

Divorce Curbing Mechanisms Among African Christians: A Phenomenological Response. Part I

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Abstract

The paper examines divorce curbing mechanisms among African Christians using the phenomenological response among the Urhobo people of Agbarho Kingdom in the Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. It is a two parts work. Usually, African scholars and researchers have often turned to written scholarly works and scripture as the primary source of knowledge in responding to the challenges of divorce. However, some of the knowledge documented are Eurocentric and alien to the local context of the people. This is because the causal factors of divorce are always localized within the context and culture of those involved in any divorce issue. It is for this reason that the prevalent literatures are often at variance in application thus be clouding the views and understanding of the phenomenon among the people. This paper adopted primarily the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, making use of the sociological and critical interpretations tools as compliments. The conceptual framework of this study is informed by the understanding that until and unless the holy scriptures are properly situated within the cultural milieu of a people, its moral and ethical lessons will mean very little to them. The study discovered that divorce is a social problem which can best be managed through effective use of personal interaction with the couples which should be relevant to their social cultural environment based on the local knowledge of the causal factors among them. It went further to identify some traditional belief systems of the Urhobo people of Agbarho Kingdom and how these belief systems can be used to reduce as much as possible incidences of divorce in the community.

Keywords: Divorce, marriage, African context, phenomenology, Curbing and Mechanisms

Introduction

The Punch Newspaper in one of its feature articles published on April 23, 2023 made the following observation:

“Globally, there has been an alarming increase in divorce rates. News reports and social media posts are rife with announcements and gossip of divorce involving celebrities, notable sportsmen and women. The Oxford Learner’s dictionaries defines divorce as the legal ending of a marriage. However, in a sequel to the dissolution of a marriage by a court, the separated couple may choose to remarry in the future. Unarguably, divorce rates in Nigeria, though not as high as European

societies, are on the increase. A report by the Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, titled, ‘Prevalence and Patterns of Marital Dissolution in Nigeria, noted that although divorce and separation in its actual prevalence were not well documented in Nigeria, previous studies indicated that the rate of divorce in some states was higher than the prevailing rates in some European countries”.

There is no gainsaying the fact that divorce rate is on the increase all over the world and that Nigeria is not an exception. It is this reality that has thrown up the term “curbing mechanism” in this study instead of “solution mechanism”. The writer is fully conscious, from empirical data that divorce practice is something seen now and then in the life of the Africans and all around the world and is actually generic to the family institution. The central objective of this study therefore is to identify curbing mechanism and control measures instead of articulating solution for divorce cases. The study accepts as a given that divorce will continue to take place from time to time. The writer’s intention is to suggest phenomenologically tested mechanisms that can be used to curb the rate of divorce within the African society.

I. Curbing Mechanism for Divorce in Agbarho Kingdom

If marriage must work among the Christians in Agbarho land in this generation, the people must go back to the original intention of God for marriage. The book of Genesis made it clear that, the original intention of God for marriage was to meet the need of loneliness. “And the LORD God said it is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him” (Gen 2:18KJV). Okpako (interview) said marriage is God’s first institution for the welfare of the human race, originated in divine wisdom and goodness and designed to promote human happiness. The original intention of marriage is clear: that is to meet the mutual fellowship of man, to keep man happy.

Anakoro (interview) said the idea of bringing individual culture and tradition to replace the idea of God concerning marriage is the main problem the human racing is experiencing marital crises. Instead of the word of God ought to filter the cultural worldview of marriage. He observes that marriage was God’s plan from the beginning. It was not man’s idea. Marriage was planned by God to meet human need for companionship, love, mutual encouragement, practical help and sexual satisfaction, So, marriage is not man’s idea hence man is not to determine how or what marriage should be. God’s intention is to make the man and the woman one flesh, which is the intimate relationship.

According to Egbo (interview), one flesh does not only mean sexual intercourse, though it includes it. But it refers to that oneness which initially was the original intention of God. God’s agenda for marriage is to bring man and the woman together without anything to separate them or make them two. He said the bond of marriage is not to be divided or separated. God has no intention of divorce at all. The reason why there is multiplication of divorce is because some women equate themselves with their husbands. The man who now need absolute obedience move for separation in order to get an obedient wife.

Edah (interview) said marriage as created by God the leadership role is purely for the husband that the wife does not have. This relationship was there from the beginning of creation in the marriage between Adam and Eve in the Garden. He thus encouraged women to learn how to submit to their husband to void putting the man in search of obedience and love that brings divorce idea. In views of this, the man and the woman should guide seriously against anything that is capable of bringing division into the institution. Having explored the original intention for marriage, it shows that, there is no room for divorce from the beginning of marriage. Therefore, man should not for any reason make room for divorce in their marriage for “In the beginning it was not so” (Matt19:8).

