Cohabitation in Akan Culture of Ghana: An Ethical Challenge to Gatekeepers of Indigenous Knowledge System in the Akan Culture

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Abstract

This article proffers an ethical investigation on the current issue of cohabitation of people who are not formally married in Akan culture of Ghana. Whilst the issue of cohabitation has become common among other African cultures in recent times, in this article I am arguing that this practice poses a challenge to our African cultural outlook towards marriage. The article argues that the essence of the institution of marriage within these communities has slowly being adulterated. This has compromised the rich and cherished values around the indigenous rites and ritual leading to marriages. Through the lens of ethical theory of consequentialism, the article exposes the ethical implications of cohabitation within the Akan indigenous knowledge systems arguing that it underplays the unity and the rituals that binds and protects the individuals in the relationship. It also downplays the essence of the institution of marriage within the indigenous Akan context. Therefore the article calls for a critical engagement in preserving some of these values in our current social system.

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Introduction

African indigenous knowledge systems and practices are embodied in initiations, rites and rituals at the various levels of humankind's life. To the Indigenous African, the life of an individual in a society is a series of passage from one age to another and from one occupation to another. The progression from one stage to another is marked by special acts which are enveloped in various rites, rituals and ceremonies. These rituals have varying degrees of intensity and are performed to mark the major turning points in humankind's life, namely, birth, puberty marriage, child birth and death. These are termed by anthropologists as Rites of Passage; a term which was first coined by Van Gennep (1960). He grouped these rites of passage into three; the first, transition rite or adoption involves pregnancy, child birth and betrothal, the second, incorporation rites which involves marriage and naming ceremonies and the third, separation rite deals with funeral ceremonies (Van Gennep 1960). These rites and ritual have been binding and preserved for many years. This is because they embodied rich values and practices which define the African. In recent times these rites and ritual are been endangered by western knowledge systems embodied in colonialism, modernization and globalisation. Of particular interest is a gradual erosion of normative indigenous marriage rituals, rites and practices in favour of more informal types of unions particularly among the educated and some urban dwellers (Meekers 1993). It is being replaced by cohabitation a situation where two individuals decide to live together, share resources and in some cases even have children without going through the initiation rites embedded within the African indigenous knowledge system leading to marriage. Most researchers now argue that cohabitation is a form of marital status (Barlow *et al*. 2005). But to the indigenous African particularly the Akans, long term union without the prescribed cultural rites and rituals is seen as a taboo. These rites and rituals are built on important values that can contribute greatly to current communal social constructive values within the African society. Therefore there is need to retrieve these values that are being eroded.

It is with this background that the current article argues that cohabita-

tion poses a challenge to our African outlook on marriage. It exposes the ethical implications of cohabitation within the Akan communitarian indigenous knowledge system. It unearths the various rites and rituals around the marriage process and argues that within these rites lay important values such as responsibility, accountability, security, celebrating of unity of families, even those from different settings, separation and incorporation into a new family by marriage. These important values will be preserved when integrated within our current marriage processes. The article is divided into 3: the first section explores the process of marriage ritual amongst the Akans' highlighting the important values embedded in the rituals. It will also look at the current challenges preventing the implementation of these rites and rituals.

Second it looks at the current phenomena of cohabitation that is eroding these communal values and lastly the article ethically challenges the Akan community of the need for a critical engagement to integrate some of these indigenous values in our society today.

The Marriage Process among the Indigenous Akans in Ghana

To the Akans 'marriage is an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual are acknowledged' (Annin & Abrefa 2014: 92). This suggests that sexual intercourse is only recognised within the confinement of the marriage relationship. Virginity was perceived by the traditional Akan as very important and must be kept until marriage. In addition, they view marriage and the various rites and rituals attached to it as a very important practice and therefore must be followed in its strictest form. The Akans occupy the southern part of modern day Cote devoir and Ghana. Despite the controversy of whether they belong to the same ethnic group or not, they seems to be sharing institution, organisations and practices, for instance there is similarity in their family systems, kingship structures, religious practices, economic and political structures (Adu Boahen 1974; Robert *et al*. 1973). This study will be based on the Akans in Ghana. The Akans form the major ethnic group in the country, comprising 52.7% of the total population (GLSS 5 2008). They include many sub-groups such as the Kwahu, Ashanti, Fanti, Akwapim, Akyem, (Brong), Ahafo, Adansi, and Nzema. These groups are slightly distinct in language—generally classified

into Twi and Fanti, but their social systems are almost the same. For instance Hendrix has observed, to the Akans, there is an expectation of relative permanence, co-residence, a division of labour, sharing of resources, a sexual relationship, procreation and cooperation in child bearing and training within marriage (Hendrix 1996: 173). The idea of divorce or anything that will bridge the marriage institution was prohibited.

