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Socio-Cultural Causes of Marriage Destruction in Ancient Rwandan Society

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Introduction

Conflict is a natural and inherent phenomena in marital relations, as a result of different interests, opinions, and perspectives between couple members (Delatorre & Wagner, 2018). Marital conflict was conceptualized as an overt opposition between spouses, which generates disagreements and relationship difficulties (Fincham, 2009).

Marital conflict may be constructive or destructive (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; McCoy et al., 2009). Marital conflict is said to be constructive when spouses deal with conflict in positive ways by displaying behaviors, such as verbal and physical affection, problem solving and support (McCoy et al., 2009; Goeke-Morey et al., 2003). Marital conflict is described as destructive when it is hostile, angry, and contains conflict tactics such as physical aggression, verbal aggression, threat, and personal

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insult (McCoy et al., 2009; Goeke-Morey et al., 2003). There is a link between marital problems and mental illness (Fincham, 2003; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles et al., 2014; Whisman & Baucom, 2011)

The problem of destructive marital conflict has not yet been sufficiently explored in Rwanda (Mukashema & Sapsford, 2013). The small number of publications available cover a period referred to as the post-genocide period in Rwanda. It is noted that the genocide of 1994 perpetrated against the Tutsis is a reference time separating the pre- and post-periods in relation to that genocide. As a matter of fact, the genocide had several consequences, including psychosocial ones. In this perspective, marital conflict in Rwanda can be seen as a legacy of that genocide (Sarabwe et al., 2018). Other mentioned causes of the alarming destructive marital conflict in Rwanda today include misinterpretation of gender-related laws by spouses (Ndushabandi et al., 2016) as well as a misunderstanding of gender roles and human rights (Mukashema & Sapsford, 2013).

The contribution of this chapter is that it describes the elders' views on socio-cultural causes of marriage destruction in the traditional Rwandan society. The chapter is an attempt toward devising a possible solution to the alarming state of marital and family life today through a Rwandan cultural lens.

Socio-Cultural Causes of Marriage Destruction in the Ancient Rwandan Society

The outcomes presented in this chapter about the characteristics of marital and family life in customary Rwanda are from the field data collected from Rwandan elders. These participants were distributed in a mixed group made up of two males and three females selected from the “Guardian of memory” known as *Inteko Izirikana* (IN) located in Kigali city; a mixed group made up of five males and two females from the Rwanda Elders Advisory Forum (RE) in Kigali City; two homogeneous groups made up of seven males and eleven females respectively, selected from the district of Nyanza (Ny) of the southern province of Rwanda;

and two homogeneous groups made up of eight males and seven females respectively, selected from the district of Karongi (Ka) of the western province of Rwanda.

The data were collected and analyzed using methodological approaches detailed in Chapter 2 of this book.

The findings reveal that there was destructive marital conflict in pre-genocide Rwandan society. The causes of marriage destruction in ancient Rwandan society as voiced by the research participants included: hidden disease and malformation, adultery, marital sexual relation dissatisfaction, uncleanliness and lack of hygiene on the side of the wife, drunkenness, disrespect, stealing, and infertility.

Existence or Non-existence of Destructive Marital Conflict in Pre-genocide Rwandan Society

Destructive marital conflict is the key focus of this research. With reference to the general tendency in the views of Rwandan elders who participated in the study, destructive marital conflict existed in pre-genocide Rwandan society.