II. Curbing Mechanisms for Divorce Cases Using Traditional Belief Systems

There are several traditional belief systems that apparently tend to increase divorce rate among the Urhobo people. This section of the paper highlights some of these and proffer empirical solutions to them as articulated from those interviewed on the field. Some of them appear sound and reasonable and helpful but at the end violate the intention of God for marriage.

A. Divorce helps to avoid spirit husband or wife.

There is this belief that a man or woman can have a spiritual husband or wife apart from the one with whom they living physically in the house. Such spiritual spouses act as mitigating factors against the peace and progress of the family. More often than not the solution is that if a man has discovered that his wife is having a spirit husband, the best way to deal with the situation is to divorce her immediately to avoid the man being killed by the spirit husband. On this Ovedje (interview) opines that, the issue of spirit husband does not call for divorce, but deliverance. He said the couple should look for a genuine or trusted deliverance minister who can carry out the deliverance once and for all and that will be the end of that spirit husband or wife. The danger of treating this traditional belief as a myth by western oriented African scholars have spelt doom to many marriages in the African society. According to Ejenobo (2013) In the Apocryphal book of Tobith, 6:1-9:6, the story of Asmodeus the spiritual husband of Sara is clearly documented. It was through the help of Angel Raphael that the spiritual husband was conquered. The existence of spiritual spouses are real as far as the people are concerned and should be properly addressed through well-structured counselling sessions and deliverance services.

B. Divorce help to improve morality.

This belief states that if a man divorces his wife who is not sexually active and marries another wife, he can improve his moral life than to keep her in his house without good marital relationship and go about having affair outside. It is on this ground that the average Urhobo does not see anything wrong in extra marital affair both for the man and the woman. Even if your spouse is not

satisfying you sexually, that is not enough ground for divorce. Likewise, if your wife is involved in an adulterous relationship, it is equally not a strong enough reason for divorce. Ighomuaye (interview) disagreed with this position. To him, immorality is wrong and divorce is not God's solution to the problem of immorality, rather, the solution is a regular and active sexual relationship between one husband and the one wife. The point to note here is that divorce cannot solve the problem of immorality in any society; the solution is the commitment of the spouses to active and regular sexual intercourse. And this is where the church in Africa must come down from its uthiopic moral highhegth of condemning marital infidelity to carrying out proper phenomologically based counselling sessions with such couples as a way forward to solving their infidelity problems.

C. Childlessness and divorce.

In the traditional belief system of the Urhobo man childlessness is not an excuse for divorce. In its place, the man is encouraged to take an additional wife to test his sterility. The biblical examples of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his wives gives credence to this traditional African practice. However, western oriented interpretation of the scripture has come to demonize childlessness in the African society to the extent that it is constituted itself a very serious social problem as family life is concerned. Concerning the problems that often erupt from childless marriage, Okotie (interview) is of the view that the Bible expressly emphasized cleaving and becoming one flesh as final as far as marriage is concerned. Even if there are no children the one flesh union does not become meaningless. He used himself as example of one who refused to divorce his wife for the fact that she has not been able to give birth to a child. Though it seems miserable but he believed that the situation is still redeemable. God is still in control. There are credible evidences of couples who have stayed together childless for over ten to fifteen years and through the grace of God had their own children. The church in Africa must play an aggressive role in trying to un-demonize the role of childlessness in the family.

D. Lack of contentment to the strict tenets of monogamous marriage

This is one of the major factors constituting divorce in Agbarho traditional society. It is the general conception that a traditional Urhobo man is entitled to marry as many wives as he likes. The woman that is not comfortable with such an arrangement is free to leave the marriage. The reverse is equally true when an Urhobo woman believes that her present husband is not carrying out his conjugal responsibilities faithfully, she has the right to leave the marriage for greener pastures with another man. This aspect of the Urhobo tradition must be handled with care by the African church. All attempts are demonizing the polygamous system of marriage in Africa has not helped to reduce the rate of divorce. Instead there is an increase in acts of concubinage, in which a man has just one wife at home but has several concubines outside who take care of his emotional and sexual needs. To this author, the church is playing the role of the ostrich. Proper and compulsory marriage counselling sessions before and after marriage will go a long way in resolving issues revolving around monogamous and polygamous marriages in Africa.