To the Akans, the process of marriage involves interpersonal as well as communal values such as interest, pleasure, likes, preference, duties, moral, obligations, desires, wants, needs, aversions and attractions and many other modalities of selective orientation (William 1968:283). This is because they believe that the survival of community depends on the institution of marriage and procreation that is attached to it. Marriage therefore was not only seen as a relationship between two individuals but also as a structural link between groups (Hendrix 1998:734). It brings clans, tribes and even villages together. To this end, the sanctity of marriage became the community's business and everyone made sure it happens as a major value to the indigenous Akans.

Another value that was attached to the process leading to marriage was the celebration of a transition from celibacy. For this reason the rituals and the ceremonies attached to the transition are adhered to strictly. As Van Gennep has observed: 'for one of the spouses it involves a change of family, clan and village and sometimes the newly married couple even establish residence in a new house' (1960: 116). This therefore suggest that within the indigenous Akan context, any time a man and a woman accept the responsibility to marry, the families or communities of both individuals come together. Both the leaving and the incorporation into a new family is celebrated. This celebration cements the social and communitarian character of the community. On the other hand, if there is a rift between the two families or communities, that rift can actually nullify a marriage between two persons. As such the indigenous marriage process was highly respected because of the significant number of people affected by the union (1960:116). Magesa rightly says that:

> The communities involved share their very existence in that reality and they become one people, one thing, as African themselves would put it that through their marriage, their families and clans are also united so that what is done to one of their members is done to all. By

> this gesture marriage also means that the partners' responsibilities are not limited to them alone but have a much wider application. Their own personal identity and identification are equally extended (1998:110).

Socially acceptable marriage among the Akans was therefore seen as lifelong union of husband and wife for mutual support and progeny to continue the ancestral line and to promote the welfare of the tribe or clan (Mole 1982:3).It was an obligation for all citizens so much that 'if you are of age and you do not marry, you lose your self-respect' (Anarfi 2006: 170). In some cases parents, elders, and family members may interfere in someone's private life out of legitimate concern should there be any undue delay especially if a man is of age and gainfully employed (Gyekye 2003: 76). Marriage among the Akans was also perceived as a sacred act and this was reiterated by Mbiti when he said that:

> Marriage is looked upon as a sacred duty which every normal person must perform. Failure to do so means in effect, stopping the flow of life through the individual and hence the diminishing of mankind upon the earth… Therefore anybody who, under normal condition, refuses to get married is committing a major offence in the eyes of the society and people will be against him. In all African societies, everything possible is done to prepare people for marriage and to make them think in terms of marriage (Mbiti 1975: 98).

Being a sacred union, it was seen as a religious obligation and a means through which the community contribute to life, especially since the Akans like the rest of their African communities believe that in most cases the living dead are reborn in their descendants (Muzorewa 1985:11-15). Therefore a person without any offspring blocks the physical continuation of life. This was one of the reasons why most parents negotiate the marriage union for their children particularly the girl child at a young age. Refusing to marry is therefore seen as an abomination, families with unmarried grown up girls are a disgrace not only to the family but the clan as well. It is through the rituals, rites and ceremonies that the couples receive blessing both from the ancestors and the community as a whole. To the Akans, every union must go through the customary rites before it is socially accepted. The first and an important

step before the rites and ritual is that 'both families must make enquiry into the backgrounds of the two families before the marriage is contracted. The investigation takes diverse forms, for instance they have to find out if there is no madness in the family or no chronic and contagious illness' (Annin & Abrefa 2014:92). The idea of the inquiry of the background was to protect the bride to be from future problems in the marriage. When the family is convince that all is well then the rites and the rituals can proceed. These rites include the knocking (*kɔkɔkɔkɔ)* and the main ceremony 'Head drinks' (*tirinsa*).

