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Woman as Mother and Wife in the African Context of the Family in the Light of John Paul II's Anthropological and Theological Foundation: The Case Reflected within the Bantu and Nilotic Tribes of Kenya

A DISSERTATION

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By

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Woman as Mother and Wife in the African Context of the Family in the Light of John Paul II's Anthropological and Theological Foundation: The Case reflected within the Bantu and Nilotic Tribes of Kenya

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This study examines the theological and anthropological foundations of the understanding of the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife, gifts given by God that expresses the riches of the African concept of family.

There are two approaches to inculturation theology in Africa, namely, that which attempts to construct African theology by starting from the biblical ecclesial teachings and finds from them what features of African are relevant to the Christian theological and anthropological values, and the other one takes the African cultural background as the point of departure.

The first section examines the cultural concept of woman as a mother and wife in the African context of the family, focusing mainly on the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya. This presentation examines African creation myths, oral stories, some key concepts, namely life, family, clan and community, marriage and procreation, and considers the understandings of African theologians and bishops relating to the “the Church as Family.”

The second section examines the theological anthropology of John Paul II focusing mainly on his *Theology of the Body* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*. The third section presents the theology of inculturation, examines the African theological anthropological values and compares the teachings of John Paul II with the African, draws a conclusion and synthesis.

According to John Paul II, the dignity and vocation of woman is “something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships, which, in the most varied ways, shape society and structure the interaction between all persons,” (*Mulieris Dignitatem* no. 29). This “concerns each and every woman, independent of the cultural context in which she lives and independently of her spiritual, psychological and physical characteristics, as for example, age, education, health, work, and whether she is married or single,” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29).

The theology of inculturation as presented in this dissertation opens the way for the integration of theological anthropological teachings of John Paul II in understanding African woman as mother and wife.

The dissertation by Joseph O. Adhunga fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Theology approved by Brian V. Johnstone, S.T.D., as Director, and Dismas A. Masolo, Ph.D. and Susan Wessel, Ph.D. as readers.

Brian V. Johnstone, S.T.D, Director

Dismas A. Masolo, Ph.D.

Susan Wessel, Ph.D.

DEDICATION

This work is respectfully dedicated to the honor of my parents, especially my mother Helena, from who became a widow at a young and tender age, accepted the gift of motherhood with love, loved and offer her whole life for service for her children and the family. From her I first learned that every woman shares in the great mystery through the service and the spirit which women give to humankind. A mother is the principle unity of a family, the first teacher and the backbone of the family, the Church and society.

Also the work is dedicated to the honor of women I have worked with especially Saints Monica and Anna groups in Mombasa Bomu Parish in the Archdiocese of Mombasa and the Women of St. Raymond Parish in the Arlington diocese. Through the intercession of Our Blessed Mother Mary, the Woman of Nazareth, may God bless you all. Amen.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

In September 1995, Pope John II came to Nairobi, Kenya to commemorate the Synod of the African Bishops which had taken place in Rome in 1994. The Pope came to celebrate the Synod on African soil and to bring the fruits of the Synod in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*. In his message to the congregation gathered at Uhuru Park in Nairobi, he expressed a hope that African theologians would “work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church.”¹ During the African Synod in Rome, attention was given to the African Church as “the family of God.” Since then, many African bishops and theologians have written a number of theological treatises on the African Church as Family, e.g., on “marriage and family,” “family of God,” and other related topics, but nothing has been written specifically about the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife in the African context of the family.

¹ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, trans. Vatican (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publication, 1995), n. 63. AAS 88 (1996), 55-71. In this text in *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul referred to the “Prepositions: Synod Documents,” which the Synod Fathers used as a source for the discussion in preparation for the Synod, which included *Lineamenta*, *the Instrumentum Laboris*, *the Report of the General Secretary*, *the Relatio post disceptionem*, *the Reports of the Circuli Minores* and their discussions. In this text the Pope is referring to Maura Browne, SND. ed. *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), Proposition 8. In this context, the unique elements which are emphasized in an African family are: caring, solidarity, warmth of family relations, acceptance, dialogue, and trust some of the characteristics of motherhood in the African context of that with some theological significance to them. The dignity and vocation of woman is derived from the theological significance. In this context, the unique elements which are emphasized in an African family are: caring, solidarity, warmth of the family, relations, acceptance dialogue, and trust as some of the characteristics of motherhood in the African context having theological significance. Hence the dignity and vocation of woman is derived from the theological anthropological significance.

African tradition, particularly among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya, exalts the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife, as central to the family. Woman is the unifying principle; she is not only a mother and the wife of one man, but as such she shares a central position in the cultural life of African society. In the Bantu and Nilotic creation myths and oral stories, women are presented as having an innate desire to fully realize their dignity and vocation as mothers and eventually grandmothers. Women who are not able to bear their own babies because of health or other reasons, nevertheless, share in communal motherhood, which is an aspect of African community life. The dignity and vocation of women are revealed in some key concepts such as life, family, clan, and community. These concepts, directly linked to life, are gifts from God realized through marriage between a man and a woman. The concept of marriage and procreation are directly connected to the dignity and vocation of women. Women are the first custodians of the gift of human life; by their very being they provide the first home for human life, the womb.

John Paul II also presented a theological and anthropological understanding of the dignity and vocation of women in the *Theology of the Body* and *Mulieris Dignitatem* which can be applied to the African understanding of women in the family. *The Theology of the Body* refers to the talks which the Pope gave to his general audience almost every Wednesday in the first five years of his papacy. The original title of this series of talks was *Man and Woman He Created Them*. In them he emphasized, among other things, that God created man in his own image as male and female. He also asserts that man and woman are equal and complementary epiphanies or images of God, whose full image is found only in their nuptial union. He coined a special term for this reality, the “nuptial meaning of the

body.” He argued that the “nuptial meaning” of the body is deepened and enriched by motherhood and fatherhood. The female’s body is a sign of a gift to the man and the man’s is a sign of a gift to the woman from the beginning. In his Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul summarized the *specific* dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife.² Motherhood is the practical and fundamental path of self-giving and the communion of persons for women. According to the Pope, motherhood implies ‘from the beginning’ a “special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman’s ‘part.’” Here, the Pope notes that in her openness, in conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman “discovers herself through a sincere gift of the self.”³ Within this theology of the “gift,” both religious life and consecrated virginity can participate in the life-giving dignity of motherhood of which the Blessed Virgin Mary is the model.

The Pope pointed out in *Mulieris Dignitatem* that the dignity and vocation of woman is “something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships, which ... shape society and structure the interaction between all persons.”⁴ It is necessary to apply an inculturation theology in order to make the teaching of John Paul II profitable to other cultures. Inculturation is a process by which “catechesis ‘takes flesh’ in the various cultures.”⁵ Inculturation has two dimensions: one is the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity, and the other one is the insertion of Christianity in various human cultures.

² John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, On the Dignity and Vocation of Women *Mulieris Dignitatem*, trans. Vatican (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1998), no. 18, AAS 80 (1998), 1653-1729.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., no. 31.

⁵ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 59.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to apply the theological and anthropological teachings of John Paul II concerning the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife to the central role of women in the African context of the family among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya through the theology of inculturation.

Methodology

A critical theological and anthropological application of the teachings of John Paul II needs a proper context; therefore, this dissertation will include the following parts. Following the introduction, the first section will present and examine the traditional concept of woman as a mother and wife in the African context of the family, focusing mainly on the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya. This explanation will include a presentation of African creation myths, oral stories, views of African theologians and bishops, focusing mainly on what has been written on “marriage and procreation,” “family,” and “the Church as a family” which was discussed during the African Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1994, and other related topics. It will also include an examination of some key concepts such as life, family, clan, and community.

The second section will investigate the theological anthropology of John Paul II, focusing mainly on his *Theology of the Body* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*. This section will focus mainly on the Pope’s key themes which are central to the understanding of the dignity

and vocation of women, e.g., the “Beginning,” the meaning of the “Original Solitude,” “Original Unity,” “the Dimension of the Gift,” the “Spousal Meaning of the Body,” and related topics. The theological analysis of *Mulieris Dignitatem* will further show that there are two dimensions of womanhood, namely virginity and motherhood. These two realities acquire their full meaning and value in the Blessed Virgin Mary, understood as the theology of the “gift.”

The third section will be the application of the theology of inculturation: this will compare the theological anthropology of John Paul II with African theological anthropology and apply the teaching of John Paul II to the understanding of woman as mother and wife within the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya.

Finally, the study will provide a synthesis of the whole study and a conclusion.

Contribution and Originality

No study has been done up till now on the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife in the African context of the family. Therefore, my dissertation is an attempt to provide the theological and anthropological understanding of the dignity and vocation of woman as a mother and wife as central in the African family context in the light of the theological anthropology of John Paul II through the theology of inculturation among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya.

One of the most challenging questions and controversial subjects to write about in our contemporary society is the “dignity and vocation” of women. This may be so because of the influence from the secular views of women, or from what individual women consider themselves to be. These trends are contrary to the Bantu and Nilotic thinking. According to Bénézet Bujo, “fatherhood and motherhood are preferred to the dimension of husband and wife, because African marriage is regarded as a source of life.”⁶ In reality, the mother of life is a woman. Generally, the controversy arises from the modern tendency to think as individuals outside God’s plan of creation.⁷ In other words, considering achievements in the world to be achievements of an individual to the exclusion of any consideration of the plan of God in his creation and what God has called each individual to be.⁸

Incidentally, Charles Taylor laments that gone are the good old days when every event in human life was considered as God’s plan. God was implicated in the very existence of every society.⁹ According to Taylor:

The natural world they lived in, which had its place in the cosmos they imagined, testified to divine purpose and action; and not just in the obvious way which we can still understand and (at least many of us) appreciate today, that its order and designs bespeak creation; but also because the great events in this natural order, storms, droughts, floods, plagues, as well as years of

⁶ Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 95. See also J. Bryson Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage* (Nairobi, Kenya: Uzima Press, 1998), 102. For Arthur, the ‘dignity and vocation of women’ is a ‘natural’ assumption which can be applicable to every woman.

⁷ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*: 95.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Massachusetts, Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard Press, 2007), 25-28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

exceptional fertility and flourishing were seen as acts of God, as the now dead metaphor of our legal language still bears witness.¹⁰

This is the age where secularism and individualism become key challenges in society. As a result marriage between a man and a woman, traditionally a sacred institution, is threatened. Therefore, the position and the roles of woman as a mother and wife are challenged.

This dissertation focuses on the ontological roots of the dignity and vocation of women according to God's plan of creation as it is understood in the African context of the family reflected within the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya. Ontology for the Bantu and Nilotic people in this context means that man and woman are different, with specific modes of being according to God's plan of creation. Each has a particular capacity to participate in the plan of creation according to their ontological constitution. Therefore, according to the Bantu and Nilotic peoples, the dignity and vocation of women comes from the plan of God revealed in being a woman.

All Kenyans belong to either Bantu or Nilotic people. There are over forty-two major sub-groups of the Bantu and Nilotic people. Each of these forty-two tribes belongs to either the Bantu or Nilotic tribe. The Bantu and Nilotic represent the forty-two tribes, which speak two major languages. A study of all forty-two tribes would be too broad in scope. Therefore, this study will be limited to one major Bantu tribe, the Kikuyu, and one major Nilotic tribe, the Luo. According to African beliefs and understanding, God created man and woman and gave each a specific dignity and vocation that cannot be altered. Moreover, the culture in

¹⁰ Ibid.

which one lives helps one to accept and appreciate these wonderful human realities of being human as a gift from God. The Kikuyu and Luo people share the same faith and belief: that the dignity and vocation of women is deeply rooted in nature and does not differ from one culture to another or is not unique to any particular culture. They presume that what is particular to the Bantu and Nilotic women is common to any woman in any culture. This line of thought seems to be in line with the teachings of Pope John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* and *The Theology of the Body*. The dignity and vocation of woman as a mother and wife in the Pope's view can be applied to any woman in any culture because it is rooted in her very female from the "beginning."

According to traditional African culture, the dignity and vocation of a human person is understood properly in the context of God's plan of creation. This is revealed in traditional African religion. Religion is part and parcel of human life; the human person, and all his/her achievements, is seen as part of being in relation with the Creator. John S. Mbiti confirmed that: "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to isolate it."¹¹ This concept is important in understanding the dignity and vocation of woman in the context of African family life because if human life is perceived otherwise, the sacred traditional meaning of human life and family can easily diminish.

¹¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers, 2002), 1.

In traditional African anthropology, being a woman has greater religious significance than being a man due to her mystical power of procreation. The truth of this reality, and of human life in general, is taught through African songs, proverbs, myths, oral history, legends, and stories which are passed on to every generation. Mbiti confirmed that each and every African tribe/people has its own body of myths, stories, legends and oral history, and women are featured prominently in all of them.¹² He emphasized that “some myths speak about an original Mother of mankind, from whom all people originated.”¹³ He argued that “the main idea here is to link human life with God through woman. She herself is created by God and in turn becomes the instrument of human life.”¹⁴

Being a mother, therefore, is not only seen as being the mother of an individual child, but also in the tradition, she is a mother of the clan, the tribe, and the nation. In other words, for Africans, a woman is a mother of life, ---undifferentiated life. Her motherhood is clearly expressed among the Luo people of Kenya by the title respectfully used to address a pregnant woman, ‘*Min Oganda*,’ which means the Mother of a clan, tribe, or nation. Among Catholics, this same title is used to refer to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Therefore, for the Luo community as well as other tribes, motherhood has an anthropological and theological foundation. It is through the mystical power of motherhood that African women across the continent perceive their dignity and vocation. They are proud to fulfill their unique role in African society.

¹² John S. Mbiti, “Flowers in the Garden: The Role of the African Women in Religion,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, Jacob K. Olupona, ed., (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 60.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Naturally, there are many things which both men and women can do as individuals, but only a woman can become a mother, and only a woman can become a wife. Similarly, only a man can become a husband. Grace N. Ndyabahika in her article, “Women’s Place in Creation” in *Groaning in Faith: African Woman in the Household of God*, is very clear on this fact. She wrote that:

Although men and women are equal partners, man cannot carry another person in his body for nine months, neither does he bear the pain of giving birth to another life through his flesh, nor does he often possess the patience, sacrificial love and ability to care for the helpless, tender growing person. The pain and the heartache that a mother experiences on behalf of her children are also beyond his experience.¹⁵

In fact, certain types of work are traditionally performed by women, and other types by men, rather than gender but the determining factors in most cases seem to be suitability and convenience. But, the natural difference indicates the ontological difference. Although Ndyabahika does not use the same word, it is implied in her work.

Generally, a man becomes aware that he has become a father through a woman. For example, after a conjugal union, and some weeks later, only a woman is able to feel some biological and physiological changes within her own body and can tell the man, “I am pregnant; you have become the father of my infant!” In traditional African culture, such

¹⁵ Grace N. Ndyabahika, “Women’s Place in Creation,” in *Groaning in Faith African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, and Nyambura J. Njoroge (Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers, 1996), 25. See also Audrey Butt, ed., *The Nilotes of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Uganda* (London: International Institute, 1952), 37. Note that Butt observed that the division of labor is related to the natural difference of age and sex.

news, especially of the first pregnancy, is a proclamation of the dignity and vocation of woman, which goes beyond the material meaning of the words. In fact, the news is received with ritual offerings, sacrifices, or prayers to assure the woman's safety during the period of the pregnancy. All these actions affirm the dignity and vocation of the woman.