E. Spousal dishonesty

This is about lack of mutual trust and confidentiality in a marriage. Ofuegbe (interview) observes that, where there is dishonesty there will be disaster. He said in a home where dishonesty prevails, there cannot be trust, and when there is no trust in a marriage, peace cannot exist. According to him, the fellowship between spouses is the antidote to dishonesty. A constant fellowship with each other brings forgiveness and trust into marriage. He said this lack of intimate fellowship with each other always result to distrust, and therefore there should be no communication gap between the couple. Urerhigho (interview) said the curbing mechanism for spousal dishonesty is the teaching of holy living (righteousness). He said if the couples are living a holy life, there will be no room for dishonesty, hence the church should do more of teaching about living a holy life, preach more about righteousness, commitment to doing what is right, truthfulness, faithfulness, justice, peace, and love for one another. All these Christian virtues are enough to deal with dishonesty. Daniel (interview) said the church can also look for a way of appreciating honest and faithful people in our congregations, because the popular impression of people is that honesty does not pay. This is the mind-set of several people, even some men and women went into marriages with this impression and became dishonest to their spouses. But if the church can float a programme of appreciating faithful and honest people in our congregations, then she can teach the people that there is a reward for faithful and honest living, if there is benefit on earth for honest living, there will be much more benefit for it in heaven. Okomadu (interview) gave her contribution for the curbing mechanism for spousal dishonesty is that, couples should learn to trust themselves. This is very important because if you don't trust your wife, don't expect her to trust you, though this could be relative. She said people criticized a woman who bought a land and built a house without the knowledge of her husband and they conclude that this is a high level of dishonesty. Nevertheless, take a second thought and find out what is happening in that home. She said, before a woman will take such decision, it means that she's already feeling insecure in that marriage. She said sometimes the husband of that woman may be keeping secretes, for such action is a result of insecurity of that woman in her marriage. She said no woman will do such a thing when everything is right in the home. The curbing mechanism the church should apply is teaching. All married men and women should be taught not to keep secret from each other. The researcher definitely agreed with her that there should be no secret between husband and wife, this is the proper nakedness displayed in the book of Gen. 2:25 that the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed, thus, the statement depicts that there was no secretes between them.

F. The wayward life lived by some husbands with violence and cruel attack on the wife at home

This is a problem that the church must seek to control. This factor has led to several divorces when it is getting to an extent of life about to be involve. Anakoro (interview) opines that, spousal abuse is a sin against oneself. He said any man who abuses his wife is ignorant of what marriage is all about. If a man is aware that he and his wife is one flesh, he cannot lay his hand against himself. He said the curbing mechanism to this factor is undiluted teaching and counselling of couples. Okpako (interview) said the church raise a standard to checkmate the abuse of spouses. He said the church should not compromise in rebuking such people, discipline is the key in dealing with such inappropriate behaviour. Osharekose (interview) observes that, the first step to curbing this

spousal abuse is to carry out the awareness to the women not to keep it in secret from the church when they are being abused by their husband, rather they should speak out and let the church know. He said some women kept their abuses in secret from the church because their husband has issue her a threat that if she reports the case to the church, he will divorce her. The women know that keeping it in secret will not help her, that it is dangerous to keep such abuses in secret because it can lead to her death. Therefore, if the church receives such report of spousal abuse, proper investigation should be carried out and if the man is found guilty, the church should give him a corrective discipline and not punitive. This he explained and suggested a kind of corrective discipline to be carried out: public apology before the congregation to his wife and pledge not to do it again. He however suggested that such a man need to know God. If he knows God, he will not abuse his wife. The gospel of marriage should be preached to him; this is the role of the church to actually curb this factor of spousal abuse that is resulting to most of the divorce cases.

G. Child Marriages in the Traditional Agbarho kingdom.

When two immature young adults come together in a conjugal relationship there are bound to be problems. This study discovered that child marriages where the couples are psychologically and sociologically immature has contributed in no small measure to the increase in divorce rate in Agbarho kingdom. In attempt to prefer control measure to the problem of Immaturity and incompatibility by the church, Okpako (interview) opines that the church has a great role to play in curbing this factor constituting divorce. He said, they should stand against any marriage that is being contracted by immature couples. The pastor should find out their age, spiritual maturity, profession and their mind-set into the marriage. If the pastor discover that they are not mature enough, he should advise them to wait and study each other very well before going into the marriage. He said, there should be no compromise on this. Gbagolor (interview) said the church and the society is going to witness much of divorces in the next decade as a result of immaturity and incompatibility. He said several marriages being contracted presently by internet fraudsters popularly known as yahoo boys of 18 years – 22 years of age may witness divorce, because the boys are not yet mature to the age of handling family issues. But because they have gotten money, they feel they can take care of a woman. Some of them are coming to the church to wed and the pastors are quiet over it. He said the curbing mechanism to this factor is that the church should adopt a specify age of the groom and that of the bride. He suggested that the groom should not be less than 27 years and the bride 22 years, anyone less than that should not be accepted to carry out the marriage in the church. Anakoro (interview) has a different view considering the issues of maturity, as seen by Gbagolor. He said maturity is not determined by age but the mind. He said, what the church should do is to actually find out through interview of both of them if the man is matured in the mind to pilot the affairs of a family. The pastor should make sure that the man is mature enough before he joins them in matrimony. He also said on the issues of incompatibility, the church should have a policy of checking genotype before accepting to wed any couple, the church should demand for the result of their genotype test and if both of them are compactible, before the church can accept the marriage to be carried out in that particular church. In addition, Ekpuyama (interview) stated that, incompatibility may not only be the problem of incompatible genotype, but can also be in the area of individual differences. He said if the couples are not able

