

**WIFE'S SUBJECTION AND HUSBAND'S HEADSHIP IN URHOB AND
CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES: A CHRISTO-FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL AND
LIBERATORY APPROACH**

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Abstract

Marriage whether in the Christian or different cultures remains an important human and social institution that is necessary for the survival of humanity. In marriage, the wife and husband play different roles. The way to understand the role of the husband as head and the wife as his companion and suitable helpmate continues to be the subject of debate. This paper uses critical analysis and hermeneutics to argue that the headship of the man is not for domination, conquest, or subjugation of the wife, rather headship is for service and building up family members. The subjection of the wife needs to be understood in a critical Christ-centered, feminist, and liberatory manner. Subjection is not subserviency of slavishness. The misunderstanding of the role of wife and husband has often led to domestic violence, abuse, and many other problems in marriages. The paper concludes that the roles of wife and husband should be redeemed following the healthy praxis of Christ and feminism.

Keywords: Marriage, Wife, Subserviency, Feminism, Husband

Introduction

An issue that has remained troubling and has not helped serve authentic freedom and the human rights of women/wives is the misunderstanding and the misappropriation of biblical texts for the dehumanizing treatment of women in the name of so-called traditional Christian values. The misunderstanding and misappropriation of texts or traditions to dehumanize women is not limited to the Christian tradition. This unhealthy interpretation of texts and praxis fostering oppression of women can also be found in Urhobo cultural texts and praxis.

The goal of this paper is to critically, analytically, and hermeneutically examine some of the biblical and Urhobo cultural texts/beliefs that people have used to subjugate women in the name of improper forms of husband's headship. The goal of the paper is not to deny the subjection of wives or the headship of husbands but to argue for a healthy, Christo-centric, and proper understanding of these issues. A proper understanding of these issues is necessary for creating healthy and prosperous marriages and families and safeguarding the human rights and freedom of women in a society that is still predominantly patriarchal.

In carrying out the goal of this paper, the following procedure shall be adopted. Hereafter the paper will make a conceptual analysis and clarification of the basic concepts. This will be followed by an examination of wives' subjection and husband's headship in Christian and Urhobo marriages. Then there will be an appraisal of these issues in the light of a Christo-Feminist and liberatory perspective. The way forward shall then be sought before the paper is brought to a conclusion. This paper has a special focus and will not delve into issues like the history of marriage, duties, and functions of marriage, types of marriages, and many other controversies about marriage.

Conceptual Analyses

Rhodes (2003) defines marriage from a biblical perspective as a God-founded institution from Genesis 2 verse 18 in which a man gets united with a woman to be a helper to each other beginning with betrothal and the wedding. Biblical marriage is not just the wedding but also the entire life that the married couple has to live together thereafter in having and raising children, serving God and neighbour, and carrying out their duties in life. According to Wynn (2017) marriage, “a common feature of all human society is an institution composed of a culturally accepted union of a man and a woman in husband-wife relationship as well as roles that recognize an order of sexual behavior and legalize the function of parenthood” (p. 676). Christian marriage is grounded in biblical values that see marriage as a covenant of the two partners with themselves and God, and through their marital life, they are to serve God. The Holy See(1994) states that marriage is: “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament” (p. 400).

Rhodes (2003) states that Christians are followers of Christ and they are a distinct group of people separate from Judaism. Christians have accepted and adopted the teachings, messages, and practice of Jesus Christ of Nazareth as their way of life. The word Christian was first used in the bible in Acts 11:26 to refer to those who followed Christ, those who were Christ-like or followers of the way. Christians follow the Christian religion which is one of the world's main religions. Though there are varieties of “Christianities” all derive their origins from the life, message, and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Eruvbetere (2003) writes that the Urhobo people are the largest ethnic group in Delta State in Nigeria, located in the Niger Delta, estimated at 2 million people and have neighbours like the Itshekiri in the South, the Bini in the West, the Isoko in the East, the Ukwuani in the North; and their main occupations are trading, fishing and farming, though the discovery of oil has brought jobs in the oil industry to some.

Sorokwu (2017) writes that Urhobo marriage takes place between a man and a woman with the support of both families, the marriage is not just a union of the two persons but also of both families, the union is seen as sacred and even at the death of the husband the woman remains part of the family, with the woman passed on to another member of the family to ensure stability and support for the woman. Eruvbetere (2003) states that: “Urhobo traditional marriage is unique to Urhobo culture and traditions. Indeed, marriage in the Urhobo worldview is an enduring institution. It is sacred. It looms large enough to tie two independent families together forever. When blessed with offspring, especially male offspring, the nuptial knot is wedded with a cord that neither death nor divorce can break or separate.”