Before proceeding with the discussion, it is better to clarify the meaning of the words "dignity" and "vocation" as used herein. One meaning of the word *dignity* is "bearing, conduct, or speech indicative of self-respect or appreciation of the formality or gravity of an occasion or situation."¹⁶ This meaning limits dignity to conduct, behavior or activity. However, the word dignity also means "nobility or elevation of character; worthiness, elevated rank, or office."¹⁷ This meaning is not limited to conduct, behavior or activity outward manifestations to the essence of things. In this discussion, dignity as applied to women denotes an essential or ontological character.

The word *vocation* means "a particular occupation, business, or profession; calling."¹⁸ But it also means a "strong impulse or inclination to follow a particular activity or career."¹⁹ This may also be understood as a divine call to God's service or the Christian life when it comes to choosing a type of life, e. g., consecrated life, priesthood, or marriage. But in this context, when talking about the dignity and vocation of a human person, it means the function or station in life to which one is called by God in nature.²⁰ This too has an

¹⁶ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* 2 ed., "Dignity," (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 2003).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, "Vocation." (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 2003).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

ontological and theological foundation. It is an interior disposition which every woman should long for in life. In other words, it is inherent in the structure of a woman.

The concepts of the dignity and vocation of women are connected in such a way that one cannot exist without the other. The dignity presupposes the vocation, and the vocation affirms the dignity of human person. There is no exact word in English which matches the literal meaning of the words *dignity* and *vocation* of woman in the Bantu or Nilotic languages among the people of Kenya; however, the meaning is perceived as an internal structure in a woman's body. The human body has a meaning. Pope John Paul II called it "the spousal meaning of the body." Once women become aware of and accept these realities within their nature as gifts, then they are recognized, respected, honored, and loved not only as a mother of an individual person but of the whole community in the African context of the family.

Brian V. Johnstone analyzes morality of the gift as given and received in this way: "a moral theory of gift which proposes that the essence of morality is to be found in the relationship between the giver, gift and receiver, where none of the three terms can be understood without the others."²¹ In this understanding the dignity and vocation of women is ontological in nature, experienced within the internal structure of women. But every woman has to receive or accept it as a gift. Otherwise, for those who have not accepted it as a gift, the dignity and vocation of woman becomes controversial because it lacks the dynamic moral reality of the gift.

²¹Johnstone V. Brian, "Gifted Morality: Aquinas, Derrida and Marion on Gift and Ethics," Lecture given on the *Fundamental Theology of the Gift*, (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, October 17th, 2006).

Not every woman accepts the dignity and vocation as a gift ontologically. But, all the same, refusing the reality of the gift does not diminish or change the value of the gift; it can only undermine the vital role of the gift in human society and in the family. As Johnstone has stated, clearly the gift presupposes the Giver, the receiver, and acceptance. The benefits of the gift depend on the receiver not on the Giver. For example, the value of gold remains what it is even though a three-year old child may not know the value or might refuse to accept the gold. In this sense, the value of the gift does not depend on the receiver but remains within the gift itself. There may be women who do not see motherhood as ontological, but the value of the gift remains the same; the only difference is that they may not share the benefits or joys which other women experience as mothers.

In contemporary secular society, when a woman is faced with challenges which demand responsibility on her part, it is common to hear reactions such as, “Do you expect women to get married and just stay at home watching babies and cooking?” Or “Do you want to limit the freedom of women and oppress them within domestic circles?” Such reactions are common and one can hear them from any corner of the world. But in reality those reactions may reveal a misconception of the ontological dignity and vocation of women. This has nothing to do with the career of the human person. However, some careers may undermine the fulfillment of the dignity and vocation of women as mothers.

Diane Kayongo-Male and Philista Onyango referred to the African woman as being responsible for the home, food-crop production, and care of children, while men are

responsible for protecting the home, for hunting and caring for cattle.²² Such distinctions, taken out of the theological and anthropological context of the African understanding of the family, limit the perceptions of the dignity and vocation of women to the economic world. They reduce the dignity and vocation of woman to a career or profession. Rebeka Njau and Gedion Muleki warned that:

The scanty literature written on women by colonial scholars depicts the African woman as an unhappy ‘beast of burden’ and ‘slave of man’ who enjoys neither sympathy nor respect from society. However, oral traditions differ from these historical records. They present a picture of a happy woman, a woman who could own property and make decisions, a woman who was consulted before important decisions were made, a woman whose social and legal rights were clearly defined, a woman who had a place in traditional religion.²³

Pope John Paul II confirmed that such a ‘*restricted*’ picture of women “would go hand in hand with a materialistic concept of a human being in the world. In such a case, what is truly essential would unfortunately be lost.”²⁴ In this case, what is truly essential could be what is proper to the dignity and vocation of women according to their structure as it differs from men. Therefore, the dignity and vocation of women as gifts have moral dimensions and cultural implications: The Giver of the gift gives the same gift to every woman, but the

²² Kayongo Daine - Male, and Philista Onyango, *The Sociology of the African Family* (New York and London: Longman, 1994), 24.

²³ Rebeka Njau Njoroge and Gedion Muleki, *Kenya: Women Heroes and Their Mystical Powers* (Nairobi: Risk Publication, 1984), 1.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18.

reception of the gift can be affected by individual perception and traditions of the culture in which this gift is received. The Giver gives the same gifts in accordance with nature. Women are internally structured to become mothers, but they may be influenced by the culture in which these gifts are given to willingly refuse to accept this gift. On the other hand, when this gift is joyfully received as in the African culture or any other human culture, the joyful discovery of motherhood is clearly related or connected to the teachings of Pope John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife.

Hence, the reception of this gift has moral dimensions and cultural implications for any human society. These moral dimensions and cultural implications must be examined because human beings are prone to abuses which can undermine the dignity and vocation of women. For example, polygamy in Africa appears to be accepted and approved as customary marriage in some African cultures. However, this acceptance does not carry an implication that polygamy is morally good. Instead, such acceptance seems to have been justified in some of the African societies out of necessity. The necessity may arise when the first wife cannot bear a child, like ancient Hebrew patriarchs, when a young woman is found to have lost her virginity, or has a child out of wedlock. Hence, in such cases, they became second or third wives.

Incidentally, there are some African marriage rituals and rites that can be performed only once in a lifetime. This means that in a truly traditional Bantu or Nilotic tribal marriage only one man and one woman can perform these rites and only once in their lives.

A second or third wife will never experience some of the very important marriage ritual and rites. This means that the second and subsequent wives are only accommodated and tolerated. They were generally the girls who had lost their virginity or those who had conceived out of wedlock. African culture in this respect resembles that of the Israelites. Recall that St Joseph, the betrothed husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary, wanted to divorce her quietly because she was found to have conceived Jesus before they lived together (Cf. Mt. 1:18-22). In Africa, especially among the Luo and Kikuyu people, it was shameful for a young man to marry a woman who had lost her virginity or who happens to bear a child out of wedlock.²⁵ Therefore, in Africa most second wives and succeeding wives were relatives of those wives who were already married and accepted their relatives who normally would not have found a husband. The first wife brought the second wife and the third came through one of them. Otherwise, polygamy seemed not to have been a practice from the beginning. Nevertheless, polygamy undermines the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife in society. Polygamy, like any other type of cultural domination, can have negative consequences for women and the family. Hence, approval and acceptance by the community does not make polygamy morally good. Polygamy is culturally oppressive and destructive to the original beauty of marriage and family.

This research focuses on the theological and anthropological understanding of the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife in the context of the African family, as reflected within the Bantu and Nilotic tribes or peoples of Kenya. However, the Bantu and

²⁵ P. N. Wachege, *Third Millennium African Single Mothers & Mother Widows: Ethno-Religio-Philosophical Touch* (Nairobi, Kenya: Signal Press Ltd, 2003), 174-177, 179-188.

Nilotic tribes do not share common myths of origin or common sociological and cultural settings. They do not speak a common language. Their languages identify them as either Bantu or Nilotic tribes. But even though they have different cultures, myths of origin, history, and language, nonetheless they have similar concepts of the dignity and vocation of women. This affirms the claim that the ontological dignity and vocation of women can transcend cultural boundaries, tribes, and even races.

The first chapter of this section presents and locates the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya, their myths, origin, and social and community structure. It also elaborates, in detail, the Kikuyu as the major tribe of the Bantu, and the Luo as the major tribe of the Nilotic people of Kenya. This first chapter lays a foundation for the second chapter which examines the African concept of life.

The second chapter presents the African theological and anthropological understanding of the dignity and vocation of women in the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya. Included in this chapter are the key concepts, which are fundamental to understanding the dignity and vocation of a woman. These concepts are life, family, clan, and community. The discussion will present and examine the understanding of the African initiation rite as a gateway to marriage and procreation.

The third chapter presents and examines the traditional understanding of marriage and procreation in reference to the dignity and vocation of woman in the Bantu and Nilotic communities. The discussion will include stages of marriage: preparations; marriage as a permanent covenant; the role of women in an African community; single, religious and

consecrated life; the relationship between men and women in an African community; and, African polygamy as a form of marriage that undermines the dignity and vocation of women. It is only when one understands these key concepts that one can understand and appreciate the role of woman as the central figure in all dimensions of human life in African society.

The fourth chapter analyzes the views of African theologians and the bishops, focusing mainly on what has been written especially on “the Church as a family” which was discussed during the African Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1994, and other related topics. This chapter concludes the first section.

The second section presents and examines the theological anthropology of Pope John Paul II, focusing mainly on his teachings on the dignity and vocation of women presented in *The Theology of the Body* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

The third section presents an application of the theology of inculturation. This section examines the challenge which Pope John Paul II gave to the African theologians: “to work out the theology of the Church as a family with all the riches contained in this concept.”²⁶ It compares the theological anthropology of Pope John Paul II with African theological anthropology and applies his teaching to the understanding of woman as mother and wife within the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya. Finally, the discussion will provide a synthesis of the whole study and a conclusion.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 77.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BANTU AND NILOTIC TRIBES OF KENYA: THEIR MYTHS, ORIGIN, AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Before proceeding, it is better to clarify the meaning and the usage of the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘ethnic.’ These words have acquired different connotations in the modern spoken English language.

1. The Terms ‘Tribe’ and ‘Ethnic’

The word ‘tribe’ means “any aggregate of people united by ties of descent from a common ancestor, community of customs and traditions, adherence to some leaders.”¹ The native African people live in units or groups commonly known as tribes. However, in recent years the English use of the word ‘tribe’ has acquired an ethnically negative connotation.² According to Mugambi, the word *tribe* has acquired a negative connotation because:

Europeans no longer define themselves in terms of tribes to which they actually belong. The word has been nearly reserved for non-Europeans, for some unexplained reason. Quite clearly, the divisive tendencies in Europe an

¹ *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* 2 ed., “Tribe,” (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 2003).

² J. N. K. Mugambi, “Problem of Teaching Ethics in Christianity,” in *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity: A Challenge for African Christianity*, 3rd edition, edited by J. N. K. Mugambi and Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers, 2003), 7.

North America on the basis of ethnic identity are fueled by the same malaise which is called *tribalism* in Africa.²⁹

Generally, people tend to emphasize tribal differences which may imply social, economic, and political segregation.³⁰ An example of this is how the Rwanda genocide in 1994, apartheid in South Africa, and political affiliation of parties according to tribes in some African countries may make one feel uncomfortable with a particular tribe, but this situation should not diminish the meaning of the word. Therefore, some modern anthropologists avoid the term 'tribe' and prefer to use the word 'people.' However, the term tribe should not necessarily imply a negative ethical connotation since it signifies a sense of belonging and every person belongs to a particular culture, tribe, or nation. Therefore, in this discussion, 'tribe' and 'people' are used and understood synonymously without ethical judgment.

It is even more difficult to associate tribes with a large or small number of people "since the number of those who make up a single 'tribe' varies considerably. The Yoruba tribes of Nigeria are estimated as twelve million, while the Hadzapi of Tanzania number less than one thousand, and some 'tribes' are dying out completely."³¹ Moreover, some of the African tribes have developed written literatures and well-structured grammar, and they can read, write and learn in their own language. A tribe is an identification of belonging which includes speaking the same mother tongue and having common ancestors and a common tradition.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Justin Wills, "Invented Tribes?: Two East African Examples" in *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Bethwell A. Ogot (Kenya: Maseno University Collage, 1996), 10.

³¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 101. See also, Justin Wills, "Invented Tribes?: Two East African examples" in *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Bethwell A. Ogot (Kenya: Maseno University Collage, 1996), 10-14.

‘Ethnic’ is a sub-tribe which generally is identified with a major tribe sharing one main common language but speaking or pronouncing words differently even though they have the same root words and can be understood in the major tribe. Depending on the environment, ethnic groups expand and form different cultural ways of living according to their surroundings.³² There are both tribes and ethnic groupings existing within the Bantu and Nilotic tribes. These tribes deserve a general background.

1.1. The General Background of the Bantu and Nilotic People of Kenya

In order to understand the theology and anthropology regarding the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife within the context of the African family as reflected among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya, one needs a general knowledge about the people living in Kenya. There are two major tribes in Kenya, namely, the Bantu and Nilotic. In fact, there are over forty-two tribes, which have been divided into either Bantu or Nilotic-speaking. One can either belong to the Bantu or Nilotic language and culture, but one cannot be in both cultures even if one knows both languages. This fact may be confusing, especially to those outside the two cultures. But to the natives of Kenya, one is always proud to be identified as Bantu or Nilotic because this is where one has his or her roots and myths of origin. The people who belong to the Bantu tribes share a common language, myths of origin, traditions and customs as well as a common, geography and history. In a similar way, those

³² Wills, “Invented Tribes?: Two East African Examples,” 11.

who belong to the Nilotic tribes share a common language, the same myths of origin, traditions and customs as well a common, geography and history.

The Bantu-speaking communities are proud to be what they are; they consider themselves different from the Nilotic because of certain specific cultural practices and myths of origin. The Nilotic communities also identify their common origin and recognize one another as brothers and sisters different from the Bantu tribes. However, when it comes to the understanding of the ontological dignity and vocation of the woman as a mother and a wife, the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya share the same understanding which has deep theological and anthropological significance.

There are over forty-two tribes and ethnic peoples in Kenya: fourteen major and over twenty-nine smaller tribes. The major ones are: the Kikuyu 20.78%, Luhia 14.38%, Luo 12.38%, Kalenjin 11.46%, Kamba 11.42%, Kisii 6.15%, Meru 5.07%, Maasai 1.76%, Turkana 1.52%, Embu 1.20%, Somali 0.99%, Taita 0.95%, Swahili 0.60%, and Samburu 0.50%.³³ The smaller tribes are: the Sweer, Bajuni, Bolkus, Dahalo, Isukha, Kore, Kuria, Maragoli, Marama, Miji Kenda, Ogiek, Orma, Oromo, Pokomo, Rendile, Sengwer, Suba, Tachoni, Taveta, Watha, and Yaiku.³⁴

The Miji Kenda, one of the smaller tribes, is further divided into nine sub-ethnic groupings: Digo, Chonyi, Kambe, Duruma, Kauma, Ribe, Rabai, Jibana and Giriama.³⁵ And the Luhia tribe, a major tribe, is also divided into twelve ethnic groupings, namely: Bukusu,

³³ Lesa B. Morrison, "The Nature of Decline: Distinguishing Myth from reality in the Case of the Luo of Kenya" in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45, 1 (2007), footnote 1 (London: Cambridge University Press). See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/list_of_ethnic_groups_of_kenya; accessed May 12, 2008.

³⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/list_of_ethnic_groups_of_kenya; accessed May 12, 2008.

³⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/miji_kenda; accessed May 12, 2008.

