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Adventists and Levirate Marriage in East-Central Africa

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Levirate marriage is still practiced among the various African tribes in including, in Tanzania, the Luo, Pare, Hehe,

Sukuma tribes. The unique struggles of the Adventist Church in its endeavors to evangelize these groups is discussed in this article.

Levirate Marriage: An Overview

Levirate marriage is a type of marriage whereby a woman marries one of her husband's brothers after the death of her own husband. The word itself is taken from Latin word *levir*, which means husband's brother.¹ This type of marriage has, for many years, been practiced among various societies in the world. It is usually practiced by the societies that have closely knit clan or family structures that do not allow widows to marry outside their clans or families.

Several reasons have been advanced in favor of levirate marriage² Among the most common reasons is that the family fears the possibility of someone from outside the family inheriting the properties of the deceased. It is better for then for a member of the family to marry the wife of his deceased brother and hence inherit the deceased's properties as well. Other reasons include remembrance of the brother's name, especially crucial among the Jews because the firstborn son in a levirate marriage was given the deceased's name. It is also done in order to prevent the possibility of having children born outside the family unit and to protect the widow from having sexual intercourse with men from outside the respective family.

Levirate Marriage Among the Luo Tribe

The Luo live in both Kenya and Tanzania, particularly, along the Tanzania-Kenya border east of Nyanza Lake. In the Luo tribe, when a married man dies, brothers of the deceased person propose marriage to the widow. The proposal may come from more than one person, but the widow will wait until she has a dream of being together with her late husband in bed, before she is allowed to tell the elders who is to be her new husband among those who offered to marry her. If there is only one brother available and he is young, after the report about the dream, elders will command the young man to take care of the widow because he is the only one closely related to the deceased person.³

Levirate Among the Pare Tribe

The Pare people are found mainly in the mountainous parts of the Same District in the Kilimanjaro Region. For decades, it was a normal practice for this tribe to make sure that the wife and children of a deceased person remain in safe hands and good care. To the Pare, the male sibling who is chronologically next to the deceased, in terms of their birth dates, takes care of the wife and children of a deceased brother. If the first chronological male sibling of the deceased is too young to marry or also dies, they will look for the next male sibling, taking into account their chronological order of birth. If the next prospective levirate marriage candidate is married, he takes the widow as the second wife. In the event that he is single, the man takes the widow as his first wife, but he can add one or more wives if he wishes to do so. However, today the practice is no longer popular among the Pare because most of them are Christians and educated. They understand the negative impact of this practice.⁴

Levirate Marriage Among Hehe Tribe in Tanzania

The Hehe people are found in the Iringa Region South-Central Tanzania. They are famous for their courage when they fought the Germans on August 17, 1891.⁵ Levirate marriage is part of the Hehe customs and tradition. When a man dies, any brother of the deceased can marry the widow. The widow is given the freedom of choice whether to be married or not; however, it is very rare for the widow to refuse the proposal simply because the consequence will be the loss of all properties which belonged to her late husband. Usually, when the widow refuses the proposal it was the sign that she has an assurance of marrying another man who is not of the same clan, though it happens very rarely. The custom is losing its power among the Hehe these days because most of them are Christians and educated. Very few people among them still have the practice as most of them are now Christians.⁶

Levirate Marriage Among Sukuma Tribe in Tanzania

The Sukuma are one of the Bantu tribes which are found in northern part of Tanzania along Lake Victoria between Mwanza Gulf and the Serengeti Plain.⁷ Levirate marriage is common among the Sukuma. It is known as *kwingilwa*. Though the way of practicing it may differ from one dialect to another, it is generally common to all. After the burial of a late brother, the family appoints the man who will take care of the widow and the properties of the deceased. Normally, they choose among the brothers of the deceased. If the brothers are young and will not be able to marry the widow, the family leader will appoint another member from the immediate member of the same family or clan.⁸ Another group (dialect) of Sukuma are stricter when it comes to this. Among them the widow will face a challenge if she refuses the proposal and her family will have to pay back the dowry (normally cows), but if she has children, the amount owed will be less.⁹

Levirate Marriage in the Bible

Traditionally, Judaism is one of the religions that has considered levirate marriage a moral duty. However, this practice has lost popularity among the Jews in recent years. The main reason the Jews practiced levirate marriage was to provide an heir for the deceased. Nevertheless, the Torah allowed men the freedom to choose to either to marry the widow or let someone else who was a close male relative do so. If he chose not to marry her, he had to show it by taking off his shoes in the presence of elders and that would set him free from the levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-9).

However, studied in its proper context, the Bible does not consider levirate marriage when it results in polygamy as conforming to the ideal conjugal relation as ordained by God in the Garden of Eden when He celebrated the first marriage between Adam and Eve. Jesus underscored the marriage of one man and one woman in the following words: "He who made them at the beginning made them *male* and *female*... For this reason, a *man* shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his *wife*, and the *two* shall become *one* flesh. So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:4-6, emphasis supplied).

By advocating the marriage of one man to one woman, Jesus was not teaching a new doctrine; to the contrary, He was promulgating the ideal form of marriage as instituted by God in the beginning. Refuting the erroneous beliefs tenaciously held by the Jews of His day about marriage vows, Jesus stated succinctly and pointedly, "but from the beginning it was not so" (v. 8). Marriage between one adult male and one adult female is one of the fundamental principles of Christianity. Seventh-day Adventists, as a people of the Bible, subscribe to this kind of marriage only!¹⁰

Seventh-day Adventists and Levirate Marriage

The Seventh-day Adventist Church believes in marriage between one man one woman as the Bible teaches (Mark 10:6). While in levirate marriage as practiced by Tanzanian tribes allows one to marry more than one wife so long as one is the close brother of the deceased. It also violates human freedom of choice especially for a woman who is forced to be married.

Levirate marriage has been a challenge in the Adventist Church because it leads to polygamy. Some church members who are forced by their society to marry their late brother's widow find it difficult to go against their elders. Consequently, they end up losing their church membership because the Adventist Church does not tolerate such an act. Others who stand firm in the faith, face the challenge of being stigmatized by non-believers in the community. The negative treatment forces some to move away from their villages in order to seek refuge in other places where they can worship God peacefully.¹¹

The Adventist Church continues to educate people about the biblical principles and values of marriage and provides care for members who undergo negative treatment by their community.

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