Marital conflict existed and there is no doubt about this. If a woman could leave her husband and flee the marital home, this is a strong evidence that conflicts between her and her husband existed. Psychological and even physical violence existed too. Spouses could repeatedly exchange negative words, a situation of discussions which was not aimed at solutions to problems but rather a mere dispute which could lead to the spouses fighting among themselves. (RE, male)

I confirm marital conflict existed and that its causes were numerous. For example, marital conflict could result from behavior like exaggerated drunkenness. However, let's remember that the families had a way of preparing the future spouses to show good behaviors and patience with each other. In some instances, a woman could be beaten by her husband to mean that domestic violence and marital conflict existed. (RE, female)

Destructive marital conflict existed in ancient Rwandan society but that was not so frequent. The participants in the study made it clear that there could be some marital conflict cases among the ancient Rwandan spouses, but added that conflict was not really frequent. Destructive marital conflict could occur in ancient Rwandan society, but it was not frequent. (RE, female)

There could be destructive marital conflict cases in the ancient Rwandan society, but they were not frequent. They were not so many cases of conflict which could be noticed. I can say that you could hardly see very few spouses in marital quarrel in ancient Rwanda. (Ny, female)

Conflict was not inexistent among rational Rwanda spouses, but it would not often spread to the public to be known to all. (Ny, male)

Marital conflicts existed but there were mechanisms to prevent and resolve them in order to sustain marital homes. In short, marital conflict existed. (RE, female)

The difference between Rwandan ancient marital homes and those of today is that in ancient Rwandan society, there were cultural safeguards which would push the spouses to get rid of situations of shame such as marital conflict. Marital secrecy was primarily a value that was preserved and this would make the spouses handle the disputes internally. Each spouse would try their best to avoid disappointment to their extended families of origin. Today, however, there is no place for the family, the spouses are individualistic. (IN, male)

The spouses in ancient Rwandan society would discuss and agree on everything to do in the marital home. I, myself, can confirm that from time to time, there was some little conflict between my own parents but we could not get to know anything about this as children. We cannot say that there was no conflict between the parents, but the parents could not argue in the eyes of their children. (IN, female)

In ancient Rwandan society, there were cultural ways of preventing destructive marital conflict in new households. The prevention of destructive marital conflict in new households would mainly and primarily run

through the family upbringing of the children and youth. Firstly, the children were to observe the parental life process, and secondly they would abide by the verbal pieces of advice given to them especially just before the time of their own marriage. In ancient Rwandan society, the parental marital daily lifestyle was playing an important role in preventing destructive marital conflict for the future spouses. It was a kind of training based on a family life approach aiming at the preparation of young people to their marriage in future and to their subsequent marital life. (IN, female)

The young people would observe their parents living carefully and peacefully in their own marital life. This could serve as a lesson and help them such that they would also avoid destructive marital conflict when they get married. (RE, Male)

The destructive marital conflict prevention was also done through verbal pieces of advice which specifically were given to the young people about to get married. They would be guided on the action to be taken in case of conflict in their new household. In their respective family of origin, the bride and the groom, through observation, would learn and get prepared for their marriage. They would be told that if a controversy rises in their life once married, they ought not to fight each other. They would rather have to approach the parents and tell them what was going wrong. The parents would then help them manage the controversial situations. (Ny, female)

Causes of Marriage Destruction in the Ancient Rwandan Society

In the ancient Rwandan society, the factors of marriage destruction included diseases, disabilities, and misbehaviors. As a result of one or combination of these, there could be separation of the spouses, thus marriage destruction. The participants in this research stressed a number of misbehaviors on the side of the spouses that were taken as a very serious and particular offence, especially when they were exhibited by women. They also highlighted some other causes that could lead to marital conflict that include the following.

Hidden Disease and Physical Malformation

In the ancient Rwandan society, it was a taboo for the prospective spouses to have sex before marriage. They would meet for the first time on the very day of their marriage. Because of this practice in the marriage process, it was possible for a spouse to discover a given abnormality in his/her partner. That abnormality could be a physical abnormality or a hidden disease. Depending on the type of abnormality, it was possible that the marriage could end there. If abnormality was noticed on the side of the wife, she was sent back to her family of origin (*gusenda*). If, however it was noticed in the husband, he was left by his wife. The ancient Rwandan society was of the view that there was nothing wrong in doing so in such a situation.