Maragoli, Wanga, Ava-Nyore, Morama, Idakho, Khisa, Isukhs, Tsetso, Tiriki, Khabraso, and Ava-Nyola. These divisions are based mainly on language. For example, the Luhia speak the 'Baluhia' language as the main language but different dialects are spoken by each of the sub-ethnic tribes of the Luhia.³⁶ While the Miji Kenda speaks the 'Miji Kenda,' language, each of the nine sub-ethnic groups speaks a different dialect, yet they can all understand each other. All these tribes have been grouped into two major tribes, the Bantu or the Nilotic, depending on their linguistic and cultural structures.

Studies of linguistics have further divided the Nilotic into the River Lake Nilotes and Hermetic Nilotes. The River Lake Nilotes are those who settled down around Lake Victoria as farmers and fishermen, people who are mainly the Luo, while the Nilotic Hermits are those who move around with their herds of cattle from place to place looking for the survival of their herds. These are the Masaai, the Trukana, and the remaining Nilotic of Kenya. Even though these groups adapted different ways of living, they identified themselves as belonging to the big family of the Nilotic of Kenya.

The Kikuyu people are one of the biggest tribes in Kenya and the largest of all the Bantu speakers in the country, while the Luo community is one of the largest tribes of the Nilotic speakers of Kenya, and the second biggest tribe in the country. Therefore, the Bantu and Nilotic understanding of the dignity and vocation of woman among two major tribes represent a substantial number of the people of Kenya. Basically, the Kikuyu tribe shares a culture similar to all the Bantu, and the Luo people share the same common culture similar to all the other Nilotic tribes in Kenya.

³⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/luhia>; accessed May 12, 2008.

1.2. The Bantu Tribe/People of Kenya: Meaning and Origin in General

The Bantu people of Kenya claim a common myth of origin, language and culture. The word ‘*bantu*’ means human beings; *Bantu* is the plural form while *Mutu* is singular. There are several tribes and ethnic groups affiliated with the Bantu tribe as such. Each tribe or ethnic group has its own distinct language-not simply a dialect. Naturally, however, their languages are related to one another; scholars have identified them as being of one family or stock.³⁷ Linguistic researchers reported that the “ancestral Bantu Language, proto-Bantu, originated in the grassland area of Cameroon and adjacent to the Benue region of Nigeria in West Africa.”³⁸ This argument is based on the fact that, linguistically, the current Tiv, Efik, and Duela languages of this region are the closest relatives to all the Bantu languages. From there, the study of the history of evolution may have taken different directions, each group in search of its livelihood. Anthropological and linguistic studies indicate that around 2500 years ago, various Bantu-speaking groups settled around Lake Victoria. They are known as the Great Lakes Bantu.³⁹ From here, again, each group dispersed to different parts of Kenya.

According to the myths and oral stories narrated by the Bantu elders from different groups, it was evident that they originated from a mystical place called “Misiri.”⁴⁰ The

³⁷ John S. Akama and Robert Maxon, eds., *Ethnography of the Gusii of Western Kenya* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 19. See also John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers, 2002), 101, Mbiti pointed out that the Bantu speaking group are the majority of the population in Africa. The word Bantu means the language spoken by particular group from the same ancestral origin and it also means the tribe/people.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 23.

particular location is not known, but they refer to the place as “far-off northwards pointing” from the present location of the Bantu people in Kenya.⁴¹

The word *Ngai* is the common name for God that is almost universally shared by all the Bantu people of Kenya.⁴² All the Bantu people living in Kenya believe that they belong to one big family. Thus, the Gusii, one of the Bantu tribes now commonly known as the Kisii people acknowledge that: “at the time the ancestors dispersed from Misiri they belonged to one and the same family with the ancestors of Kuria, Meru, Kikuyu, Kamba, Luhya and several other ethnic communities.”⁴³ Gusii elders fondly refer to all the Bantu as ‘*abanto bamito*,’ which means our people. The Kikuyu tribe is the largest of the Bantu family in Kenya. The following section presents the Kikuyu as a major tribe of the Bantu people and outlines their myths and origin.

1. 3. The Kikuyu: The Major Tribe of the Bantu of Kenya, their Myth and Origin

From their myths and oral stories, it appears the Kikuyu people believe that they are the descendents of *Gikuyu* and *Moombi* (Mumbi), his wife.⁴⁴ These two people descended from Mt. Kenya (Mount Kere-Nyaga) and they were shown a land by ‘*Ngai*’ (God) to settle

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 103. Each tribal elder shares a common myth, oral story and history, which often ends up as a common story that either the first man was created by God (*Ngai* in Kikuyu), or that God moderated national leaders responsible for establishing a particular society.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ The word ‘*Moombi*’ is sometimes written ‘*Mumbi*’ when reported by non-tribal anthropologist, but when written by typical Kikuyu like Jomo Kenyatta, it is ‘*Moombi*,’ which means both spellings are accepted because the word has the same pronunciation in the Kikuyu language.

as a wife and husband.⁴⁵ This is an area called ‘Mukorwe wa Nyagathanga,’ presently known as ‘Muranga’ in Kenya near Mount Kenya.⁴⁶ Jomo Kenyatta in his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*, wrote of what was orally handed to him by his grandfathers:

The man, Gikuyu, the founder of the tribe, was called by Mogai (the Divider of the Universe), and was given as his share the land with the ravines, rivers, forests game and all the gifts that the Lord of Nature (Mogai) bestowed on mankind. At the same time Mogai made a big mountain which he called Kere-Nyaga (Mount Kenya), as his resting-place when on inspection tour, and as a sign of his wonders. He then took the man Gikuyu to the top of the mountain of mystery, and showed him the beauty of the country Mogai had given him. While still on the top of the Mountain, Mogai pointed out to Gikuyu a spot full of fig trees (*mikoyo*), right in the centre of the country. After Mogai had shown Gikuyu the panorama of the wonderful land he had been given, he commanded him to descend and establish his homestead on the selected place which he named Mokorwe wa Gathanga. Before they departed, Mogai told Gikuyu that, whenever he was in need, he should make a sacrifice and raise

⁴⁵ C. Cagnolo, I.M.C., ed. *The Agikuyu: Their Customs, Traditions & Folklore* (Torino, Italy: Instituto Consolata, 1933), new eds., Hilary Wambugu, James Mwangi Ngarariga and Peter Mwuriiki (Nairobi, Kenya: Wisdom Graphics Place, 2006), 16. Also Stephen Belcher, *African Myths of Origin* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 159-161.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* This is currently gazetted as a historical site and, a tourist destination known as the place where Mumbi and Agikuyu, the descendents of the Kikuyu people, settled in Kenya. ‘Gikuyu’ is the name of the founder of the tribe ‘Kikuyu.’

his hands towards Kere-Nyaga (the mountain of mystery), and the Lord of Nature would come to his assistance.⁴⁷

This legend is significant in the life of the Kikuyu people because it basically establishes the traditional religious belief that God lives and watches them from Mt. Kenya. This explains why the Kikuyu people pray with open hands facing Mount Kenya where they believe that God first spoke to their ancestors.

As the above narration indicates, according to the Kikuyu creation myth, God created Gikuyu and Moombi first, and then all other things they needed were granted in response to prayers, offerings, and sacrifices done on the Mountain or facing Mount Kenya. To them Mount Kenya is also known as the ‘mountain of mystery’ where God *Mogai* lives. It is from this mountain that God gave Gikuyu his wife whom he named *Moombi* which means ‘creator’ or ‘moulder.’⁴⁸

The dignity and vocation of woman as a mother among the Kikuyu people is connected to the mystery of God and understood within the procreative nature of women. For them, women share a mystical power of creation with God. That is, being able to bear a human life for nine months in the woman’s womb! Thus, the Kikuyu people look at women with a unique reverence in the ‘moulding’ of human life. They believe that human beings are ‘moulded’ in the womb of women.

⁴⁷Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, edited by J. Kariuki (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1991), 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Note that Kenyatta is using the word ‘creator’ or ‘moulder’ when citing Moombi, the wife of Gikuyu; this is given special emphasis, emphasizing her procreating power. The word is spelled and pronounced as it is in its typical Kikuyu text.

Note that when Kenyatta refers to Moombi, the wife of Gikuyu as a 'moulder,' it is not understood in the same sense as God, the Creator, or *Mogai*, but in the African understanding of the 'hierarchy of being.' Women are 'moulders' as participants on the level in procreation. In this context, Kenyatta is referring to the mysterious procreative nature a woman has as the mother of human life. It is only woman who can nurture human life in her womb and give birth to new life. This is a great mystery which most Africans treasure as the dignity and vocation of every woman. For the Kikuyu people, among other Bantu tribes, this mystery of procreation was revealed to the founders of the tribes and has been passed on from one generation to the next. Thus, the Kikuyu and other Bantu people, share a common creation myth.

The history of the origin of the Kikuyu people further confirmed through other linguistic and historical studies of the Bantu's migratory patterns that the Kikuyu belong to the Bantu-speaking tribes who came from Nigeria and Cameroon by the year 2000 B. C.⁴⁹ By the end of 1000 B. C., a number of Bantu-speaking tribes had spread south to the savannah lands of Angola and east to the area of Lake Victoria. This fact is supported by the following text quoted by H. Wambugu:

Over the next 1500 years they scattered throughout central and southern Africa, interacting with and absorbing indigenous populations as they spread. The group that entered present day Tanzania, spread through central Tanzania leaving some groups like Wanyamwezi before splitting into two groups. One headed south towards present day South Africa (Nguni or Ngoni) while the

⁴⁹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 2.

other group headed towards the coast. Some of the groups that were left at the coast are the Shaaga, Miji Kenda and other Bantus of the east coast of Africa. The migration continued westwards from the present day Kenya coast, to leave behind the Wataita (Wadaviada) near Voi. Those who continued westwards left the Akamba in present day Ukambani area of Kenya as they proceeded towards Mt. Kenya. On the eastern slopes of the mountain they left the Ameru, and as they went on, they left the Aembu before ultimately crossing the mountain to settle on the western slopes (Murang'a) as the Agikuyu. This historical version agrees *in toto with* legend. Gikuyu, according to legend descended from the mountain. The community according to historical fact crossed the mountain to their current home. In the Ameru traditional legend of origin, they indicate that they came from *Mpua (The great ocean)*. This shows that this is the group that came from the coast.⁵⁰

The main purpose for highlighting the above Bantu migration is to show that the Kikuyu tribes belong to one family of the Bantu-speaking people and, like other Bantu tribes, share a common myth of origin. The most significance fact among the Kikuyu is the position and the role of a woman in the family. This is because it is from the female that the name of the family is derived, which gives meaning to the family. This significant is confirmed in the Kikuyu oral stories and traditions which claim that at one time the Kikuyu family was

⁵⁰ Cagnolo, *The Agikuyu: Their Customs, Traditions & Folklore*, 16. In this book, Wambugu the editor of the new version, added some details at the footnote about the Kikuyu legends and it relevant to the myths of origin, and this confirms the Kikuyu myths and oral stories of origin narrated by Jomo Kenyatta in his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*.

matriarchal and that the menfolk staged a coup to end the women's rule.⁵¹ But Godfrey Muriuki noted that this story is 'unsubstantiated.'⁵² Yet, such stories point to the central role of women in the Kikuyu culture and their Bantu family. The following section examines and analyzes the social and community structure of the Kikuyu people.

1. 4. The Social and Community Structure of the Kikuyu People

The Kikuyu social and community life is based on three major principles: The first is the family group *Mbari* or *Nyomba*; this first principle arises from blood relationship, namely a husband and wife or wives, their children, their grand-and great-grandchildren.⁵³ The second principle is clan *Moherega*, which "joins in one group several *Mbari* units who have the same clan name and are believed to have been descended from one family group in the remote past."⁵⁴ The third social principle is *riika rimwe* which means 'age-grading.' Almost every year, thousands of Kikuyu girls and boys who have reached the age of adolescence go through an initiation ceremony and automatically become members of the 'age-grade' *riika rimwe*.⁵⁵ The initiation ceremony is the ritual rite which provides a link between adolescence to adulthood. The initiation ritual ceremony helps the youths to bond as a group in all tribal matters. This ritual forms in them a sense of awareness of brotherhood and sisterhood among 'age-grades' who have gone through the same initiation ceremony and endured pain and suffering together.

⁵¹ Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu 1500-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 110.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

The tribal social and community life of the Kikuyu people is organized and controlled by the three fore mentioned principles (*Mbari* or *Nyomba*, *Morega*, and *riika rimwe*). These social and community principles have both social and religious significance in molding the life of an individual within the community. The ritual rites bind the individuals together in their social and communal life. At the same time, they have a significant religious perspective because one must undergo a ritual ceremony that is even more binding on both spiritual and sociological levels. No adult can be fully recognized or participate in the Kikuyu community life as a mature person independent of the three governing principles. Both young men and women assume the status and recognition of adults within the 'age-grade' through the initiation ceremony. This is the first ritual to be experienced by young men and women in the community.

After this ceremony, the social status of a young woman is totally changed in the community. The expectation for living a responsible life becomes high. Even though the initiation rituals vary across the different Bantu tribes, the concept that they are the gateway to adulthood is common to all of the Bantu-speaking communities and to all Nilotic tribes in Kenya. The initiation rite controls and governs the social and community life of both Nilotic and Bantu tribes. The following section briefly presents the Nilotic tribes of Kenya in general, and the Luo as a major tribe of the Nilotic in particular.

2. The Nilotic Tribes/People of Kenya: Meaning of Origin in General

Like the Bantu-speaking tribes, the Nilotic tribes are identified by their physical and linguistic differences. For the Nilotic, the word ‘*jii*’ means human beings in the plural form while ‘*dhano*’ is the singular.⁵⁶ This is common to all the Nilotic tribes who are living along the Nile Valley, Southern Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. In addition to language, they are closely related in their physical appearance, similar in cultural traditions, and share common myths of origin.⁵⁷ From the geographical and historical settings, there are two groups of the Nilotic: the River Lake Nilotic who are settled in farming and fishing, and the Nilotic Hermits who depend mostly on their animals and move from one place to another in search of good pastures. The major tribes of the Nilotic are: Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Anuak, Acholi, Lango, Alur, (Jo Padhola and Jo Paluo), Burun. The Bor Belanda, Jo Luo (Jur), Shilluk, Luo Tribes of Bahr el Ghazal, Pari, and Luo of Kenya.⁵⁸

The Nilotic people have settled into three distinct blocks or regions: the northern block consists of: Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Burun, The Bor Belenda, Pari, Jur, and Anuak in the Sudan. The central block consists of: the Acholi, Lango and Alur in Uganda. The southern block consists of the Luo people of Kenya and has spread to Tanzania around the shores of Lake Victoria. The main interest in this discussion is the Nilotic people of Kenya, counting the Luo tribe as the major tribe of the Nilotic of Kenya. Therefore, the following section presents Luo myths and stories of origin.

⁵⁶ Butt, *The Nilotes of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Uganda*, 23.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1. See also Jude Ongong’ a, *Life and Death: Christian – Luo Dialogue* (Edoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications 1983), 7-10.

⁵⁸ Audrey Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda*, 2.

2. 1. The Luo: The Major tribe of the Nilotic of Kenya, their Myth of Origin

The Nilotic tribes of Kenya have no written record of their myth of origin.⁵⁹ It appears that all the information known about them came from the oral-narrations. For many years, the main historical information about the Nilotic people existed in creation myths orally narrated by elders and passed on from one generation to the next. In such cases, no objective or coherent record exists other than the expressions of the faith and belief of the people. Only what is important in the faith and belief of people is passed on faithfully with little alteration from group to group. This seems to be the case with many orally transmitted myths and traditions and likely applies to the oral myths and origin stories of the Luo people.

Later, during the early nineteenth century some myths were recorded by European missionaries. But they could only offer their interpretations. As foreigners, they did not understand the language and symbols very well. They do not offer a consistent story.