This paper is written from the perspective of a Christo-Feminist theological and liberatory approach. These concepts must be also interrogated. Wienclaw (2017) writes that: the movement of Feminist theology reexamines sacred biblical texts on women and their roles and denounces practices that subject women to inferior positions or see them as inferior; and it also advocates for equity for women, justice, freedom from all structures that marginalizes women. Slee (2003) writes that feminist theology rages against sexism and androcentrism, and whatever privileges the positions and places of men over women, whereby men are assigned to the public square and women to private. A Christo-feminist theological approach is a feminist theology that is rooted in the egalitarian values that Christ taught, and for which he lived and died. Jesus had a healthy relationship with women and spoke positively of women and their issues. He never put women down as was common in some strands of the Jewish tradition. He saw men and women as equal in God and deserving of equal treatment. The term liberatory is used in this work to mean

freedom from oppressive structures, situations, and realities. The approach in this work is that the way that the headship of husbands and by extension men have been exercised and lived in Urhoboland and the Pauline New Testament context is oppressive to women and wives. It has obliterated the rights of women and denied wives their dignity. Feminism is used here as the empowerment and affirmation of the dignity and rights of women. The goal of this work is to show that wives in marriage and family have co-responsibility with their husbands and that their subjection does not mean domination.

Wife's Subjection and Husband's Headship in Urhobo and Christian Marriages

Sociologically some duties have been assigned to wives and husbands in married and family life. In Christianity, there are biblical passages that spell out these duties. Unfortunately, these texts have not always been understood the same way and there are diversities of interpretations and practices. Christian marriages are generally informed by the Pauline texts in Ephesians that is why in most readings for Christian weddings or celebration of marriage this text is read. Most of the most popular passages about the roles and duties of wives and husbands are found in the Pauline epistles. They are so popular that they are often read at wedding masses, services, and functions. A presentation of some of these texts and how they have been understood is pertinent here.

The apostle Saint Paul provides some basis for husband headship over women. He states that the woman is the weaker sex, the woman was the first to fall and led the man to fall also, the woman is for child-bearing, etc. See what he avers in the following verses: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (1 Timothy 2:11-15, RSV). Some have interpreted this passage to mean women are to keep silent in public and if they must it must be in private in submission.

It is tragic how the woman is portrayed as being deceived and seen as a transgressor, while the man who also fell in the Genesis text is glossed over. In this text from 1 Timothy, the role of the woman is seen as it is only to bear children, and without this, they cannot be saved. A literal reading can imply a woman who does not bear children and does not get married cannot be saved. There are many all through history and even in the church who have used these verses for the suppression of women. Women are to keep silent even in church and are to ask their husbands at home. The headship of the man/husband becomes a vehicle to keep women in the background, restrict them to domestic chores, and deny them public roles. If a woman is attempting to enter a public role she is often told that her place is in the kitchen. The man/husband should be head both at home and in public. Alabi (n.d) writes that certain sacred texts have been misinterpreted to enforce women's submission, but the reality is that a deep study of these texts indicates that they do not mean gender discrimination nor women's subjugation and Amba Oduyoye has shown that the Pauline texts in Ephesians 5:21-25, 28, 31, 33 should be read in the light of contextual and cultural applications. It is troubling to simply carry Pauline texts that are often influenced by household codes in Greek and Roman households and place them into today's contexts without critical hermeneutics. Okure (2007) writes that the household code found in Ephesians 5:21ff originated from an unredeemed culture not the liberatory gospel of Jesus Christ, which is good news.

Borg and Crossan (2009) have argued that passages from Paul have been used to justify slavery, subordination of women, and unjust government. They state that not all that we find in the Pauline letters come from the radical and revolutionary Paul. Some are attributed to him. Paul who preached radical equality of men and women in Christ and equality of all races counts not

turnaround and justify slavery, racism, and women's subordination. Borg and Crossan (2009) follow the line of thinking that some reactionary disciples of the original Paul are reacting against their master Paul in these passages that run in conflict with the original vision of Paul. The point to be noted is that whatever is not in line with the gospel of justice, liberation, and healthy living as children of God that is found in Paul or any other writings of the sacred texts should be subjected to critical cultural hermeneutics. Even if it is the Original Paul who became reactionary or conservative in his later life, it is still important to re-interpret him within his context. His reactionary teachings that are contrary to human values and dignity should not be upheld.