As the spouses could not know each other before their marriage, it was possible that either of them might discover an abnormality in the other and that abnormality could make the marriage end immediately. The wife was sent back to her family of origin (*gusenda*), the husband was left by his wife because the society was viewing this as a right thing to do in case of abnormality or disease. A visible physical malformation or a hidden disease like tuberculosis would also be a cause of divorce. There was nothing wrong for a spouse to leave his/her partner in such a situation. (RE, male)

If a woman got married to a man and she found that the husband had a sickness like stinking (*isundwe*), then it was her right to leave that gentleman for good. (IN, male)

Adultery

If one of the spouses was ever engaged in some cheating, this could end in marriage break-up. Cases of adultery which had come to be known by the public could lead to the complete destruction of the marriage. Adultery, especially when committed by the wife, was particularly taken as an unforgivable sin.

If the husband was caught committing adultery for nearly two times, and when his wife had come to know it, this would eventually end up into marriage ruin. It was particularly a big shame for a wife who committed adultery though. When it was known that a wife had committed adultery, that behavior would make the husband kick his wife away to her family of origin or he would immediately leave her alone. The wife's adultery in the knowledge of the husband was such an unforgivable sin that it would cause a serious quarrel with him. (RE, male)

When a wife tended visibly to be attracted by other men, this tendency could also lead to the ruin of her marriage. (Ny, female)

Marital Sexual Relations Dissatisfaction

Sexual relations dissatisfaction could lead to marital disputes, which in turn could result in destructive marital conflict.

Sexual relations dissatisfaction could lead to marital disputes. When one of the spouses was not satisfied and felt displeased toward his/her partner, one of them, especially the dissatisfied one, could engage in some cheating and this could end in marriage break-up. (Ny, male)

A woman could be sent home by her husband on the ground of sexual dissatisfaction for the latter (RE, female)

Uncleanliness and Lack of Hygiene on the Side of the Wife

In the ancient Rwandan societies' gender roles, the wife was specifically in charge of the hygiene of the household, and for the hygiene of the members of her household, among other responsibilities.

When the wife was dirty and was failing to fulfill her responsibilities regarding assurance of proper hygiene in the household, this was a cause of marriage destruction. A wife with dirtiness was a case of humiliation

for the family; this was an unbearable misbehavior. Dirtiness, i.e., lack of hygiene, was one of the causes of quarrel between spouses. (IN, male)

Drunkenness

Drunkenness on the side of the wife was not socially tolerated. It would cause quarrels between her and her husband unless the husband was too soft.

Drunkenness was a misbehavior that could cause quarrels among spouses. When the wife was a drunkard, this was particularly serious and it was socially intolerable. There were bad behaviors which men could show and yet that the society could tolerate but it was so unlikely when it came to their wives. (IN, male)

Disrespect

The wife had to be careful about her behavior and ought to show a behavior of respect toward her husband.

Whenever a husband had tried to make a call to his wife and yet the latter had neglected or refused to serve him as he had asked, that could lead to her expulsion from the family. Such behavior was more seriously castigated when efforts had been made for some time to correct her, but in vain. In this case, the husband would have a right to remarry with hope that the new wife could behave and show more respect to him than the first one. (Ny, female)

When a husband had made allegations that his wife was showing disrespect toward him, this could have a lot of meaning in ancient Rwandan culture. For example, that would mean that when he returned home drunk, his wife maybe did not receive him with respect. It could mean also that things had not happen so properly in bed for him to obtain satisfaction. (RE, female)

Stealing

The act of stealing carried out by one of the spouses could be a possible reason to raise up conflict and lead to marriage destruction, and this misbehavior was mainly shown by men.

When the husband was stealing the household property; i.e., if farm harvests were being dilapidated and/or taken away by the husband without any reason, and when this was noticed by the wife, this could lead to marriage break-up. (Ny, male)

Infertility

Failure to give birth in the household was attributed to the wife, and that was taken as an abnormality in the ancient Rwandan culture. As a result of this, the wife could be sent back to her family of origin.