to manage their individual differences, it means they are not compatible. He gave an axiom that, “If two mad persons roast palm nut in one fire without controversy, it will result to two fighting”. If two hot tempered persons decided to come together in marriage, the pastor should spend much time to counsel the would be couples, he should not go ahead to join them until both of them understand the type of person they are, and teach them how to control their temperament. With this suggestion they can reduce the factor to the barest minimum.

H. The negative influence of in-laws.

Otite (2006) said, marriage goes beyond the individuals to embrace the families. Hence, the consummation of marriage is not merely a union of the two parties but their families. But the problem of in-law influence has been discovered as one of the factors constituting divorce. In attempt to provide a curbing mechanism for this factor, Kpeji (interview) observed that, several homes have been affected by this factor, He said, the church has a lot to do to curb this menace of in-law influence. He said the church can curb it by dealing with it during premarital counselling. Let the would be couple know that they need to learn to manage their home by themselves without their parents, even though there are some area where they may need their parents, but not in everything. The couple should be made to know that they are leaving and cleaving to themselves and not to their parents nor brothers or sisters. He notes that, sometimes the problems of in-law influence may not be from the parents, but brothers or sisters. He suggested that the most effective curbing mechanism for this factor is the sermon preached during the wedding ceremony. The preacher should put emphasis on this factor, he should preach it to them that the in-laws should allow them to exercise their will in building their own home. Fathers, mothers, brothers or sisters should not unnecessarily intrude into the affairs of this marriage, the in-laws should allow then take decisions of their own. The preacher should preach against the idea of in-laws becoming a factor constituting divorce in marriages. He should sound it loudly to all the in-laws to give the new couple a space to live their lives.

I. Sexual inconsistencies and abuses.

In several family sexual starvation or sexual non-fulfilment has been a problem in marriages, and also a major ground for divorce. In search or curbing mechanism for the factor, Onoakporoafure (interview) said the major causes of this factor is lack of counsel. He identified that most married couples are not opened to each other, most especially the women. He said most of the married women don't open up to their husband when they need sex, and if the man is not able to design the mood of the woman, she may end up saying her husband is sexually starving her. But the starving of a women with sex is not common as the starving of men. Some women use it as a punishment to the man. What the church can do to salvage this factor is to float a seminar on marriage regularly where issues of this nature are discussed and rooms are given to the people to ask questions regarding sexual activities.

J. Financial Mismanagement and Irresponsibility.

Financial challenge has been one of the constituting factor of divorce among the Urhobo people. Okitiakpe (interview) opines that, the problem of finance should not be as serious to tear marriage apart. If the couples have actually known God, monetary issue is not enough to cause divorce to true children of God. But he identified an enormous belief or impression of some women, that it is the responsibility of only the man to take care of the home. This belief or impression have actually caused changes to some homes. He said in a home where the woman is working or earning more than the man, there is nothing wrong for such woman to adequately support that home. He suggested that the church should take it as a responsibility to enlighten her congregation and make it clear that it is the responsibility of both the husband and the wife to take care of the home financially and not the responsibility of only the man. As children of God, whoever is blessed among the couple should be glad to shoulder the financial commitment of the family. They should see it as a privilege and not a thing of pride. Osharekose (interview) said, in a difficult situation where the man is not having a lucrative job or in a situation of loss of job, the woman should be patient with her husband and not to put the man under pressure because such pressure can result to serious crisis that may eventually lead to divorce. He suggested a curbing mechanism, that the church should embark on a regular program where issue of marriage and financial challenges are treated. He said this is one of the ways of changing the mentality of some women and their character. Okitiakpe (interview) said, one of the ways the church can curb financial challenges in marriages is to regularly float a business program that will encourage people not to fold hands but to do any work they find. While doing this, the church can also embark on empowerment programme, the church can also lease with some NGOs to assist some less-privilege people. The researcher confirms this idea as very effective in restoring homes. He testified of several families that were having financial challenges and the marriage at the verge of breaking, that he empowered the women to begin a small scale business that eventually helped the family to stand. He said the church can do more by helping some of these women who have nothing doing. This is the best way the church can curb the issue of financial challenges that have cause divorce in some homes.