In Urhobo traditional marriage as in many types of African traditional marriages, male headship in life and marriage implies that a man can marry many women (polygamous marriage). In this type of marriage, the women's rights are often infringed upon and the man is allowed to treat his wives the way he desires. Eruvbetere (2003) writes that Urhobo men see it as their natural right to have and enjoy many women. His word is often final. I have heard women call the husband "massa," a way of calling master. The mentality of calling the European invaders masters or the biblical practice of a woman calling her husband master has prevailed in many Urhobo marriages. The man is called a master: human words and language matter. The word master makes men feel superior, inflate their egos, and see themselves as conquerors. Many Urhobo men can hardly see meaning in the admonition of Jesus, "Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ" (Matthew 23:10, RSV). While it is true that the text is not to be taken literally the fact is that if the term master is to be used it should be seen as a call to service, sacrifice, solidarity, not oppression or suppression. The headship of the man/husband is for service and protection of the family. Headship is not domination or subjugation of others. Iguanre and Windapo (n.d) cite Oyatoye to state that in many traditional cultures especially in yesteryears the wife (because she is a woman) is seen as the weaker sex, physically vulnerable, and they are to lie in submission which includes being under the man during the sexual act and they are to be passive. This is also present in Urhobo culture. In traditional Urhobo society, the wife is not to be seen sitting with the husband to eat together, she is to prepare the meal, place it on the table, and wait on her husband. She must be nearby waiting for any order that may come from the husband. She is to kneel in submission when presenting food and other items to her husband, the head. She is not to respond even when the husband insults her as she is presenting the meal.

For some the subjection of a wife to her husband also implies that a wife cannot undertake any endeavour in life without approval from the husband. A wife is to depend totally on the husband including for economic resources. And even if a wife perchance brings income and economic resources home the husband must be in charge of allocation as the husband desires.

The Way Forward in the Light of a Christo-Feminist and Liberatory Approach

When it comes to the management of economic resources and income brought by the wife into the home, there should be co-responsibility and collaboration between wife and husband, and not only the husband should be solely in charge of the management of the resources and finances brought by the woman. And by the way, this should apply not only to the economic resources and income brought by the wife but also that brought by the husband. After all, marriage is a partnership of life between the wife and husband, God, and other stakeholder institutions. The purpose for which marriage and family life exist such as the birthing and education of children, health and wellbeing of the couples, and other social roles all require the collaboration of both husband and wife.

A family is a unit, and so also is the marriage between a wife and husband. They need to have a shared vision and mission. The economic resources and finances that come into the home then ought to be accountably shared in meeting the needs of the marriage and family. There is a need

for collective decisions in financial matters, and not in the name of headship of husband putting all decisions into the hands of man. It ought to be realized that marriage is not a sole proprietorship and the husband is the sole administrator. Marriage should be informed by democratic values and the principles of justice. There is a Pauline verse in which he speaks of submitting or subjecting yourself to one another. This verse comes before Paul speaks of the subjection of women to men or wives to their husbands. The submission or subjection of wives comes within the context of mutual submission Paul affirms in the previous verse. Husbands are also to subject themselves Powell (2002) opines that:

Scripture does not mandate a wife giving unquestioning obedience to a husband any more than a husband giving unquestioning obedience to a wife. 'Be subject' in the NRSV is probably better understood as 'be submissive', since the submission Paul is requiring is not something enforced but embraced voluntarily, out of love for Christ and for one another. Another way of thinking of it may be giving in. Giving in to others or compromising our needs or wishes is something that is necessary to make a relationship work and is eventually a mark of strength, not weakness. The relationship advocated is not one of doormat to exploiter but of equals giving in at appropriate times to each other in love (p.703-704)

Men who are husbands should see their headship of families as a call to service and stewardship. The apostle Paul is clear that their headship is like that of Christ. They should be quick to ask themselves how Christ exercises his headship over the church. Powell (2002) rightly notes that the headship of the husband is not in the sense of rulership, lordship, governorship, or boss but in the light of Christ's self-giving one of sacrificial love and care. In Urhobo culture, the husband should be seen as head for service not in domineering and authoritarian rulership over their wives. This is where a healthy reading of the texts in wedding and marriage celebrations and married life comes into place. Christian ministers in Urhoboland and elsewhere should see it as their duty to campaign for healthy marital relationships rooted in mutual self-giving.

There should be healthy and human-affirming interpretations of scriptural texts. Every human being, including wives, is created with certain human rights and inalienable dignity. The rights of wives to live healthy lives and have their human rights respected should be affirmed. Religion does not have the power or government to take away the rights of people or subjugate them. Texts in the scripture including Pauline texts should be read in the light of the liberatory and justice values that Jesus preached and lived for in the gospel. In the life and ministry of Jesus, he affirmed the dignity and value of not only women but wives. To the question of divorce brought to him Jesus asserts that it was not so from the beginning. God planned that there should be no divorce, and even when the law of Moses permitted it, it was to make it hard for husbands to throw out their wives as they like. Alabi (n.d) writes that women like men are created in God's image and likeness, they are to govern with men over God's creation, from Genesis 1:26 she is blessed and endowed with blessings as the man having divine privileges, she is not subsidiary and before Genesis 3:16 which some use to teach that women are cursed and are to be subjugated to men, God had already coffered his original blessings.