Among the abnormalities in ancient Rwandan society, there was infertility that would often be attributed to the woman who had failed to give birth. In such a situation, her husband could kick her out of the house and send her back to her family of origin. (RE, male)

The woman could be sent home by her husband on the ground of infertility [here this does not say that there was evidence that it was the woman who was sterile]. (RE, female)

Discussion

This section discusses the findings regarding the views of the elders about the existence of destructive marital conflict and the causes of marriage destruction in the ancient Rwandan society. The findings show that even for the rare cases of destructive marital conflict which existed, the marital life shaping in ancient Rwandan society was such that there were mechanisms to deal with the spousal disputes within the families so as to avoid divorce. Divorce was socially allowed only for specific cases.

Existence or Non-existence of Destructive Marital Conflict in Ancient Rwandan Society

The existence of cases of destructive marital conflict was a reality in ancient Rwandan society, according to the participants in the current research. The findings illustrate that marital conflict is obviously a phenomenon that cannot totally be prevented by spouses. Marital conflict is linked to marital relations (Delatorre & Wagner, 2018; Fincham & Beach, 1999). Spouses in ancient Rwandan society did not make an exception to this, but cases of destructive marital conflict are said to have been not frequent. The concept of “non-frequency” with regard to marital conflict in ancient Rwandan society can actually be nuanced. This can be interpreted and/or explained in two ways.

On the one hand, one may assume that conflict existed and was probably frequent, but that it was not reported, or not easily discovered to become publicly known. Cultural values in ancient Rwanda were shaped in such a way that neither of the spouses would make their marital conflict publically known, i.e., revealed to the world outside their household and/or outside their two families of origin. This was learned naturally and by emulation from one generation to another, i.e., from parents to children, and the practice of keeping family business private was seriously stressed on prior to marriage.

On the other hand, the frequency of destructive marital conflict was really low because of permanent ties between new spouses and their families of origin. These two families of the spouses’ origin had important roles to play in supporting the new spouses’ good marital relations (Chereji & King, 2015). Participation and involvement of the spouses’ families of origin, if not a constant presence, in the whole marriage process and during the marital life of the children, would somewhat constitute a cultural and psychosocial pressure to the new households. As a result of such pressure, the two spouses had to strive to prevent destructive marital conflict. This was triggered by the fact that marriage was seen as a union of the two in-law families beyond the fact of being a union between the two new spouses (Arugu, 2014). Thus, any misunderstanding between the spouses, which eventually could lead to the breach of such a union, would be a shame for their families (Chereji & King,

2015). Each of the spouses would do anything to prevent conflict for fear of creating public shame, not only on themselves, but also on the families they had been brought up in.

Causes of Marriage Destruction in the Ancient Rwandan Society

The Rwandans participating in this study did not mention marital conflict as a potential cause of marriage destruction as such in the ancient Rwandan society. Instead, they listed a number of factors which could lead to marital dissolution, i.e., marriage destruction, in ancient Rwanda. These factors of marriage destruction included hidden diseases, disabilities, and misbehaviors. The participants stressed misbehavior in spouses as very serious and particular offences, especially when they were exhibited by women.

Prior to marriage in some African traditional societies, investigation was conducted in order to find whether there existed various chronic diseases, especially the contagious ones, and to inquire about the behaviors in the family intended to become the family-in-law (Chereji & King, 2015). The investigation was necessary in order to protect and maintain the marriage and the moral status of the families as the family unit was the guarantor of security (Huyse & Salter, 2008). Sometimes, it was not easy to get to know about a disease in a spouse if this was not revealed, and the partner would later on be allowed to divorce if ever this was discovered.