K. The Negative Effect of Alcoholism and Divorce.

Alcoholic drink is an integral part of the culture of the Urhobo man. There is hardly a social event in which alcoholic drink is not served. The result is that most Urhobo men and women have very serious issues with alcoholic tolerance. The damaging effect of this factor as far as the family life is concerned is serious to say the least. Midiyeraye (interview) observed that the problem of drunkenness is natural while some are spiritually influenced. He said some of the people you see drunk are not really a drunk, but a display of wickedness by the enemies. He explains further that there are some drunks that did not drink a quantity of alcohol enough to intoxicate them, but the little they have taken was spiritually influenced to bring shame and reproach to the family, such drunkenness have destroyed several marriages. He said, in this kind of cases, there is no amount of counsel and preaching that will make such people to desist from drinking. He said the curbing mechanism to this kind of drunkenness is a proper deliverance, because it is done by the enemies hence you need a greater power through Jesus Christ to undo what the enemies have done. Oriakhin

(interview) have a different opinion of adult juvenile as he identified it to be stealing. He said some spouses are fund of stealing from their spouse. He said this is common among the women. Some women have the habit of stealing their husband's money. He said this factor has led to several divorces and disasters, where by the man may either fight and injure the woman or send the woman back to her parent. The curbing mechanism for this according to him is prayer and counselling, while their husbands are also counsel to take responsibility of funding their wives, take care of them financially.

III. Conclusion

This study has shown that the traditional belief system of the Urhobo people of Agbarho Kingdom have in built mechanisms that can be used to reduce the high rate of divorce prevalent in the society today. In making a clear distinction between the interpretations of the holy bible on family issues using the Eurocentric lenses and adopting the phenomenological approach of the African traditional belief systems, this paper has laid a foundation for a more practical approach to the handling of divorce cases. Some aspects of these traditional beliefs have been handled in this first part of the article. Part two will discuss other traditional belief systems which can be used as tools for curbing the rising incidences of divorce in the African society.

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ORAL INTERVIEW

S/N	NAMES	GENDER	AGE	OCCUPATION	PLACE	DATE
1.	Anakoro, K	Male	57yrs	Clergy	Agbarho	7/7/2021
2.	Daniel, G	Male	38yrs	Clergy	Oguname	23/8/2021
3.	Edah, F.O	Male	66yrs	Clergy	Ekreravwhe	23/8/2021
4.	Egbo, J.J	Male	46yrs	Clergy	Ikweghwu	15/7/2021
5.	Ekpuyama, J.C	Male	70yrs	Retired Principal	Ohrerhe	14/8/2021
6.	Gbagolo, F.O	Male	37yrs	Solar Engineer	Ewherhe	16/7/2021
7.	Ighomuaye, F	Male	41yrs	Clergy	Agbarho	15/7/2021
8.	Kpeji, U.F	Male	40yrs	Clergy	Abgarho	5/7/2021
9.	Mideyeraye, W	Male	39yrs	Clergy	Agbarho	14/7/2021
10.	Ofuegbe, B	Male	55yrs	Civil Engineer	Okan	26/8/2021
11.	Okomadu, G	Female	91yrs	Retired Teacher	Ewherhe	11/3/2021
12.	Okitiakpe, E	Male	57yrs	Clergy	Agbarho	3/9/2021
13.	Okotie, M	Male	61yrs	Clergy	Agbarho	4/8/2021
14.	Okpako, E	Male	44yrs	Clergy	Ewherhe	3/7/2021

15.	Okpako, J.O	Male	68yrs	Clergy	Agbarho	6/7/2021
16.	Onoakporofure, F.O	Male	61yrs	Clergy	Uvwiamuge	6/7/2021
17.	Oriakhin, T	Male	68yrs	Driver	Ikweghwu	9/8/2021
18.	Osharekose	Male	40yrs	Clergy	Oviri	15/7/2021
19.	Ovedje, G.O	Male	72yrs	Clergy	Uvwiamama	5/7/2021
20.	Urerhigho S	Male	37yrs	Clergy	Ohrerhe	6/9/2021