Unlike in recent times, traditionally only a few people attend the *tirinsa* ceremony. As a rule, the bride is not present and often the groom is absent as well. Someone acts on his behalf. This person may be his own father or a close maternal relative.A personal experience confirms this fact, during my *tirinsa* ceremony, my father and the groom's father and their representative attended the ceremony. In the presence of all gathered the bride to be had to agree for the elders to accept the gift and that is what happened in my case. I was only called in to agree for the elders to accept the gifts. It must be noted that 'a yes' from the 'bride to be' seals the marriage. The grooms family then present bottles of schnapps and money as a token of appreciation for the brides' family for bringing up a marriageable daughter and a few personal effect such as ornaments, cloths, sewing machine (optional) etc. (depending on the family) for the bride to be. The idea of the ornaments and cloths for the 'bride to be' is that in case children follow quickly after the marriage, that will require attention financially so in order for the 'mother to be' not to be in need, the 'husband to be' had to provide even before the children come. Again the significance of the machine is for her to learn how to sew in order to mend torn cloths and to preserve money instead of giving it to tailors. All these instil the value of hard work in the young couple.

In view of the importance and sacredness attached to marriage, issues of fornication, rape cohabitation were regarded as very serious offenses which required ritual for cleansing lest the Gods and ancestors be offended (Shorter 1999:95). In most cases offenders were punished severely or outlawed on moral as well as social grounds. This was to prevent others from repeating the mistakes of others. As has already been mentioned above, currently, the nature of marriage and the processes leading to it has changed dramatically. The next section explores the challenges that the traditional

processes are facing.

So far we have seen that marriage among the Akans enlarges a group and produces legitimate children. It is an achieved status that brings respect for both men and women. In the past, the unmarried woman was not accorded much respect. The same status is accorded to anyone who enters into a relationship of no social and cultural recognition and also a relationship that is not aimed at producing children into the lineage. Similarly, the unmarried man who stays alone for years was frowned at and a sense of shame or stigma was attached to cohabiting couples (Wilson & Mafeje 1963; Pauw 1968; Budlender *et al.* 2011).

Current Challenges Faced by the Culturally Accepted Marriages among the Akans

From the above discussion it is clear that marriage among the Akans in Ghana, like any other ethnic groups on the African continent is very important and considered as an institution which every individual adult should experience if possible (Tetteh 1967 cited in Frost and Dodoo 2010). It must be noted that currently, marriages recognized in Ghana are of three types, marriage under ordinance, marriage under customary law and marriage of the Mohammedans ordinance (Kuenyehia & Aboagye 2004). Marriage under ordinance is monogamous while the two others can be polygamous. No matter which form one chooses, marriage is legally recognised after the customary rites and rituals have been performed. Yet there are a growing number of people living together without going through the instituted rites and rituals. Many scholars have attributed this trend to a number of factors these include the following:

Most scholars argue that modernization and urbanization has adversely impacted on the stability of African marriages (Moore 1994; Oppong 2003) and has contributed to more cohabitation. Urbanization or modernisation according to (Takyi 2001; Moore 1994) has gone to an extent to undermine African marriages and urban dwellers like the preference of conjugal union over the extended family. Scholars such as Oppong (1980) Tilson and Larson (2000) have argued that modernization in Africa and therefore Ghana has led to urbanization which is encouraging wide separation from the extended family members who are the gatekeepers of our cultural

heritage and therefore supporting individualistic kind of living arrangement. Currently, there have been movements from rural areas to urban in search for employment, infrastructure and better life. In the cities, people encounter different cultures and are influenced by them. In addition to the influence of the foreign cultures, religion and lifestyle there is freedom which has the potential to influence traditional lifestyle. Most migrants no longer live as they use to do in the rural areas where indigenous lifestyle is strictly upheld.

Another practice of the Akans believed to weaken traditional marital processes is the high price tag currently attached to the bride wealth demanded by the woman's family during the process leading to the marriage. As noted from above, this bride wealth was supposed to be as a token of appreciation for example among the Akans, this included two bottles of gin and a token of money and ornament (Fortes 1950), but currently this has changed. A visit to a bride price ceremony recently, revealed that in deed this transaction has been commercialised, the groom to be had to present a physical cash of about 4000 Ghana Cedis (approximately 958 US dollars), 3 suitcases full of clothes, sewing machine, ornaments, expensive wines and cool drinks as well as the cost of the party. Given the current economic status of Akan men only a few prospective husbands can afford the payment of bride wealth to the family of the bride (Hunter 2006; 2010; Hosegood 2009; Posel *et al.* 2011; Posel & Casale 2013). Most young men lack the economic readiness to marry given the high bride wealth, yet they have respect for the custom as an integral part of the marriage process (Posel *et al.* 2011; Posel & Rudwick 2011). This poses ethical dilemma for most of them.