For example, Westerman asserted that the Shilluk, one of the Nilotic tribes, reached their present land in the Sudan at the end of the 15th century.⁶⁰ And Seligman assumed that the Nilotic cradle land lay somewhere to the east of the Great Lakes. Accordingly, they understood there to be the original homeland of the Nilotic. Two great waves of migration were reported when in reality there was a long series of movements to the North.⁶¹

⁵⁹ J. M. Onyango-ku- Odongo and J. B. Webster, *The Central Luo During the Aconya* (Nairobi, Kenya: East Africa Literature Bureau, 1976), 25.

⁶⁰ Butt, *The Nilotes of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Uganda*, 23.

⁶¹ Ibid. Note that Butt is referring to the earliest recorded myths by Westerman, *The Shilluk People*, written in 1912, Seligman *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*, 1932. According to Butt these are some of the earliest sources available.

Butt analyzed all the myths of the origin as to the place of origin of the Nilotic people. All facts seem to point to Rumbek in the Sudan.⁶² Therefore, for him, Rumbek in the Sudan is the homeland where each Nilotic tribe originated and from which each tribal leader set out in different directions. Jude Ongong'a pointed out that the Luo elders simply say that "we came from the Sudan," without any detail.⁶³ This is the common story among all the Nilotic tribes. However, J. M. Onyango - ku-Odongo and J. B. Webster as noted in their book, *The Central Lwo During the Aconya*, maintained that the accurate historical origin of the Luo (*Lwo*) remained unresolved.⁶⁴

In Kenya, there are three sub-groups of the Nilotic tribes who simply point to a common origin from the Sudan, without mentioning any specific details. But their beliefs, customs, and traditions all indicate that they have a common origin, especially their belief that they have common ancestral land. Therefore, the Luo people recognize all other Nilotic-speaking tribes as *Omin*, 'people from one mother.'

Similarly, there are also three sub-Nilotic tribes: The first sub-Nilotic tribe is the one composed of the nomadic herders which include the Maasai who roam around the southern region of Kenya, the Samburu who occupy central Kenya, and the Turkana in the northwest. Although the numbers of the Samburu and Turkana are fewer than one million, they are the most traditional or identifiable people in Kenya because they maintain their traditions and customs.

⁶² Ibid. See also Bethwell A. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Publishing House, 1967), 41. Ogot is a historian who has extensively studied the Southern Luo referred to the same sources used by Butt.

⁶³ Jude Ongong'a, *Life and Death*, 6.

⁶⁴ Odongo, and Webster, *The Central Lwo*, 25. See also Butt, *The Nilotes of the Sudan and Uganda*, 23.

The second sub-Nilotic group is collectively known as the Kalenjin and includes the Kipsigis, Nandi, Tugen, Marakwet, Keiyo, Pokot, Terik, and Sabaot tribes. These tiny communities are settled throughout the Rift Valley region of Kenya.

The third sub-Nilotic tribe and the largest of the Nilotic people of Kenya is the Luo/Lwo.⁶⁵ Sometimes they are referred to as the Nilotic Kavirondo because they inhabit the shore around Lake Victoria, north and south of the Kavirondo Gulf. The Kavirondo Gulf is the southern, flat plain relieved by a few rocky and ridges upon which the people built their homesteads.⁶⁶

The Luo people of Kenya do not have the specific myth of origin which identifies their founders like the Kikuyu people have in their myth of Gikuyu and Moombi. But their social and community structures spell out the position and the role of woman in the family that is similar to the Kikuyu traditions. Such similarity of the position and the role of woman in the family presupposes something that springs from more ancient sources of African tradition, something intrinsic about the dignity and vocation of a woman as being a mother of the family. For example, Odinga pointed out clearly that “the clans were named after the women in recognition that they are the mothers of the children and thus the founders of the clans.”⁶⁷ In a Luo social and community setting, a woman is recognized as the mother of not only the individual person but of the whole community, as she is also considered among the

⁶⁵ The word Lwo means following each other in the Luo language. It is also referred to the people who followed each other along the Nile River. The tribe is known as Luo or Lwo. It is spelled differently but pronounced the same.

⁶⁶ Butt, *The Nilotes of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Uganda*, 108. See also Henry Okello Ayot, *A History of the Luo-Abasuba of Western Kenya From A.D. 1760-1940* (Nairobi, Kenya: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1979), 3-4.

⁶⁷ Odinga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1984), 11.

Kikuyu people or among the other Bantu of Kenya. The following section presents the social and community structure of the Luo people.

2. 2. Social and Community Structure of the Luo people

The etymology of the word Luo comes from the word *Luwo* which means “following one another.” The meaning is taken for granted, across several literatures, and no one mentions the etymological meaning of the word Luo. Yet the term has a deeper meaning which expresses the sociological and anthropological structure of the people. It means those who followed one another from the beginning of the tribe. This means from the beginning of migration the Luo people were following each other as a family, clan, and tribe for days, weeks, months, and years. This experience made them bond together in such a way that formed a tribe called ‘Luo’ and as stated earlier, means followers of one another.

Therefore, the Luo as a tribe is also known as *JoLuo*, which means a people who followed one another, or *Oganda Luo*, which means the community which followed one another.⁶⁸ Bethwell A. Ogot also noted that the Luo as a tribe are known by their identification with the Lake Region. For this reason, they are called *Joka Nyar Nam*, people born by the women (daughters) of the lake.⁶⁹ Their movements were determined by geographical conditions, such as floods along the Nile and frequent drought. Their routes were also restricted along rivers and lakes, i.e., along the River Nile and its tributaries which

⁶⁸ Ongong’ a, *Life and Death*, 7.

⁶⁹ Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo*, 38. See also Gilbert E. M. Ogutu, *An Historical Analysis of the Luo Idea of God 1500-1900* (Kenya, Nairobi: University of Nairobi, 1975), 8-22.

were the main routes. Presently, they are settled around the shores of Lake Victoria, namely the Central and Southern Nyanza Provinces of Kenya. These include original Siaya, Kisumu and Homa Bay districts.⁷⁰

The elders who pass down oral stories have compared the movements of the Luo to that of the Israelites moving to the Promised Land, but there is no historical proof of any promised land for the Luo community. Unlike the Kikuyu people of Kenya whose economy is based on a forest environment, the Luo people preferred the short grassland or savannah woodland areas suited to stable pastures for their animals and the lake water for fishing and also suitable for agriculture.⁷¹ Originally, they were a nomadic people, moving along the Nile looking for better pastures for their animals. But now they have abandoned this style of living and have settled into fishing and small scale farming.

In the Luo government, the king does not enforce laws. Instead, the king is politically autonomous and respected. The social-religious and political functions are based on the family. The Luo family has a father as the head of the family, a woman as the mother of both the family and the community, a medicine man, and elders who are consulted in case there is a need.⁷² The society is made up of clans which are comprised of lineages or extended families. Each clan is self-sufficient. Their community life is socio-religious but also functions as socio-political. Their political system has no juridical right over a particular defined territory but only over the members of the community with genealogical ties to the

⁷⁰ Ogotu, *An Historical Analysis of the Luo Idea of God 1500-1900* (Nairobi, Kenya: University of Nairobi, 1975), 10.

⁷¹ Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo*, 37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 8.

clan.⁷³ The most significant and sacred functioning authority in the families among the Luo and Kikuyu communities is the position and role of woman as the mother of the family. Her position is unique and sacred. This is common to every Nilotic tribe; each community has a special respect and honor for women as mothers. This is also common to the Bantu tribes of Kenya as a whole.

3. Conclusion

This chapter has laid a foundation for understanding the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya, showing their ancestral origins and mythological differences. A tribe has a common ancestral origin which unites and binds a group of people together. For example, the Bantu and Nilotic people have their respective common ancestral myths of origin which define them as different. This means all tribes belonging to the Bantu-speaking language group have their common customs which are different from all the tribes which belong to the Nilotic-speaking language group. But when it comes to women, the perception of the dignity and vocation of women is common to all these tribes.

The common understanding of woman or the common concept of woman among these tribes is revealed in anthropological investigations and reflections. The unique position of a woman as a mother of the family as broadly recognized and respected among the Bantu and Nilotic people, as exemplified in the Kikuyu and Luo tribes, leaves no doubt about her sacredness in relationship to God the Creator and the communities.

⁷³ Ibid., 9.

This belief in sacred origin exists despite the fact that the Bantu and Nilotic people in Kenya do not have a common ancestral origin. In fact, as tribes, they are always in conflict; but when it comes to the respect accorded to women, they have a common understanding. Therefore, the next chapter presents and analyzes the underlying theological and anthropological reasons for the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife within these tribes. We will examine key concepts such as life, family, clan, community, marriage, and procreation among these two tribes.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMAN IN THE BANTU AND NILOTIC TRIBES OF KENYA

1. Introduction

This chapter presents the African theological and anthropological understanding of the fundamental topic of this thesis, namely the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife among the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya. A proper understanding of this fundamental topic requires an awareness of key concepts related to culture namely, life, clan, community, and initiation. There are other such concepts but these are the most important in understanding the role of the woman in the family.

It is important, in the beginning, to clarify the context within which the term “African theological and anthropological understanding” is used. The term will be discussed in the context of moral theology. Morality is “a normative ordering in terms of perceived meanings, values, purposes and goals of human existence, of the lives of human persons with regard to ways in which they can choose to relate themselves to reality: themselves, other individuals, their community or communities, their world and the divine.”¹ The fundamental topic of the “African theological and anthropological understanding” is to be considered from the perspective of the ethical and moral sense of the Bantu and Nilotic people.

The study seeks to identify the particular cultural and moral values of these people and ultimately how they inform the fundamental topic of this thesis. This is what Norbert Rigali calls the “perceived network of human values within some world-views.”²

¹ Norbert J. Rigali, S. J. “The Uniqueness and Distinctiveness of Christian Morality and Ethics,” in *Moral Theology: Challenges for the Future*, Charles E. Curran ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 74. See also Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 2; and Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 4.

² Rigali, “The Uniqueness and Distinctiveness,” 75.

When people reflect norms of morality in the context of their religious beliefs, this is called religious ethics or moral theology.³ When norms of morality are derived from the cultural norms, this effort is called cultural ethics. The difference lies in the source of people's morals and beliefs. In this case, the sources of the "African theology and anthropology" emanate from the Bantu and Nilotic religious beliefs, traditional cultures, and family life.

For these people, morality and ethics are intimately connected to religion. John S. Mbiti, for example, pointed out in his early writings that "traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and secular, religious and non-religious, spiritual and material areas of life."⁴ The study of religious systems is, therefore, ultimately the study of the people themselves and all complexities of both their traditional and modern lives.⁵ Moral and ethical studies have different sources. For example, Christian anthropology bases its norms on the traditional Christian moral values while African theological anthropology uses norms drawn from the traditional cultural moral values lived and experienced within the family and accepted by the community.⁶

³Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 2.

⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 3rd edition (Nairobi, Kenya: Easter African Educational Publishers, 2002), 2. See also John Pobee, "Sources of African Theology," in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, edited by John Parratt (London: Latimer Trend & Company Ltd, Plymouth, 1987), 29-36.

⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2. See also John Pobee "Sources of African Theology" in *African Christian Theology*, edited by John Parratt (Great Britain: Latimer Trend & Company Ltd., 1987), 29-36.

⁶ Rigali, "The Uniqueness and Distinctiveness,"⁷⁵ There is also debate going on among theologians on the "specific," "particular," morality. Those who deny or support "specific," "particular," morality may have a rationale but the sources of the arguments cannot be denied. The traditional cultural, natural moral values and faith are the main sources for or against.

Note that Africa, because it is a large continent with many tribes, and because of its geographical diversity, various languages, and cultural differences, is regarded by most Western anthropologists and missionaries as not having a single religion. Magesa confirms this when he notes that for missionaries and Western anthropologists “if there was such a thing approximating religion at all in Africa, they argued, it was ‘animism’ or ‘fetishism,’ a multiplicity of ritual actions with natural objects as deities.”⁷ Even Mbiti, one of the famous African anthropologists, in his early writing, *African Religions and Philosophy*, published first in 1969, considered Africa as a continent of multiple religions. But in his later publications, such as *Introduction to African Religion*, when he analyzed the nature and the content of ‘religion,’ in 1975, he recognized that African traditional religion is best described as a single religion like any other religion of the world and it contains a very rich and complex heritage.⁸

African traditional religion has all the essential elements common in almost all major tribes on the continent including the Bantu and the Nilotic.⁹ The differences lie in their

⁷ Magesa, *African Religion*, 14. A consequence of not recognizing a notion of religion in Africa was to do away with the black man’s spirit, give the African traditional religion a new sense of sins, and look at the practice of African religion as a superstition. See also Kashama Sharma, *Women of Africa: Their Role and Position in Society* (New Delhi, India: Mittal Publications, 1998), 26.

⁸ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd edition (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers, 1991), 11-19. Mbiti observed that what makes religion such as beliefs, practices, ceremonies and festivals; religious objects and places; values and morals; religious officials or leaders (priests) are all present in the African traditional religion and share common elements all over the continent. The main difference is that African traditional religion does not have an evangelization mission like Christianity; it is part and parcel of the lives of the people, one is born and grows in it and finally dies in it. See also Magesa, *African Religion*, 2-3; and Alan Dundes, *Every Man His Way: Readings in Cultural Anthropology* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1968), 543. Dundes observed that what is said about a particular tribe in Kenya, or in Africa, may be true also of other tribes without mentioning the name of that tribe and Jacob K. Olupona, “Major Issues in the Study of African Traditional Religion” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, edited by Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1990), 25-32.

⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 11. See also Alexis Kagame, “The Trail of an African Theology,” in *African Theology in The 21st Century*, vol. 2, edited by Bénézet Bujo and Juvénal Ilunga Muya (Nairobi, Kenya:

liturgical celebrations, symbols, and ritual ceremonies, with each tribe having its own style of celebrations and religious ceremonies, but the contents, which ultimately make religion, are the same. In fact, F. Ochieng Odhiambo argues that if one can identify an African ‘philosophy’ not ‘philosophies,’ then it is possible to have an “African Traditional Religion” since there is an “African Philosophy.”¹⁰ John Mary Waliggo in his paper, “The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church,” confirms that one can develop each of the above mentioned elements in relation to any cultural group in Africa, but this must allow “similarities and differences,” “essential and accidental values.”¹¹ There are some things which can easily change or disappear, but there are also elements which will resist any change and are universal to Africa as a whole.¹² Therefore, the phrase ‘the African theological and anthropological understanding’ as used in this study stems from the reflections on the ethical and moral values which are woven into religion and culture among the Bantu and Nilotic people, especially the dignity and vocation of woman in God’s plan of creation.

For these people, the theological and anthropological concepts of the dignity and vocation of woman as mother and wife are perceived within particular key concepts; life,

Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 27-34; and Oscar Bimwenyi, “End of Discussion on the Possibility of African Theology” in *African Theology in 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003), 102.

¹⁰ F. Ochieng’ Odhiambo, *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Nairobi, Kenya: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 2002), 1. Odhiambo speaks of the ‘Continental Concept’ of the African Continent. See also Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 11. Mbiti speaks about the nature of African Religion within the specific universal concept of religion.

¹¹ John Mary Waliggo, “The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church” in *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, edited by J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1990), 119.

¹² Ibid. See also T. Tshibangu, “The Task and Method of Theology in Africa,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London, Great Britain: Latimer Trend & Company, 1987), 95 37-57.

family, clan, and community, marriage, and procreation. It is only when one understands the depth of these concepts that one can appreciate the role of woman as the central figure in all dimensions of African society in general, but specifically in the Bantu and Nilotic peoples of Kenya. Therefore, let us start by explaining the first key concept of life which, with others, forms the theological and anthropological basis of the dignity and vocation of woman in the context of the family.