When talking about spousal misbehaviors, the Rwandan elders participating in this study showed that some behaviors were specific to either sex. Bad behaviors like adultery were common to both wives and husbands. Some others like dirtiness and disrespect were considered bad behaviors exclusively in women; while stealing and the like could be particularly seen in men. Cases of adultery that had already come to be known by the public in the ancient Rwandan society could put an end to the marriage. When adultery was particularly committed by the wife, this was taken as an unforgivable sin. There was a mere exaggeration of women's adultery over men's, since adultery was a somewhat commonly

tolerated practice. Research has shown that the culture could not tolerate the fact that someone's wife had committed adultery, and yet she still had further conjugal relations (Mathebula, 2017).

In a study conducted by Dhont et al. (2011), sexual relations dissatisfaction was more frequently reported by infertile than fertile couples. The psychosocial consequences suffered by infertile couples in Rwanda are severe and similar to those reported in other resource-poor countries (Dhont et al., 2011). When the wife was dirty or had failed to care for hygiene in the household, this was a cause of sending her back to her family of origin. Drunkenness displayed by a woman would cause quarrels between her and with her husband except when the latter was too soft. Also, researchers suggest that an African man is likely to divorce his wife when he feels that she disrespects him (Preller, 2014; Scarpitti & Anderson, 2011).

Infertility was a cause of marriage break-up in ancient Rwandan society. The absence of fertility was attributed to the wife. In African societies in general, there was a profound conviction that children are a blessing, and so failure to produce children was considered a misfortune. There is a belief that a marriage without children has not yet achieved its objectives (Chereji & King, 2015). A marriage that is not blessed with children has not achieved its aim (Arugu, 2014). Infertile women were more likely to encounter domestic violence (Rahebi et al., 2019). Traditionally, the state of childlessness in marriage within some African societies was a factor that could influence and lead to automatic divorce (Chereji & King, 2015). A childless marriage could be a cause of divorce in the ancient Rwandan society as well.

Conclusion

This research verified the existence of destructive marital life and described the causes of marriage destruction in ancient Rwandan society. Marital conflict existed in ancient Rwandan society but cases were not frequent or alarming. This can have a double explanation. First, there were cultural values that would stop the spouses from making marital conflicts publicly known. Second, marital conflict in new homes within

ancient Rwandan society was prevented through an upbringing from a young age that would lead to some emulation of the parents. New spouses would behave in the ways they had observed throughout the marital life course of their parents, and would go by the advice given to them by their elders, prior to their marriage.

Even if divorce was not seen as an option to solve marital problems in the ancient Rwandan society, there were culturally accepted cases where the spouses were allowed to divorce. These included: cases of adultery, discovering of a hidden disease or/and malformation in one of the spouses, marital sexual relations dissatisfaction, dirtiness and lack of hygiene on the side of the wife, drunkenness, disrespect, stealing, and infertility. Among the causes of marriage destruction in ancient Rwandan society, some seem to have been specific to either sex. Bad behaviors like adultery were common to both wives and husbands. Some others like dirtiness and disrespect were specifically considered for women, while stealing and the like could be particularly seen in men. Coping strategies in traditional Rwandan society should be explored, and the applicability of cultural values in preventing destructive marital conflict that has become frequent in today's new homes, is today essential.

Implications

The current research used focus group discussions, and thus the findings may not be generalized. However, they give insight on what marital life in the ancient Rwandan society was like, and some experiences can be taken from there, built on, and adapted to home-grown solutions for a better and healthier marital life in today's Rwandan society. The findings will be of particular interest for the following groups of people: participants in the current study, young people about to get married, policymakers, religious authorities, and married people.

Limitations

This chapter discussed the perceptions of participants on destructive marital conflict in ancient Rwandan society, and its goal has been achieved. However, applying it to the broader population would need further researches. The next researches could aim to systematically compare ancient and modern marital life in Rwandan society with a larger sample, and to explore the applicability of cultural values in preventing destructive marital conflict in today's new families.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest.

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