Other studies attribute the reason for cohabitation to the changing attitudes to marriage. The context of rising levels of education and increased employment opportunities for African women has contributed to low and falling marriage rates among Africans (Garenne *et al.* 2001; Kalule-Sabiti *et al.* 2007). There is also increasing number of institutions within urban centres that allow for or justify cohabitation. Educational attainment has open opportunities for people to ask pertinent questions around these rites and ritual. A typical; example is the issue of upsetting the ancestors, with the current pluralism of religion such a belief is not respected by most people.

Another major reason why people opt for cohabitation is the binding nature as well as the presence of abuse and oppression that has characterized traditional marriages. Not only are people afraid to marry but also they are afraid that they will fail in marriage and end up with divorce. Thus far the

article has argued that the inability to pay the bride wealth, modernisation, migration and exposure to different form of cultures has influence most people to choose alternative union instead of the traditionally prescribed one. The next sections examine cohabitation among the Akans.

Cohabitation as a Modern Trend among Akans in Ghana

As noted from above, the ideological significance of the indigenous rites and rituals leading to marriage among the Akans is slowly eroding and being replaced with 'consensual, free and casual unions' (Meyer Forte 1978: 29).The significance of the rituals associated with the processes leading to marriage in terms of bride wealth, alliance between kinship and lineage participation in marriage are declining particularly among many urban dwellers, In its place have witnessed the rise of unorthodox marital forms that have not been institutionalized by the exchange of bride-wealth or by a civil or religious ceremony (Locoh 1988). Carlos Arnaldo has defined cohabitation as a relationship where persons of the opposite sex cohabit without going through the formalities of customary, religious or civil marriage (2004:147). This suggests a mutual consensual relationship which can either be a long term or temporary depending on the choices of the cohabitants. It is with this background that the Demographic and Health Surveys of Ghana in 2003 and 2008 as well as the 2010 Population and Housing Census has included individuals in informal unions like cohabitation as other forms of union which exist within the Ghanaian context. It must be noted that there have been a substantial increase in this type of union since 1988 (Terborn 2004: 207) among Ghanaians. People co-habiting in 2003 according to the Ghana Demographic and Health Survey were about 8.1% this figure increased to 13.1% in 2008. This number rose to 14.1% in 2014 (GDHS 2014:10), suggesting that informal cohabitation has become a common trend. The inference here is that the institution of indigenous socially sanctioned marriage is gradually being compromised by consensual and this could have so many implications on the former as well as the children that come out of such unions. Interestingly within the Ghanaian context, most cohabitants see their situation as good as marriage and therefore rights afforded to marriage couples apply equally to them Barlow et al (2005:28-247).

A number of scholars have argued that most women in cohabitant

union are at a disadvantage and face a number of challenges. These include danger of economic deprivation and as well as human wellbeing. This situation is perpetuated by the lack of legal protection particularly in the event that their partners died intestate. Barlow et al (2005:65) also stressed the vulnerability of cohabitants. They further argue that cohabitation is mostly seen as the form of prelude to marriage before the actual union, it is also seen as an alternative to marriage. This therefore makes most cohabitants susceptible to deprivations since they view cohabitation as equal to marriage (2005: 67).

Ethical Implications of Cohabitation

So far, the article has created awareness that the significance of indigenous rituals and rites that leads to socially sanctioned relationship among Akans is slowly being eroded. In its place is the phenomenon of cohabitation as David Parkin and David Nyamwaya have rightly observed (1987: 207). This emerging trend proposes a challenge particularly to the gate keepers of the Akan culture whose responsibility is to protect and preserve the indigenous heritage. These gatekeepers include the traditional leaders such as kings, chiefs, family heads and parents. A critical look at the current changing trend calls for consequentialist theory which argues that morally right action is one that produces a good outcome or result, and the consequences of that action or rule generally outweigh all other considerations (Mastin 2008). Consequentialism stresses the way people (or sentient beings, in general) are affected by our actions. Therefore, what matters is the welfare or the preferences of everyone to whom our actions make a difference (Bergström 1996: 76).This means that the right thing to do in any given situation is the act with the best consequence. Looking at cohabitation in the Akan culture through the lens of the above theory, the following issues come out:

To the Akan, the consequences of cohabitation undermine the significant values such as responsibility, commitment and accountability cherished within the confinement of traditional marriages. The quest for autonomy in today's society forces people to shy away from strong commitment with the view of seeking independence in relationships. A number of people opt to hang loose so that they can walk in and out at any given time. Ambert (2009) has explained that cohabitants are less committed

and can easily decide to go or come out of a relationship as compared to married couples who are much committed. Cohabitation is not recognised and respected in the Akan context therefore cohabitants may not be able to be held accountable of cheating outside the relationship. Such relationship is called 'mpenawadie' meaning concubine marriage which is not respected in the culture (Ankomah 2004: 472). In the same way individuals cannot be held accountable for any form of abuse or neglect. In fact there is a sense of shame or stigma attached to cohabiting couples (Wilson & Mafeje 1963; Pauw 1968; Budlender *et al.* 2011), more so it serves as disrespect to the family, the clan and the community as a whole. A number of studies both local and international have confirmed that the likelihood of couples who cohabit to divorce later in marriage is higher than those who do not cohabit. The reasons stem from unfaithfulness, instability to domestic violence (Waite & Gallagher 2000: 46; Wellings, Field, Johnson & Wadsworth 1994:116). Indeed prior cohabitation experience can contribute to divorce in later marriage (Amato 2010).

Another important consequence of cohabitation is that there is neither protection not security. For instance on the death of a partner the other cannot claim inheritance; in fact he or she is treated as an outsider until the bride wealth has been paid. Children born in such union are considered illegitimate. It is seen as individualist union and does not unite families, clans, villages, towns and even countries in any way.

What we Ought to Do

The consequences of cohabitation discussed above calls for an urgent action, especially if the ideological significance of the rites, rituals and processes leading to marriage is to be protected and preserved. With the dawn of modernity, some of these rites and ritual may need to be interrogated. There will be need to deconstruct and reconstruct new rites and rituals to reflect the current context consisting of people from different educational backgrounds, religious groups, racial as well as ethnic group.

First, transformation through debates and education around the greed and self-interested tendencies which has resulted in the commercialisation of the bride wealth must be encouraged. This is because as noted the consequences of it do not burden only the bridegroom but also the woman.

The expensive bride wealth does not only put financial burden on the couple to be but also perpetuates abuse in the marriage. The current situation challenges gate keepers of the Akans cultural heritage such as traditional kings, chiefs, community leaders, family heads and even parents to challenge their fellow men who play central role in the bride wealth rites and rituals to embrace the challenges as a matter of urgency. It must be noted that the patriarchal nature of the bride wealth has to be challenged because as noted during such ceremonies, even the few women who are present may not be given a platform to contribute in the whole process (Matope *et al.* 2013:1).
Such an education will help preserve the important heritage that seems to be eroding. This can be achieved through community forums and debates. Gate keepers must join forces with the government and other stakeholders in its protracted efforts to consider re-educating society on the dangers of allowing exorbitant amounts of money to be paid as bride wealth in marriages.

Gate keepers must be challenged not to turn a blind eye on issues of domestic violence, marital rape and other social ills found in the binding confinements marriages. Such neglect serves as discouragement to potential brides and therefore they chose the cohabitation option. There is need for cultural transformation, and on this the article recommends that the appropriate stakeholders work to make sure that such rites are not abused by members of the society. There has to be efforts to eradicate the driving forces like greed, moral degradation, unemployment that most individuals are facing.

Conclusion

Thus far the article has argued that the significance of the rites and rituals surrounding marriage among the Akans in Ghana are slowly being eroded and a new form of unsanctioned unions is emerging. Cohabitation defined as a situation where two individuals decide to live together, share resources and in some cases even have children without going through the initiation and rites embedded in the indigenous knowledge system leading to marriage is becoming more popular. The article has argued that there are a number of legitimate reasons for this phenomenon. As noted from the discussion above, these may include the economic status of Akan young men, the commercialised bride worth, migration and modernisation. Yet a critical look

at the consequences suggests that such union is not a sustainable alternative to marriage. Apart from the fact that cohabitants are vulnerable to security, abuse, binding responsibilities and accountability, it is a threat to the rich indigenous knowledge and values such as the unifying of families, appreciation of good parenting and test of maturity in taking up responsibility of starting a family. What is needed is interrogation of the practices perpetuating cohabitation whilst protecting and preserving the rich values found in the indigenous knowledge and practices in keeping with the changing nature of our societies.

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