1.1. The Concept of Life

The concept of life is important in understanding the African theological and anthropological view of the dignity and vocation of women because life determines the ethical agenda for a human being. Magesa observes that Africans are deeply rooted in religious life. According to him:

The foundation and purpose of the ethical perspective of African Religion is life, life in its fullness. Everything is perceived with reference to this. It is no wonder, then, Africans quickly draw ethical conclusions about thoughts, words, and actions of human beings, or even of “natural” cosmological events, by asking questions such as: Does the particular happening promote life? If so, it is good, just, ethical, desirable, divine. Or does it diminish life in any

way? Then it is wrong, bad, unethical, unjust, detestable. This most basic understanding of morality in African Religion is incorporated systematically in the people's way of life. It is expressed in their traditions, ceremonies, and rituals. It constitutes what Africans perceive as the mystique of life.¹³

From this foundation, one can perceive that the African concept of human life is so central to daily living with God that no one doubts that life is sacred.¹⁴ The Bantu and Nilotic tribes have always perceived human life in relation to God, the life giver.

The conception of life is not merely a result of man and woman coming together in sexual intercourse. Rather, conception is understood as a sacred state of being and a blessing from God and the ancestors. According to Magesa, “without divine and ancestral blessing, conception may well not be possible.”¹⁵ This belief is expressed in African spirituality as mother and father “copulate to ‘beget’ jointly and ‘give birth,’ while God intercedes [intervenes] to ‘create’ and the ancestors assist in protecting the creation from the malevolent powers of destruction.”¹⁶ African religion recognizes God as the source of all life, especially human life. Such belief is what confirms that human life is sacred. This controls morality, especially within the Bantu and Nilotic family life. But as Mbiti observes, there is no testimony written in any African language about the sacredness of life as it is found in the

¹³ Magesa, *African Religion*, 77. See also Manas Buthelezi, “Salvation as Wholeness,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London, Great Britain: Latimer Trend & Company, 1987), 95, Buthelezi explains that the traditional African religion upholds that “religion and life belonged together.”

¹⁴ Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1999), 2. See also Georges Niangoran-Bouah, “The Talking Drum: A Traditional African of Liturgy and of Meditation with the Sacred” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, edited by Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1990), 82; and Kagame, “The Trail of an African Theology,” 22-26.

¹⁵ Magesa, *African Religion*, 83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Bible for Christianity.¹⁷ Instead, it is written in the hearts of the people and can be experienced within their practical lives and beliefs in the families and communities. This is what Christians call the natural law.

John S. Mbiti, Laurenti Magesa, Bénézet Bujo, Charles Nyamiti, and Laurent Mpongo, among other African theologians, have confirmed the fact that human life is understood to be sacred in the traditional African religion. For example, according to Mbiti, when a woman reports that she is pregnant, her “people perform rituals and make offerings to thank God for the expected child and pray for the safety of the child and the mother.”¹⁸ For Magesa, the conception of a child is always “understood as the result of a blessing from God and ancestors.”¹⁹ For Bujo, God is “the source of life, especially human life.”²⁰ For Nyamiti, “God is the source of all good things,” and there is nothing better than life.²¹

Bénézet Bujo, in his book, *African Theology in its Social Context*, further confirms that “religion is the heart of the traditional society and God is the source and the life-giver.”²² According to Bujo, the concern about African religion comes as a consequence of Christianity confronting African culture and religion with its claim of “absoluteness.”²³ For

¹⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 3. See Also Friday M. Mbon, “African Traditional Socio-Religious Ethics and Traditional Development: The Nigerian Case” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, 101. For Mbon, African religion has no formulated/written rules which one is obliged to believe as it is in Christianity. Generally, African people include religious beliefs within living experienced in families as part of ethics and morals.

¹⁸ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 89.

¹⁹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 83.

²⁰ Bujo, *African Theology*, 2.

²¹ Charles Nyamiti, “The Doctrine of God,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, John Parratt, ed. (Great Britain: Latimer Trend & Company Ltd, 1987), 64.

²² Bujo, *African Theology*, 17.

²³ Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1993), 24. See also Stanley Hauerwas, “Who are

him, African ethics is unthinkable without a theocentric dimension.²⁴ This idea is supported in other words by Laurent Mpongo who acknowledges that human life is not understood only as a set of elements that form the universe or the world but considers also “beliefs and attitudes in relation to life.”²⁵ This reveals a deep conviction and faith within most African people. It is a unique attitude which views life as a sacred gift of God to his people.

According to Mpongo, the belief that human life is sacred is typical of the traditional African religion. Long before the arrival of Christianity in Africa, traditional African religions recognized God as the source of all life, especially human life.²⁶ In fact, apart from Egypt and Ethiopia which received Christianity in the first century (cf. Acts 8:26-36), the Christian faith in the rest of the continent is barely a century old.²⁷ Long before that, Africans believed that human life was a gift from God and such a belief controlled the moral life for the preservation of a good life in society. All these ideas have always been passed from one generation to the next by oral stories and teachings. From oral tradition stories, human life is revealed as being so sacred that it cannot be on the same level as any other form of life.

Christians? The Christian Story: ‘How Christian Ethics’ Came to Be,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (London, England: Duke University Press, 2001), 38-50. Hauerwas explains the historical development of Christian ethics in a community dimension, but looking from the point of view of Western culture. He analyzes Christian ethics having its roots from Western culture. Therefore, there can be a comparison between African ethical morals having religion at the center and Christian ethics and morals emanating from Western culture, having religion and enlightened by the Gospel values. Thus African culture can be also open for the enlightenment by the gospel values.

²⁴ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*: 25. See also Kagame, “The Trail of an African Theology,” 27-28.

²⁵ Laurent Mpongo, “A Defender of African Marriage and Liturgy,” in *The African Theology in the 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, vol. 2, eds. Bénézet Bujo and Juvénal Ilunga Muya (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications, 2006), 127.

²⁶ Bujo, *African Theology*, 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2. See also Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 11-20, and *African Religions and Philosophy*, 6-114.

Eugene Hillman supports this perception of the sacredness of human life in the religious attitude of the African toward life. For example, he observes, especially among the Massai of the Nilotic people, that religion was not found in any written record among the tribes in Africa but “it is, however contained in the memory of the people, and it is repeatedly expressed through their traditional symbols, myths, rituals attitudes and practices.”²⁸ In this context, religion forms part and parcel of these people’s moral and ethical life. In a certain sense, religion seems to form part of a wider area of human culture even beyond African culture. For example, Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that:

The pre-Christian thought in all its complexity preserved an advent-like openness of the coming of something greater than itself by which it could be determined, and how much post-Christian thought, whether it will or not, has been determined by that which is greater than itself.²⁹

Accordingly, the perception of “something greater than itself,” cannot be anything other than God. This view of thinking is similar to the Bantu and Nilotic belief. As Paul O. Gaggawala expresses, it is religion that “sets the tone for everything in the Bantu spectrum of reality, because all their socio-cultural, economic political life anchors on it.”³⁰ Religious and moral values are fundamental and essential in a well-integrated, authentic life. Moral values and

²⁸ Eugene Hillman, C. S. Sp., *Toward An African Christianity: Inculturation Applied* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 50.

²⁹ Paul O. Gaggawala, A.J., *Fully Christian ... Fully Human A Model for the New Evangelization The Drama of Inculturation Evangelization at the Center of the Christian Bantu Family in Africa: Toward a Christian Family Bantu Culture and Identify* Boco Raton, Florida: Jeremiah Press, 1999), 51 quotes, Uns Urs von Balthasar, “The Realm of Metaphysics in Modern Age,” vol. 5 in *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 655.

³⁰ Gaggawala, *Fully Christian Fully Human*, 51.

religious beliefs are one in the African anthropology. Magesa notes that, “Due to the inseparability of the religious and secular models of existence, the link between anthropology and theology is especially important.”³¹ For Africans, especially for the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya, religion determines the ethical values and the purpose of human life. Therefore, a good moral life is controlled by the fear of God, the giver of life. This fear has a religious sense which demands faith in the unknown power of God.

The Bantu and Nilotic people recognize life as a ‘mystery.’³² The mystery of life is closely connected to God-the Giver of life. The mystery of life unfolds through a marriage between man and woman. The Bantu and Nilotic people recognize that women have a special role to play in the mystery of human life through procreation. Woman as mother is the only person privileged in the process of procreation and physical development as the first custodian of human life. Additionally, she is more capable of nurturing human life after birth in a natural way because it is her body that is capable of receiving the gift of life and bearing it within her womb for nine months. A man becomes important as a companion, protector, and provider. As such, African culture respects women as mothers of human life. Catherine Coquery-Viderovitch acknowledges that African women “have been and are still the nurturers” of human life.³³

³¹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 31.

³² Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 15-16, explains ‘mystery’ in relation to religious ontology, man in relation to his origin and destiny. The same work (194-196) explains ‘mystery’ in relation to invisible forces that control human life beyond the material world. In this sense the power of procreation is considered beyond the material world, and man can only grasp its meaning in a marriage between a man and woman.

³³ Catherine Coquery-Viderovitch, *African Women: A Modern History*, translated by Beth Gillian Raps (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 1. See also Magesa, *African Religion*: 77- 82.

The ‘sacredness’ and the sense of ‘mystery’ are two elements in the concept of human life which can be attributed to the theological and anthropological cultural reality of life among the Bantu and Nilotic people.³⁴ These two elements are directly connected to the dignity and vocation of woman. But, there is also a very special and specific element within the concept of human life among the Bantu and Nilotic people known as ‘vital force.’³⁵ ‘Vital force’ is the underlying principle of every life.³⁶ According to Nkemnkia, it is the concept of vital force which makes it possible for the Bantu and Nilotic people to conceive human life on the basis of “hierarchy and superiority of one genus to another.”³⁷ According to Bantu philosophy, it is the ‘vital force’ which is the center of the value of human life.³⁸ This means that human beings are not rated as ‘valuable’ or ‘less valuable,’ ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’ in the sense of strength, power or wealth but rather in the sense of their vital force. In this sense, woman is viewed as having more vital force than man because of her capacity to receive the gift of life and nurture life in a more special way than man. In the Bantu and Nilotic philosophy, it therefore makes sense that a mother has more influence in matters of the ethical and moral life of her children and of others, as well. Therefore, from the Bantu and Nilotic cultural points of view, the concept of human life brings together, in one instant,

³⁴ Magesa, *African Religion*, 77. See also Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy: A Step Forward in African Thinking* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1999), 186-187.

³⁵ Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy: A Step Forward in African Thinking* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1999), 186-187, 166-167. *Vital force* is spiritual power or mystical power within human life. Human being is dynamic; it is not merely a being, rather it is a being who has certain mystical powers attached to the very act of being. For instance, being a mother has certain vital force attached which makes a woman being in a certain level of life in reference to generation of life. Among the Bantu and Nilotic people, when a mother curses one, it is believed that she has more vital force than when a father does so, because as a woman there is distinctive vital force of human life connected to ‘mystery of being’ a woman. In this sense vital force is part of the being, unlike the view of the West, where the concept of vital force is not necessarily a part of the being. It may be an external force.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

sacredness, mystery, and vital force. In all these respects, woman is understood as mother of human life.

Being a mother is being in a relationship, that is, a primary relationship with God, the giver of life. Life with its vital force is a mystery manifested through motherhood. Among the Bantu and Nilotic people, woman is called 'mother' as a title of honor in respect to her role in human life. This title, however, goes deeper than the literal meaning of the word. It brings to mind a metaphysical experience, the capability to transmit not only physiological and biological life but also spiritual, economic, and moral values.³⁹ Among the Bantu and Nilotic people, the title is applicable to all women who have reached child-bearing age. Kshama Sharma has noted that there are several misconceptions given by early anthropologists from the West about the position of women in this society.⁴⁰ According to Sharma they "generally believed that the African woman is a poor, degraded, down-trodden being, with no rights and morals, subjected to constant ill-treatment and deserves little better."⁴¹ But this is a mistaken view presented by foreigners; in fact, the woman is viewed as the center of the family.

The state of motherhood is, in a certain way among the Bantu and Nilotic people, both a theological and an anthropological experience. One cannot conceive of the idea of being on earth in a natural without being of a mother. This emphasis does not diminish the role of a man as a father but acknowledges the role of a woman as a mother. After the conjugal union between a man and a woman, the responsibility of the man is needed, but the presence of a man is not required to sustain life. The reality of human life from this point

³⁹ Sharma, *Women of Africa*, 35.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

forward depends entirely on the part of the mother. In fact, a man only knows that he has become the father of a child in her womb when he is told by the woman.

The concept of the ‘sacredness’ of human life may be common in other cultures, but in the African cultures there is a unique sense and a particular emphasis on the idea that considers human life as a ‘whole life.’ This means that there is no distinction between biological or physiological, spiritual or material life as there is in western culture. Human life means the ‘whole human being’ with all human attributes, and this individual is regarded as constituting a single, undifferentiated whole. Bujo notes that both physical life and the concept of an undifferentiated whole occupied sacred positions in traditional religions.⁴²

According to Bujo, the undifferentiated whole means looking at human life as a sacred whole without distinction between the biological, spiritual, or physiological natures of the human person.⁴³ In other words, there is no distinction of spirit and body as there is in western anthropologies. This concept and belief in the wholeness of life is expressed in traditional African cultural liturgy. When there is news of a new life, or news of a pregnancy with the first child of the couple, a celebration reveals the mystery of life and man’s thanksgiving to God. Mbiti confirms that “pregnancy is a joyful period for the woman and her family. If it is the first pregnancy for her, it assures everyone that she is able to bear children. Once that is known to her, her marriage is largely secure, and the relatives treat her with greater respect than before.”⁴⁴ Such respect indicates the cultural respect for women, however, it does not mean that inability to bear a child would make a woman less important.

⁴² Bujo, *African Theology*, 17. See also Mbiti, *African Religion*, 2; and Magesa, *African Religion*, 1-32.

⁴³ Bujo, *African Theology*, 18. See also Mbiti, *African Religions*, 2.

⁴⁴ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 87.

A woman is regarded as a mother of human life even without bearing her own child. A subsequent pregnancy will not require a serious ceremonial celebration. Generally, there is no ritual ceremony until the time of the delivery, naming, and the initiation period. However, every pregnant woman is treated with great respect.

Among the Nilotic Luo people of Kenya, when a woman realizes that she is expecting a child, she will share this news with the father of the child and a sacrifice and thanksgiving will be offered with a variation of the following prayer: “God, the giver of human life, God of Our Ancestors who has given us this child present in the womb of the mother, may You bless and protect the child to be born and the mother.”⁴⁵ Then a special meal will follow and the woman will be treated with great love, honor, and respect until the time of the birth of her baby. Another celebration and ritual ceremony will follow after the birth. By contrast, among the Nandi, one of the Nilotic tribes, the expectant couple and the family offer prayers for the child and the pregnant mother for protection. With the Bambuti tribe, when a woman realizes that she is expecting a child, “she cooks food and takes some of it to be offered to God with prayers of thanksgiving.”⁴⁶

After the birth of a child, the experience of the concept of human life as sacred continues in different ways. This is evidenced in the traditional cultural celebrations. For

⁴⁵ Ibid., 87-90. See also Michael C. Kirwen, ed., *African Cultural Domains: Life Cycle of an Individual* (Nairobi, Kenya: Mias Books, 2008), 4; and Magesa, *African Religion*, 84-85.