Alabi (n.d) shows further that the institution of marriage from Genesis 2:18-25 shows that though the male is distinct from the female, sexual difference is not a basis for patriarchy, Adam in seeing the woman did not see her as a property, a subordinate, a nonentity, a subsidiary or slave but appreciated woman, who is now his wife with the beautiful words (This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh). The woman (wife) is of the same natural stuff as the man. The wife is created to be a helper and companion. The wife helps the husband not as an inferior or subordinate but as a partner. True biblical headship does not mean that the husband is up and the wife is down. The relationship between husband and wife should be a cooperative one not competitive or a military school of commandry where the husband exercises authority like pagan

monarchs. Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (2010) states that: “Women, just like men, are created in the image and likeness of God. Created by God, in this context, means that they too are endowed with wisdom and knowledge, which men seem to have made their prerogative” (p. 15). It is necessary to restate this because often women and wives are not part of decision-making. In Urhoboland some husbands have failed to train their girl-child and have refused to allow their wives into politics, business, and into the economic world. This author has seen situations in which husbands made their wives domestic housewives without outdoor functions except to go to the market to buy foodstuff and come home to cook. This of course is extremely dangerous. If the husband dies before the wife the wife is put into economic jeopardy as she has no source of income. In the biblical tradition, Prophetess Deborah was a wife, but that did not stop her from being a judge, mediator, and leader in war.

There is a need for correct hermeneutics of the biblical texts, especially the Pauline texts. It is important to note that Ephesians is considered by some scholars not to be written by Paul but by his followers. Powell (2002) disputes this and affirms that it was written by Paul from prison. Powell (2002) argues that the instruction for wives' submission should not be separate from the “mutual submission of all believers within the body of Christ but flows from it. It shows that Paul is not requiring submission from wives only and therefore relegating wives to a subordinate place within marriage(p. 701). Submission and giving way to one another should inform all types of human relationships. Relationships are places of mutual interactions in those engaged in the relationships. It is mutual supporting, teaming together, and enriching one another in achieving common and personal goals. They are not battlegrounds for conquest or one party oppressing and suffocating the other in the name of headship.

Taking a look at the bible from its origin, Mathews(2002) argues that Genesis 1 and 2 establish a relationship of equality between males and females in marriage, but in Genesis 3 the relationship of equality gives way to the hierarchical relationship in marriage as a result of the fall as women from there on are seen as properties to be owned and given in marriage as they are bartered by their fathers; “...the picture in the Old Testament is not one of unrelenting hierarchy, individual women exercised political, religious and familial authority in ways that challenged the prevailing patterns of hierarchy” (p.702). For the sake of this paper which focuses on wives and husbands, the example of wives who played critical roles in scripture such as Deborah, Huldah, Abigail, Naomi, Ruth, and Anna, should be highlighted. Mathews (2002) in arguing for equality in the home over hierarchicalism states further the followings: (1) in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 both wife and husband have needs that should be met as both partners reciprocally exercise authority and rights over one another, and decision making rooted in consensual partnership; (2) Ephesians 5 verse 22 that calls for wives submission to their husbands should not be separated from verse 21 that enjoins mutual submission; (3) the passage in Ephesians 5 is not that of husbands exercising authority or power over wives but wives devotion to their husbands following the manner of Christ to the Father and husbands showing sacrificial love to their wives (which is equally a form of submission).

Havener (2001) corroborates the idea that verses 22-24 of chapter 5 of Ephesians should not be taken out of context and seen as putting down women, and it is noted that husbands and wives are united in the body of Christ. Barclay (1976) one of the most notable biblical scholars writes that the love required of husbands is sacrificial, purifying, caring, and unbreakable, and real love is above extracting service from the wife and does not see the wife as an object to simply wash clothes, cook meals and take care of children. Jesus related to women in his ministry healthily. Many of the women he related to were wives at home. Even though the Samaritan women had suffered in different marriages Jesus spoke with her affirming her humanity.

Conclusion

This paper did a reinterpretation and reimagining of the texts in Ephesians chapter 5 that has been used to justify the oppression of wives and by extension women. It also looked at Urhobo culture in examining how wives have been maltreated. The study was done analytically and hermeneutically using ideas from Feminist theological and Christ-liberatory perspectives. The paper argued that men and women, husband and wives are radically equal in Christ. Equality does not mean they play the same roles or occupy the same position. It should be that the position of the husband at home is that of headship, but it is argued that headship is for service and healthy leadership at home and in society. Biblical passages should be reinterpreted and never be used to suppress or oppress women/wives. If there is a proper understanding of the headship of husbands and the subjection of women, it will help build more peaceful marriages and families.

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