife remained at home nurturing the nest. In more recent times, men moved to urban centers in pursuit of better jobs while their wives remained in the rural areas taking care of the children. This frame of thinking has changed pretty little since the onset of the twentieth century. Even today, most African men are trapped in the rat race of the towns fending for their families in the village. The scenario is slightly different in towns where both men and women work in the interest of kids. But even here, there are lingering expectations that a man's salary should be for the family and the woman can keep her money.

The above scenario accentuates patriarchy, a situation where the man is atop the family and the wife come in a shaky second. What compounds the picture is religious confessions that preach the superiority of man and the obsequiousness of a wife. Remember, before the cultural imperialism of the conquistadores, many African cultures were matriarchal. For instance, the Gikuyu nation, founded in the mythology by Gikuyu, husband of Mumbi, is organized around nine cryptic clans that bear names of women. In West Africa, some matriarchal communities place more value on maternal uncles than fathers. Mudimbe (1994) in *Idea of Africa* postulates

that patriarchy may have been introduced into Africa by the early missionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Manifestly, the Christian religions imagined a man to be the head of the family. Similar arguments may be advanced in the case of Islam, which came earlier to Africa. Patriarchy seems to be firmly entrenched in Abrahamic religions.

It can be argued safely that patriarchy, although seemingly comforting for men with big egos, can be a source of tremendous stress for men. Statistically, men die at least ten years before their wives. But when you look at the general pattern of these poor souls, it's little wonder that they check out so early. They are, thanks to patriarchy, required to provide food, shelter, education and protection to the family. Is this not enough load to kill anyone sooner than later?

If marriage is conceptualized along patriarchal configurations, then it's bound to be extremely stressful for both couples. But probably a more rational prism would be equity in the sense of fairness. Both parties should be alive to what is possible for each one of them and arrange their lives along those abilities and possibilities. No one person should be tasked so heavily as the other one plays a more or less passive role, and outliving the other.

Evidently, marriage as an institution suffocates its clients because of its attendant expectations, expectations that prove too smothering in a very short period of time. Once lovely couples turn to each other and tear each other apart in courts of law. And yet these are the self-same individuals who had to elope, the same individuals who were completing each other sentences, the very individuals who became one at marriage. No, they are not to blame. Marriage as an institution is to blame. It should be indicted for destroying people's lives. And either it reforms itself or, now that we know the culprit, it is declared enemy of the people.

In France they say "romance is well alive but marriage is in the Intensive care unit". Marriage is dying from its own excesses. It has come full circle. It should be unmasked for what it is, a killer of profound love, respect and consideration. Many troubles couples recall wistfully how their love lives were before marriage. Then, oblivious of the weight and exigencies of marriage, they do not know what happened to their erstwhile sweethearts. The invisible juggernaut of marriage has swallowed its own children, and they have to suffer the consequences.

Historically, humans create institutions to serve them. These include schools, politics, economics, religions, myths, social relations, and so on and so forth. Reason demands that we should reform these institutions if we feel that they are no longer serving us but serving themselves. To wit, we change school systems, political ideology, economic models, gender matrices but we are less disposed to change religious beliefs, and even less so the marriage institution. And yet, it's time we zoomed in on this source of intense enrapture and angst in almost equal measure.

What we are saying here is that the reasons advanced for divorce, serious as they may be, are mere offshoots of the tyranny of the marriage institution. Deep down, the couples are innocent, they are victims of a more pernicious and unforgiving monster, the marriage institution. Apparently, if the troubled couples could revert to their pre-marital states, they could live on more harmoniously but alas, once in, the exit has to be acrimonious and noisy.

In sum, marriages are in trouble all over the world while romance is thriving. Couples blame each other for the failure of the marriage, oblivious of the fact that they are victims of the marriage institution. Without it, they would have lived happier lives together. It's a social invention that no longer serves us but serves itself. It needs to be re-engineered to be more equitable, less demanding, less stressful. Couples should not feel entitled to anything or any expectations other than mutual love, respect and consideration. If it's not possible to reform or reconfigure the marriage institution, then it should become extinct like the dinosaurs.

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