⁴⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 112. See also Magesa, *African Religion*, 88.

example, among the Bantu and Nilotic people, each stage in human life is marked with a ritual ceremony: at conception, birth, puberty, adulthood, marriage, and death.⁴⁷

In general, there is a ritual at every stage mentioned above, which Magesa calls the “rites of passage.”⁴⁸ In each of the celebrations, the concept of life as a gift, as a mystery, as sacred and as vital force becomes clear. From these celebrations, one observes certain coherence, such as: i) the unity between the visible and invisible, ii) the hierarchy of being and, iii) prayers, offerings, and sacrifices in the liturgical rite. All of these elements affirm the sacredness, vital force, and mystery of human life. Above all, each element offers an indication of the dignity and vocation of the woman as mother because she stands at the center of all the celebrations. From the ritual ceremonies, there is evidence of a link between the visible and the invisible which reveals the mystery of human life. The invisible refers to the belief in the power of God, ancestors, and the close relatives of the family who have died and who are believed still to have some influence in the family. The family members offer libations for their spirits during the celebrations of the events/stages of their lives. This next section examines and analyzes the deeper meaning in the unity between the visible and invisible observed in the African liturgical celebration of the concept of life in understanding the dignity and vocation of woman in the context of the African family.

1.2. The Unity Between the Visible and Invisible and the Hierarchy of Being

⁴⁷ Magesa, *African Religion*, 95.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* The rite introduces one to certain groups, states of life and community; it also binds blood-friendships, oaths of secrecy, or commitments to certain causes in life.

So far, it is clear that for the Bantu and Nilotic people the concept of human life is sacred, mysterious, and has an underlying vital force. It is also clear that the Bantu and Nilotic people celebrate every stage in life. From their celebrations and ceremonies there is a sense of unity between the *visible* and the *invisible* which is significant for the moral life.⁴⁹ Basically, one observes that there is a belief in an invisible presence of God and the communion with living relatives who have died. The living relatives (family members), the *visible*, believe that spirits of the living-dead, the *invisible*, have influence in their lives. This is the unity which Temples refers to as the visible and the invisible.⁵⁰

For example, at any given celebration of life, the spontaneous prayers, libations, and invocations of certain names reveal that there is communion between the visible and the invisible world. Thus, the concept of human life includes the *visible* and *invisible being* in the world. The unity between the *invisible* and *visible* also influences the moral behavior of the individual and community.⁵¹ In this way, the invisible participates in the visible world. Bujo acknowledges this unity and notes that there are two worlds of being: the *visible* and the *invisible* world in which human beings participate according to the hierarchy of being.⁵² In the ‘invisible’ world, there are the spiritual beings: God and all those who have died and are

⁴⁹ Placede Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, translated by Colin King (Paris, France: Présence Africaine, 1969), 18. See also Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy For Africa* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1995), 52-58; Buti Tihagale, OMI, “Saints and Ancestors: A Closer Look,” in *Inculturation in South African Context* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 28-37; and Vincent Mulago, “Traditional African Religion and Christianity,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1990), 120 -121.

⁵⁰ Temple, *Bantu Philosophy*, 18. See Also Vincent Mulago, “Traditional African Christian Religion and Christianity,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* edited by Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 120-122.

⁵¹ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 18. See also Michael C. Kirwen, ed., *African Cultural Knowledge: Themes and Embedded Beliefs* (Nairobi, Kenya: Mias & Books, 2005), 34; and Maurice M. Makumba, *Natural Theology with African Annotations* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 14-18.

⁵² Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 20.

believed to have some supernatural influence on the living members of the family. They bring blessings to their family members who are observing the moral values of life, but can curse those who are not. Every African community believes that the ‘invisible beings,’ the deceased relatives, ancestors and God, have much interest in the family but they live in the ‘invisible’ world, or the world of the spirits. Similarly, Nkemnkia terms this unity between the visible and the invisible life as “being with everyone and everything.”⁵³ This is what influences the moral state in human life on different levels which he calls the ‘hierarchy.’⁵⁴

The hierarchy of being is as follows: In this world, the highest place is occupied by one living God who is the source of all life; next to Him are the ancestors who are more in communion with God than any of the living beings. They are the founders of a tribe who are believed to be in the ‘invisible’ world, the world of the living beings.⁵⁵ In a theological and anthropological sense, there is a continuous communion between the invisible and the visible beings. In other words, the Bantu and Nilotic people live in the world of faith and the world of experience. They believe that ‘living-dead’ members are the intercessors for the living members of the family. The ‘living-dead’ are all the dead relatives who are still remembered in family events and celebrations. At all liturgical events or family ceremonies they are remembered through food and drink offered to God through them. Next in the invisible world are the tribal heroes and elders of the clan who are recognized by society.

Women are believed to have more connection with the invisible beings because of their mystical power of generation. Africans “seek an increase of that life-force which flows

⁵³ Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy*, 172.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 18.

through the mystical body to which both they and ancestors belong.”⁵⁶ This ‘vital-force’ in women is experienced through their motherhood, specifically through the women’s capacity to bear life. Women are recognized as mothers of not only individuals but also of society. In this sense, if the dignity and vocation of women is not recognized and respected, there cannot be a true human society. It is common to hear about the “fatherless” child, but if women are not respected as mothers, then there can also be “motherless” children.

The concept of human life being sacred, mysterious, and having vital force places women on a higher level of being with reference to the value of life. The mother has a capacity to carry a child in her womb and give birth. For this reason, naturally, the ideal mother should feel closer to her child than the father. There is more natural bonding between the child and the mother than with the father, although it may at times develop in the opposite direction if the gift of life is not respected with love. For the Bantu and Nilotic people, God, the Creator, has constant communication with his people through the hierarchical levels of being. They believe also that, somehow, God intervenes in the life of his people through this hierarchy. According to Tempels, this is known as the hierarchical participation of life, a principle which strengthens moral and ethical structures at different levels and values in society and family life.⁵⁷ Among the Bantu and Nilotic people, the hierarchy governs the roles of family members and the communities.

The fact that women in their tribes are at the center of the family adds to their significance. It is through a woman that the invisible and visible become dynamic in the

⁵⁶ Bujo, *African Theology*, 23. See Also Magesa, *African Religion*, 83.

⁵⁷ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 18.

mystery of human life. It is through the woman as mother, that the mystery of life unfolds.

Mbiti notes that the birth of a child is not a single event.

Nature brings the child into the world, but society creates the child into a social being, a corporate person. ... Children are the buds of the society, and every birth is the arrival of 'spring' when life shoots out and the community thrives. The birth of a child is, therefore, the concern not only of the parents but of many relatives including the living and the departed. Kinship plays an important role here, so that a child cannot be exclusively 'my child' but only 'our child.'⁵⁸

This mystery of life is passed on through a mother, when she allows life to in her womb. Then, the mystery of life is also a dynamic in the family and community. The expectant mother becomes a special person and receives special treatment from her family, friends, neighbors, and relatives. According to Magesa, the whole community becomes aware of the value of human life through the woman.⁵⁹

Long before the birth of a child, the mother, the family and the community already experience the dignity and the vocation of the woman. Every member of a community has an obligation to protect life by respecting and honoring women. Women are seen by communities as the primary custodians of life, therefore, communities have obligation to respect and protect them. The respectful attitude emphasized toward women among the

⁵⁸ Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 110.

⁵⁹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 83.

Bantu and Nilotic peoples shows the significant role of women as mothers of life within their communities.

Finally, the protection of human life is not merely a matter of political, economic or social concern. Bujo notes that the ‘preservation’ of human life is the responsibility of “not simply religious and political leaders who have the obligation to preserve and transmit life,” but every member of the community, from the top down to the lowest member who must strengthen one another in the community.⁶⁰ Such responsibility is possible in accordance with the culture and faith of the people. According to Magesa such “conception indicates and assures that the universe is in good order and that the ancestors are happy.”⁶¹ Such cultural beliefs point to the moral values. Thus, according to Bujo, the morality of an act is determined by “its life-giving potential: good acts are those which contribute to the community’s vital force, whereas bad acts, however apparently insignificant, are those which tend to diminish life.”⁶² The ‘vital force’ is the power of the spirit within human life, which gives meaning to life.⁶³ The vital force according to Temples is the supreme value in human life.⁶⁴

Nkeminkia, an African philosopher and anthropologist, observes that first, *being* is the most important value in the West and is classified as the principle of causality, activity,

⁶⁰Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 22. ‘Preservation’ here refers to the values which pertain to the dignity of human life.

⁶¹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 83.

⁶²Bujo, *African Theology*, 22.

⁶³ Temples, *Bantu Philosophy*, 45.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

and movement.⁶⁵ It is “the first principle” of life.⁶⁶ This is a principle whereby, in the Bantu and Nilotic concept of being, it is impossible to think of a ‘part’ separated from the ‘whole’ or to deprive the ‘whole’ of its ‘part.’⁶⁷ The whole here includes both the visible and the invisible realities of life. This makes sense in human relationships in reference to morals and traditional ethical values.⁶⁸ According to Nkemnkia:

Vital force presents itself to the intellect, and the intellect gives life to the word as an instrument of knowledge. Knowledge of the vital force is not attained only through abstract thinking. It is above all, mediated by different entities which determine its intensity, grade kind and species in the experience of daily life, made up of relationships and will.⁶⁹

It is in this context that one can affirm that there is life common to all creatures, identical in human beings and in all created things, and more mystical in the life of a woman because of her specific capacity to nurture life.

Second, for the Africans, the ethical and moral issues are judged based upon the belief in the effects of the ‘vital force’ in life in connection several to other values in the family and community to which one belongs.⁷⁰ The traditional Bantu and Nilotic belief holds firmly that the teacher of good morals in a family is the mother who has a special attachment

⁶⁵ Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy*, 167.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago University Press, 1983), 21 - 32. According to Shils, tradition guides actions of human morality because people think that certain actions are linked to what people believe to be intrinsically right or wrong. Therefore, the Bantu and Nilotic traditional belief in the ‘vital force’ in women helps to enhance their role, dignity, and influence in their family and children.

⁶⁹ Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy*, 166.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 168.

to the children. This does not exclude the involvement of the father; it only emphasizes the important role of the woman as mother of the family.

The 'vital force' emphasizes that the woman has a special role in the family which shows that there is traditional understanding and belief among the Bantu and Nilotic people in the 'hierarchy of being.' That is, "all things having existence live a life of their own, proportional to the species and genus to which they belong; this is the basis of hierarchy of values and the superiority of one genus to another."⁷¹ It is on the basis of belief in the hierarchy of values and the superiority of one species to another that the vital force in women is considered to be higher than that in men.

The Bantu and Nilotic tribes believe in the hierarchy of human beings and their influence in a community. This is the basis of the traditional Bantu and Nilotic recognition and respect for authority from hierarchical levels in the community. African hierarchy has influence in both internal and external affairs in life and in the moral and ethical life of a person. The internal affairs form the character of the person while the external or social affairs affect the whole community. In this sense, the Bantu and Nilotic peoples believe that a mother donates greater spiritual formation of life for an individual person than a father.

The Luo community believes that spirit, breath, and blood flow from the mother and she shares these with her child. These form the part of the internal life of a child. The mother nurtures her child close to her in her personal life and connects the child to all members of the family and clan. The unique way a mother nurtures her child explains the idea of the

⁷¹ Ibid., 166.

‘hierarchy of beings’ in the concept of life among the Bantu and Nilotic people. The idea of a ‘hierarchy of being’ in the Bantu and Nilotic concept of life has no connection with the Church’s hierarchy.⁷²

The Church speaks with a hierarchy of ‘authority’ which is often misread to mean ‘power’ invested in an individual without reference to the source and the community.⁷³ The idea of hierarchy is significant in the understanding of the dignity and vocation of a woman as mother because African life is family-centered in the community structure. This means that every member of a family has prescribed roles. For example, in a family both the man and woman share the same life, but with respect to motherhood, the woman participates in a more significant hierarchical level in the family having religious and ethical concurrence. The idea of religious and ethical dynamism is what is known as religious ontology. A religious ontology here means being in relation with God-the giver of human life and with the community. Therefore, the respect and the dignity of motherhood come from her hierarchical position. The following section explains the Bantu and Nilotic tribes’ understanding of the ‘hierarchy of being’ within the concept of life and its role.

1. 3. Understanding the Hierarchy of Being and the Religious Ontology

⁷² Waliggo, “The African Clan,” 117. For Waliggo, the hierarchy of the Church concerns the “structure of the Church, the concentration of powers in an individual, the preoccupation with structures and bureaucracy.”

⁷³ Ibid.

According to African culture, human life is perceived as falling within the ‘hierarchy of being.’⁷⁴ This hierarchy of being is life with its own religious ontology.⁷⁵ That is life presupposes the life-Giver. Therefore, an understanding of African moral and ethical values must penetrate this religious ontology.⁷⁶ It is anthropocentric in character and family life is at its center. The Bantu and Nilotic moral values and religious beliefs are formed and understood in relation to the family and the community. A woman as a mother is at the center of the family.⁷⁷ This makes it easy to apply the concept of a ‘hierarchy of being’ to a woman and understand the dignity and vocation of women in reference to the concept of life. The divine power of life is believed to flow dynamically through the ‘hierarchy of being.’ For example, human life flows to the family through a woman, and respect for this belief governs the moral life in the family. Women are the mothers of their family. It is only when the woman is respected and loved by the members of the family and community that the mystical powers of life can flow through her.

Therefore, the hierarchy of being is understood to give life by different means at different levels: (1) On the family level, the father is the external link with ancestors; (2) at the clan level, an appointed leader of several families gives social order; and (3) at the tribe or nation level, it is the chiefs and kings who give political and economic order; and (4)

⁷⁴ Ibid., 61. Africans believe that in being what we are, there is a mystical power attached to the being itself in a hierarchical order. This power flows in a hierarchical order, which means a blessing or a curse can only flow from a senior person to junior person; a mother to child; a father to a child; an ancestor to the elder of the clan, God to his people, etc. This is how blessings or curses reach people. However, mothers have special mystical powers in relation to their children. See also Vincent Mulago, “Traditional African Christian Religion and Christianity,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* edited by Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 119-131.

⁷⁵ Bujo, *African Theology*, 22.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 61. See also Bénézet Bujo, *African Christian Morality: At the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 50.

within the family, the mother is the immediate teacher in the life of the child. There are morals and ethical structures which mold a child's character.⁷⁸

When women play their natural role well in the family, they give strength, hope, and order to the whole community, not only to their children through imparting moral values but also through religious values and practices in their daily lives.⁷⁹ Note that the Bantu and Nilotic concept of 'hierarchy' is conceived as part of being, while in Western medieval thought, the idea of 'hierarchy' is mostly associated with the governing or ruling body of the Church. Therefore, the meanings are totally different. And today within the Church, the concept of the 'hierarchy' refers to the clergy, the governing body of the Church, while in Africa, among the Bantu and Nilotic, it refers to the concept of life.⁸⁰

For the Bantu or Nilotic people, being a religious person is equivalent to being a moral person. Therefore, a life lived and examined in relationship to God is a holy and dignified life. It is within the concept of the hierarchy of being that a woman receives the respect and honor for her dignity and vocation in society because at both the personal and family level she is the custodian of life. Therefore, when a boy stands to defend his sister, he does not defend her only because she is physically weak but also because his protection has theological and anthropological implications.

⁷⁸ Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 16.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy*, 169. For the Bantu people, Life is superior to entity, or Being as a notion in order of time. Every entity is a determination of that which exists in some way or which has possibility of existing and of living. In the same way that the word is the expression of man, the Being is the expression of life. Life remains identical in everything, it is the very first possession, while Being evolves and composed. Life is measured in quality, while Being always determines a size and therefore, it is measured in quantity. Life which is in human beings has neither age, color, nor size; the same adjectives can be applied to all the attributes. This makes it possible to respect women as mothers because of the 'vital force' understood in connection to being.

The idea of the hierarchy of being in the concept of life is a significant factor among the Kikuyu and the Luo in relation to the family. For example, in the family it is the man who is the external *link* between the individual and the extended family. Members of the family use the father's or grandfather's names. However, when it comes to the internal identification, for the Kikuyu "the mother is the immediate head of the family."⁸¹ This means that the family vital force and spirit are traced through her. For the Luo, "the clans are named after the women in recognition that they are the mothers of children and the founders of the clans."⁸² This makes sense considering that the Bantu and Nilotic tribes live in large families and clan circles; hence, children are better identified with their mothers, and even women are better identified by the name of their children.

Among the Bantu and Nilotic, for instance, when women are addressed by the name of their children it is a great honor. It is an even greater honor for a Bantu, Kikuyu, or a Nilotic, Luo woman to be addressed as the mother of 'so and-so.' Actually, it is a great honor for any leader to be addressed as 'the son of such-and-such a woman,' referring to his mother. There is no way to explain this, but being a Nilotic Luo and having experienced and seen how people usually express joy and excitement in response to such an address, it can only be said that there is something unique or significant in the relationship between the mother and the child. It may be instinctive, but for the Bantu and Nilotic it is something more than that, something that evokes the vital force, or the spirit of motherhood.

⁸¹Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 7.

⁸²Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru*, 11. Note that, among the Luo community, family/clan carries the name of the mother but generally, identity cards and passports bear the last name of the father as the family name. This seems to have an origin in Western culture, with the written identifications coming with foreign masters from the Western countries. Most countries have adopted this, but deep in the African villages, sons and daughters are properly identified by the names of their mothers.

When a woman is recognized and honored as a ‘mother,’ this honor applies not only to her personally but also to motherhood as a gift to the culture. The idea of motherhood reveals something deeper than just cultural esteem for the reality of being a woman. For instance, among the Bantu, Kikuyu and the Nilotic, Luo tribes, if the first born is John, it is polite and a sign of deep respect to be addressed as “Mama John” (the mother of John) if one knows the name of the child. Such an address is always solemn and accepted culturally because it touches on the dignity of motherhood. But when a man is addressed as ‘the Son of Wanjiku,’ for a Kikuyu, or ‘the son of Anyango,’ for a Luo, the man feels great.⁸³ The man is identified with the community as a son not only of the individual person but of the clan which has the name of his mother.

Similarly, the mother plays a part in the foundation of the family, the clan, and the tribe. In a profound way, she feels protected by all the founders of the tribe and the creator of the tribe; she feels the reality of her motherhood. At the theological and anthropological level, such form of address “Mama of So-and-So,” to a woman, or “Son of So-and-So,” awakens a sense of community and belonging. The man is the ‘link’ to the external community, while the woman is believed to be the center of the unity to the invisible life (the mystical powers), to which human life ‘belongs.’ This confirms the Bantu and Nilotic cultural belief that the dignity and vocation of women are gifts given by God in the very

⁸³ ‘Wanjiku’ is a common name for a Kikuyu female and ‘Anyango’ is also a common name for a Luo female. Most of the Luo female names start with ‘A’ and most of the Kikuyu female names start with ‘W,’ but there are a few exceptions.

‘being of a woman,’ *Muke* in Kiswahili.⁸⁴ In this sense life is given to women in a special and unique way.

Affirming the ontological dignity and vocation of women, a Bantu and Nilotic woman feels that she is a ‘mother’ and that she is aware that she is the only person who is privileged by the Creator to experience the growth of that human being in her womb. This is true for all women. Motherhood is a mystical experience that eclipses the material world. Theologians and philosophers may offer theological and scientific explanations of this reality. However, theological, philosophical, or scientific explanations fall short of the concept that life is a gift from God given through the union between man and woman. This way of thinking confirms the respect and love the Bantu and Nilotic people show to every woman as a mother.

Among the Kikuyu and the Luo people, once a woman reaches a marriageable age, the age whereby one is able to give birth to a ‘new life,’ she automatically enjoys the dignity of motherhood. The society already recognizes in her the potential of motherhood. Therefore, she already enjoys the title of ‘woman’ or ‘mother’ even before she gives birth to any child. When a woman conceives a child, the prayers and sacrifices offered by the family confirm her dignity and vocation as gifts from God. The following section presents analyses of the

⁸⁴ *Muke*, is a Swahili word which expresses the very being and the act of being woman. Being a woman presupposes motherhood. This term *Muke*, woman, has a specific concept which presupposes being with a potency of motherhood, and the opposite is *Mume*, man, with the potency of fatherhood and one cannot mean the other, rather the dignity of one depends on the other. For this reason, the dignity and vocation of *muke*, woman, is understood in reference to the opposite sex, *mume*. It is in this context that the Bantu and Nilotic tribes understand the dignity and vocation of women.

prayers, offerings, and sacrifices which facilitate the understanding of the dignity and vocation of women as mothers within the concept of life.

1. 4. The Prayers, Offerings, and Sacrifices for an Expectant Mother

Prayers, offerings, and sacrifices are common acts of worship among the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya. There are various forms of prayers, offerings, and sacrifices among different tribes of the Bantu and Nilotic of Kenya and various explanations of their purposes.⁸⁵ This section highlights some of these theories to show that through them one can better understand the dignity and vocation of women. Underneath the prayers, offerings, and sacrifices lies a deeper reality than the actions and words uttered.

‘Prayers’ are the verbal invocation of blessing, asking for protection, thanksgiving, or individual or community acknowledgement of the powers of God. They are offered for both adoration and worship. Prayers may or may not be accompanied by an offering or sacrifice. Mbiti observes that:

When a Gikuyu woman has given birth, she screams five times if the child is a boy, and four times if it is a girl. The placenta and umbilical cord are the symbols of the child’s attachment to a mother, to womanhood, to the state of inactivity. They are therefore the object of special treatment in most African

⁸⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 58-66. Mbiti explains the reasons which call for prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. All of them are not written and explained in this text, but they express deeper desire, thanks, gratitude, and adoration to the Creator. See also Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 60-70. See also Kirwen, ed. *African Cultural Knowledge*, 6-14.

societies. For example, the Gikuyu deposit placenta in an uncultivated field and cover it with grain and grass, these symbolizing fertility. The uncultivated field is like a silent symbol of fertility, strength and freshness; using it like a silent prayer that the mother's womb should remain fertile and strong for the birth of more children.⁸⁶

The Luo people have a similar prayer that is said after the birth of a child; then they plant the umbilical cord behind the house adjacent to the rain line where it falls from the roof. This symbolizes the fertility of the mother's womb to have more children. As the rain drops and wets the ground, vegetation springs up and grows just as children from the same womb of the woman will be born again.

Magesa observes that, for an African conception of a child requires the cooperation of God, as well as ancestors, mother, and father.⁸⁷ These cultural insights reveal the belief that the life is a sacred gift from God. When a woman conceives a child, prayers, offerings, and sacrifice are offered because a conception is not viewed as the effort of man and woman alone but as cooperation in God's plan and the intervention of ancestors. The mother and the father united in love beget a child; God intervenes to 'create' while the ancestors are believed to protect the child from malevolent powers.⁸⁸

For the African, the word 'offering' refers to gifts. There is no killing of animals. For example, among the Luo and the Kikuyu people, when a woman is reported to be with child,

⁸⁶Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 113. See also Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion*: 82-94.

⁸⁷ Magesa, *African Religion*, 83.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

she may be given a particular gift as an offering for the protection and safety of the baby in her womb. Mbiti notes that offerings are mainly foodstuffs and other items obtained without spilling animal blood.⁸⁹ Another example of an offering is performance of an act of charity in memory of someone who passed away. These are tangible, symbolic deeds which imply a direct connection to the beauty and strength of human life. The offerings are not merely items offered to God in honor of the expectant mother but rather to express a deeper reality, the respect the people have for motherhood.

For the African, ‘sacrifices’ refer to cases “where animal life is destroyed in order to present the animal in part, or, in whole, to God, supernatural beings, spirits, or the living-dead.”⁹⁰ Sacrifices are only offered when there is a real foreseen threat to human life.⁹¹ For example, among the Luo and the Kikuyu people when a woman is experiencing some difficulties during her pregnancy, they might offer a sacrifice for the protection of the mother and her expected child. This is done when there is real need, such as when the life of the baby or mother is threatened or when the family wants to show gratitude to God. The most important reality expressed at a sacrifice is that the “worshiper sees God as entering into human conflicts and problems, to console and heal.”⁹²

The significant thing that one learns from the prayers, offerings and sacrifices made at the_wedding ceremony, when the woman conceives, or after the birth of the woman’s first

⁸⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 58.

⁹⁰ Ibid. See also Tokunboth Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1979), 33-34.

⁹¹ Judith M. Bahemuka, “The Hidden Christ in African Tradition,” in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, edited by J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1989), 10.

⁹² Ibid.

baby, is the thanks and gratitude given to God, the woman, and the community. These symbolic traditional gestures reveal a total respect for womanhood and motherhood. The community and family ask God for the blessings of a safe delivery.

Some prayers, offerings, and sacrifices are directed through the ancestors, with the family hoping that they are in a special place in heaven near God or with the living-dead. The family believes that these ancestors have some influence with God so as to intercede for the safety of both the mother and child. All these liturgical dynamics reveal that human life is a special gift from God realized through a woman who gives her womb as the first home of life. Therefore, through prayers, offerings, and sacrifices, people express respect and love for women as mothers. This is clear in African liturgies accompanied by songs and dancing. The liturgical songs and dancing express the attitude of the people and the mood of the particular ceremony.

Thus far, we have presented and analyzed the concept of life in the traditional Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya with all elements significant to understanding the dignity and vocation of women. It is only when one sees traditions in terms of dynamic unity between the visible and the invisible, the hierarchy of being, and the meaning of prayers, offerings, and sacrifices that one can understand the dignity and vocation of women within the Bantu and Nilotic tribes. For these people, life is also family-centered, taking place within the family. Therefore, it is important to understand the concept of family. The following section outlines the concept of a family with reference to the dignity and vocation of women.

2. The Concept of Family and the Dignity and Vocation of Women

The concept of family among the Bantu and Nilotic people is wider than the western idea of family.⁹³ Generally, in western culture, the term refers to the ‘nuclear family,’ father, mother, and children. In western culture, the extended family includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

In the traditional Bantu and Nilotic tribes, however, ‘extended family’ is part of the nuclear family.⁹⁴ In this context, motherhood has a broader meaning in family life. It is more than a specific physiological and biological relationship in a nuclear family.⁹⁵ This kind of family exercises a broader moral role in a society.

Gyekye noted that a family “in itself is held as a fundamental value: a social as well as moral value.”⁹⁶ The members of the family are brought up to think of themselves primarily in relationship to blood relatives and to seek to bring honor to the family.⁹⁷ Therefore, it is the responsibility of every member to maintain the cohesion of the family.

Because of moral values in African Bantu and Nilotic families, there seems to be a connection between the dignity and vocation of women and a theological understanding of

⁹³ Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*, 66. See also Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 75-76.

⁹⁴ Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*, 66.

⁹⁵ Diane Kayongo-Male and Philista Onyango, *The Sociology of the African Family* (New York: Longman Group Ltd, 1994), 11-15.

⁹⁶ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 75.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

‘being.’⁹⁸ This refers to being a ‘mother,’ or being a ‘father,’ which is fundamental. However, it is not the same in the western culture.

Koyongo-Male and Onyango observe that when “people argue that the family is disappearing,” they usually refer to a function of the family.⁹⁹ That may be, for example, the economic and social stability of the family is disappearing, or the economic benefit which an individual contributes to the family is disappearing. When everyone is doing well economically and socially and everyone is contributing and no one is seen as a burden, then people may forget the value of ‘being’ in God’s plan. Such a view seems to emphasize the benefits of having family, not necessarily, family according to God’s plan. There is a danger that such a mentality may tend to overlook the significance of a woman as a mother of life.¹⁰⁰ The Luo proverb which is generally passed on orally expresses this in the following way: “when one seems to be fully satisfied, he can easily forget and set fire to burn the granary without thinking that what he has eaten came from there.”¹⁰¹ An example of disappearing family is when parents end up in nursing homes not because they do not have a family to take care of them but because they are no longer profitable and have become a burden for the family members.

Among the Bantu and Nilotic communities, first and foremost life is conceived in a family and is centered in a family and a woman is the mother of human life. For them, the

⁹⁸ Kayongo-Male and Onyango, *The Sociology of the African Family*, 12.

⁹⁹ Ibid. ‘functions’ in this text means, reproduction, affection, socialization and economic cooperation, and religious upbringing. Each of these is directly connected to the dignity of woman as a mother.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Most of these proverbs generally are still passed on orally by Luo elders living around Lake Victoria, Kenya. This particular proverb has a moral teaching that one should not disrespect an old woman because through her comes the one who looks young and strong now.

family includes: i) the *living* members, ii) the *departed* members, and iii) the *unborn* members. This section examines and explains three categories of membership which comprise the family in the traditional Bantu and Nilotic communities in reference to the dignity and vocation of women.

2. 1. The *Living* Family Members of the Bantu and Nilotic Communities

In most African communities and particularly among the Bantu and Nilotic of Kenya, the living members of the family include the parents, children, grandchildren, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, and all the immediate relatives. But as mentioned above, in the western cultures the family includes father, mother and children, perhaps with one or two people as ‘extended family’ members. The ‘extended family’ is part of the basic family among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes in Kenya, as are the departed relatives and those in the womb.¹⁰²

Mbiti in his book, *African Religions and Philosophy* notes that the western term ‘extended family’ does not have the same meaning in the traditional African family concept because ‘extended family’ in western culture does not typically include the departed and the unborn children as members of the family.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 75.

¹⁰³ Mbiti *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106. See also Laurent Mpongo, “A Defender of African Marriage and Liturgy” in *African Theology in the 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, vol. 2. Eds. Bénédet

Moreover, western ‘extended family’ makes distinctions which are not recognized within the African family context. For example, the brother of one’s father is an uncle in western culture, but in Africa he is one’s *father*. He may be called younger or elder *father* in relation to the position of biological father in the family. In the Kiswahili language, he may be referred to as *Baba mkubwa* or *Baba mdogo* which means the younger father or elder father in reference to the order of birth.

Similarly, the sister of one’s mother is not referred to as an aunt, but younger *mother* or elder *mother*, which means the younger mother or elder mother in reference to position of the biological mother in her family. All cousins are referred to as brothers and sisters. There is no term ‘cousin’ among the Kikuyu of the Bantu tribes or the Luo of the Nilotic in Kenya. In this sense, Africans express the strength of the blood relationship beyond the concept of “extended family.” This is very significant because in the Bantu and Nilotic tradition, a family extends beyond a house. It is through a woman that the family traces its roots, its given name, and its meaning. In this way, women as mothers are significant in the family.¹⁰⁴

Within the Bantu and Nilotic communities, the idea of family influences moral behavior. It promotes reciprocity of respect in the community and clan. Children respect elders and elders reciprocate in being faithful to their status in life, knowing that through them the young members receive family values. This has another implication, the implication of the authority of parents over their children.¹⁰⁵ Family presupposes authority and respect

Bujo and Juvénal Ilunga Muya (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 125-147; and Bryson Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*, 66.

¹⁰⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 6. See also Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Sharma, *Women of Africa*, 34-35.

for all its members beyond one's house. A woman, being the mother of the family, enjoys the gift of motherhood which bonds all members as one. Thus, women have greater authority and influence than men within the family because of the relationship through the umbilical cord. The living members of the family view a woman as the uniting central figure.¹⁰⁶ Generally, at an early age, women as mothers are the best teachers of all children in a family. For example, Sharma observes that the mother of a great Chief is always a person of great importance.¹⁰⁷ This is because people generally tend to look to where one acquired his education.

Most education is done within family circles, and in age groups, especially at night around the fire. Later, when children have become teenagers, the grandmothers know what to teach the girls and grandfathers teach the boys their different responsibilities in the family. Later on, the older boys and girls are expected to repeat the same stories and transmit good moral examples to the younger ones as they grow up. The teaching is always done by age, and gender, except on special occasions, when there are common events being celebrated. In any of these situations, it is a woman as a mother who gives both spiritual and moral formation to the family.

There is a Luo saying which goes, "The mother gathers all members like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."¹⁰⁸ So are all members in the family gathered by a woman through the spiritual and social umbrella of her motherhood. Therefore, women as

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ The source is from the oral traditional sayings and teachings among the Luo people living around the Lake Victoria region in Kenya.

mothers are the central figure in the Bantu and Nilotic traditional family. At any of their celebrations or special events she is an important figure of the family, uniting all the members.

During celebrations of life events within these families, 'departed' family members are included. The inclusion of the *departed* family members reveals that the *departed* family members are a part of the family.

2. 2. The *Departed* Members of the Bantu and Nilotic Communities

The *departed* are deceased family members and relatives, specifically those who the living members of the family believe are interested in the members still alive on earth.¹⁰⁹ According to Vincent Mulago, the relationship which exists between the departed and the living members of the family is "unity in life or vital union."¹¹⁰ That is, the union which joins together "vertically and horizontally, beings living and dead," all of whom are in communion in life.¹¹¹ The Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya believe that departed members can bring blessings as well as harm to individuals or families if people do not live with love and respect for the family.

The living-dead or the departed relatives "are the best group of intermediaries between men and God: they know the needs of men, they have 'recently' been here with men, and at the same time they have full access to the channels of communication with God

¹⁰⁹ Vincent Mulago, "Traditional African Christian Religion and Christianity," in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* edited by Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 120.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., See also Buti Tihagale, O. M. I, "Saints and Ancestors: A Closer Look," in *Inculturation in the South African Context*, various Authors (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 27-36.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

directly or, according to some societies, indirectly through their own forefathers.”¹¹² Nyamiti shares the same view that the African family includes departed relatives, known as the ‘living-dead.’¹¹³ These are the family members and relatives who have died but are ‘alive’ in the memories of their surviving families. They are vividly alive in every event of the family and members invoke their names in all their ritual celebrations. Mbiti points out that most Africans believe that the living-dead are interested in the affairs of the families in which they once lived.¹¹⁴ Such a belief affects the daily moral life of the living members of the family.

For example, among the Kikuyu and Luo tribes, there are cultic rituals and celebrations which show clearly that they believe in life beyond death. For instance, their living relatives remember the ‘living-dead’ from time to time. They do this by offering them food and libations. Hospitality, respect, love, and charity are extended to other living members of the society in their honor. Taking care of widows and orphans is common in the Bantu and Nilotic communities in honor of the living-dead. They believe that by doing so they receive blessings from their ‘living-dead’ and ancestors.

Mbiti noted that some of these ‘living-dead’ are believed to have joined the community of ancestors which is the highest state of communion with God.¹¹⁵ According to him, “people know only too well that following physical death, a barrier has been erected between them and the living-dead.”¹¹⁶ But physical death opens up new dimensions in

¹¹² Mbiti *African Religions and Philosophy*, 83.

¹¹³ Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984), 16.

¹¹⁴ Mbiti *African Religions and Philosophy*, 83.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84. See also Tihagale, “Saints and Ancestors,” 27-36.

relationships. For example, Thagale points out that the experience of naming a child after a grandparent brings the relationship between the departed grandparent closer to the family, and for Christians, taking a name of a saint reflects a belief that the virtues and the good spirit of the saints live in the ones being named.¹¹⁷ While the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya might physically see that death is a barrier, they reach over to their living-dead through prayers, offerings, and sacrifices, and acts of charity. In this way, the living-dead members have an influence on the moral life of the living family members.

According to Nyamiti, the ancestors are those who in the category of the ‘living dead’ are believed to participate in both a natural and a supernatural relationship with their living relatives.¹¹⁸ They act as mediators and are in sacred communion with their earthly relatives.¹¹⁹ The departed members of the family are comparable to the intercessors in the Christian religion. In Christianity both the known saints as well as those who are not officially canonized by the Church form the living-dead, the communion of saints. For Africans, the living-dead include all the departed members of the family except those who committed suicide or died in a state that is believed to indicate a bad spirit with God and the community. For example, those who are drowned in water or rivers or are killed by lightning are believed to have died in bad spirit, and therefore they are not generally included among the living-dead.

¹¹⁷ Tihagale, “Saints and Ancestors,” 30.

¹¹⁸ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 16.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The communication between the departed members and the living members of the family is part of Christian belief and also part of the belief of other non-Christian religions.¹²⁰ In the Catholic faith, such communication is experienced through the celebration of the Eucharist for the dead by putting flowers on their graves, praying for departed relatives, or lighting candles for the dead. The Bantu and Nilotic people who are not Catholic Christians do not put flowers but pour food. They do not offer a Eucharistic celebration but they offer traditional sacrifices such as slaughtering animals and pouring blood or food on the graves.¹²¹ Thagale observes that graves are places of reverence, which reveals something about the faith of people.¹²²

Also, Thagale notes that living relatives extend their good deeds in honor and respect to others who have a connection to those “living-dead.”¹²³ In this way, they believe that they continue the good works that the departed would have done. Because of such belief in the living-dead members of a family, sometimes the living members are influenced and change to live very good moral lives after the death of their dear ones since they believe that the invisible members are watching them. Some of the living-dead members, because of the positions they held and the good works they performed while still on earth, are believed to be in the category of ancestors which is regarded as the highest state that one can acquire after death. This position is comparable to the state of sainthood for Christians. This forms a part of ethical teachings in the Bantu and Nilotic communities.

¹²⁰ Thagale, “Saints and Ancestors,” 33.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

The Bantu and Nilotic people also consider the ‘not yet born’ or the ‘unborn babies’ as family members. Therefore, the following section explains who the ‘not yet born’ or the ‘unborn’ members are and shows how they form part of the family in reference to the dignity and vocation of women.

2.3. The *Unborn* or *Not Yet Born* Members in the Bantu and Nilotic Communities

The *unborn* or sometimes referred to as *not yet born babies* are children who are conceived but not yet born into the family.¹²⁴ The Bantu and Nilotic communities recognize these individuals as real members of the family. They are “the buds of hope and expectation, and each family makes sure that its own existence is not extinguished.”¹²⁵ This exercise of preservation of life is evident first and foremost through the respect and love given to the expectant mother. Secondly, it is shown by respect for the life of the children who were conceived but in one way or another have died or been miscarried before they were born. These children are fully recognized as human beings and members of the family. One observes this at their funeral. The respect which is given to such a body, no matter how small it may be, shows the belief that human life is fully present and there is a link between the lost child and God-the giver of life.

¹²⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 107.

¹²⁵ Ibid. See also Yusufu Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview* (Nairobi, Kenya: Word Alive Publishers, 2007), 112-114.

When life is disrupted by miscarriage, for instance, the funeral ceremony is performed no matter how small the infant may be. The funeral rite is performed out of respect and honor for the mother who has lost her own child and member of the family. Sympathy is expressed through words and songs used to console the mother. The burial also expresses a belief which the Bantu and Nilotic people have regarding life, that the unborn are true members of the family.

Also, when a woman is expecting a child every member of the family is involved in the preparation for the welcoming of the one to be born. This commitment shows that the unborn are considered members of the family. Magesa noted that “the beginning of life (conception) already contains the end, and the end is in normal circumstances a splendid beginning.”¹²⁶ This also confirms the respect and love the Bantu and Nilotic people have for women as mothers. Thus, “the expectant woman must be treated with extreme care and solicitude. Everyone directly involved with her, particularly the husband, must be extremely careful not to infringe on any code during the entire duration of pregnancy.”¹²⁷ According to Magesa, anyone who does not respect the life of the unborn child is considered to be dishonoring women as mothers and also to be dishonoring all of the members of the family.¹²⁸ For this reason, abortion in the Bantu and Nilotic cultures is not only viewed as killing an innocent human being but also is seen as dishonoring women, the mothers of human life.

¹²⁶ Magesa, *African Religion*, 87.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

The mother of a miscarried baby receives the same sympathy and respect as would a mother when a grown-up child dies.¹²⁹ Although abortion has been supported by other liberal theologians on the grounds of women's rights, this line of thinking is not accepted in the Bantu and Nilotic culture because the unborn are considered true human beings and are part of the family. Women as the sole custodians have the primary responsibility for the unborn human life at its early stage. However, because of the clan and community, women are supported and encouraged in their role as the mothers of life. The following section examines their role in the clan and community in establishing the dignity and vocation of women among the Bantu and Nilotic people.

3. The Concept of Clan and Community in the Bantu and Nilotic People

The *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines the word "clan" as "the principle social unit of tribal organization in which descent is reckoned exclusively in the paternal or maternal line."¹³⁰ However, in the Bantu and Nilotic tradition, the word 'clan' has a special and specific meaning. The clan takes the name of the woman, the mother of the original family that unites all other families into one group of people called a 'clan.' For these people the name of a clan must be the name of the mother of the clan. This name is a tribal name, not a baptismal name. Wilson acknowledges that it is the woman in her role as

¹²⁹ Ibid. Note that it is a belief among the Bantu and Nilotic cultural community that no woman can carry out a responsible abortion' because for them, this is killing one's own child.

¹³⁰ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, "Clan" (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 379. See also John Mary Waliggo, "The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church," in *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in ecclesiology*, eds. J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publications, 1990), 111-125.

mother who unites a group of families who are descended from a common ancestor.¹³¹ In this sense, the mother is considered to be the center of unity and the root of the clan.

Among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, family is the center of life. Life is properly perceived in reference to a family, a clan, and a whole tribe. The Bantu and Nilotic people are proud to be identified with their roots of origin, their clan and the community to which they belong. A clan is the first major division of the tribes. In the Luo community, the word clan is known as “*dhoot*,” which means “the door.”¹³² Wilson confirms that clans are “those of a common mother, or those of a group of wives who stand in the same *nyar ot* (daughter of the house) relationship.”¹³³ “Clan” represents ‘exogamous unities’ which can be traced to real or mythical descent from a common ancestor at least between five to ten generations back.¹³⁴ This emphasizes the unity of a family which comes through marriage but is traced through the woman.

It is important to note that in the Bantu and Nilotic traditions, the head of the family is a man; however, a woman has a unique and special position because she is the one who gives the name to the clan. For example, Oginga Odinga in his book *Not Yet Uhuru*, elaborates that women: “were the custodians not only of the children, but also the granary, and theirs was the responsibility to conserve food for the times of drought and famine. The

¹³¹ Gordon Wilson, “Luo Customary Law,” in *Luo Customary Law and Marriage Laws Customs* (Nairobi, Kenya: Government Printers, 1961), 5. See also Waliggo, “The African Clan :”119-126.

¹³² Wilson, “Luo Customary Law,” 5. Note that *dhoot* means a “door” in English but figuratively means “a woman.” She is looked upon as a door-path where through which human beings pass into a family, or clan. Therefore, using the word *dhoot*, or woman as a door, refers to her as the one who give birth to a clan symbolically the way she gives birth to a child. See also Yusufu Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview* (Nairobi, Kenya: Word Alive: Publishers, 2007), 118-119.

¹³³ Ibid. *Nyar ot* (literary means daughter of the house) this is of a family tree, or from whom a clan from the name of a woman, the mother of that particular clan, or family.

¹³⁴ Wilson, “Luo Customary Laws,” 5.

clans were named after the women in recognition that they are the mothers of the children and the founders of the clans.”¹³⁵ Within the Luo tribe there are, Nyinek, Nyakan, Nyaruoth, Nyapuny, Nyawiny, Nyakach, and other clans all with female names.¹³⁶

The above concept holds as well for the Kikuyu people. The authenticity of the clan is traced from the mother. The names of the nine Kikuyu clans are the names of the nine daughters of Moombi and Gikuyu, the founders of the Kikuyu people. They gave birth to nine girls only. When the time came for the girls to get married, Gikuyu and Moombi went to the mountain of mystery, Kere-Nyaga, under the *Mokoyo* tree. They prayed and offered sacrifice after which Mogai or Ngai (God) granted them nine young handsome men who became the husbands of their nine daughters.¹³⁷

The nine young families lived together with them as one big family until the death of Gikuyu and Moombi. The family then became so large that they could not live together in one place. It was then decided that each of the nine daughters should form separate clans. Each went her way with her own family and formed nine different clans, each under her name.¹³⁸ The nine main clans of the Kikuyu tribe, named for each daughter of Gikuyu and Moombi, are: (1) Wacheera; (2) Wanjiku; (3) Wairimo; (4) Wangare; (5) Wamboi; (6) Wanjiru; (7) Wangoi; (8) Mwethaga or Warigia; and (9) Waithera.¹³⁹ The Kikuyu tribe is

¹³⁵ Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru*, 11.

¹³⁶ The letter ‘N’ at the beginning of each name indicates the feminine possessive case in the Luo language.

¹³⁷ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 3. The Bantu name for God is “Ngai;” sometimes known as “Mogai” depending on the dialect differences, it means the “Giver” or the “Divider” of land, Life and of all living and non-living beings. See also S. Kichamu Akivaga and A. Bole Odaga, *Oral Literature: A School Certificate Course* 3rded. (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Education Publishers, 2004), 20 reports the Kikuyu legend, which is coherent to the oral stories common among the Kikuyu people.

¹³⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 4.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

also known by the name of Moombi, children of Moombi, the mother of the Kikuyu tribe. In the Kikuyu language “*rorere wa Moobi*” means the children of Moombi, the mother of the Kikuyu tribe.¹⁴⁰

However, it is also common that children are given the names of their fathers for external identification.¹⁴¹ But for particular and cultural identification, when a mother’s name is used, it touches the inner pride of what the woman is called to be. There is a unique sense of pride when a great man is addressed by the name of his mother. This may be indicative of the natural sense of belonging to a woman as a mother.

This identification indicates the significant role of a woman in both the Bantu and Nilotic community; she is the central figure and the uniting force in the family and clan. For this reason, Odinga said that “no marriage could be solemnized without the presence of the mother.”¹⁴² According to Odinga, in cases where there is disunity in the family, the marriage ceremony of a son or a daughter is enough reason to bring about the unity of the parents. However, if the mother has died, a ceremonial mother can be found to represent the mother. In the Luo and Kikuyu communities, the women who accepted the responsibility and the role of motherhood in society “became wealthy as a result of their diligence and were consulted on questions and, in some instances, they were women chairmen of elders’ councils.”¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ It is common in Kenya that children are given the father’s name, but this might have been adopted from the colonial masters. When a person is called by his or her mother’s name it evokes a certain feeling of excitement which is deeper than just a name. It touches the root of origin, and a true sense of belonging.

¹⁴² Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru*, 11.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Incidentally, Ominde, pointed out in his book, *The Luo Girl: From Infancy to Marriage*, that “the mother’s attitude towards the emotions of the child is based on the deep impression left on her mind by the strain of the birth.”¹⁴⁴ This indicates that women have a special connection to children as mothers in their natural capacity. Ominde notes that:

A mother tolerates the emotional outburst of her child not only because she loves it but even more because she struggled to bear it. This seems to be the real cause of the so called humanity of women towards children in contrast with the indifference sometimes shown children by men. Instead of setting the mother against the child, the child’s emotions of anger or suffering have the effect of reminding the mother of their physiological connection. When a mother is unable to pacify her crying child she generally feels quite a personal sense of depression.

On the other hand, signs of pleasure in a child give its mother the greatest satisfaction. If a child has a happy nature, even the most critical of neighboring relatives are pleasant, and frequently comment or compliment the mother upon it. The desire to share the emotions of her children leads a mother to begin laughing with them and tickling them while they are very young.¹⁴⁵

These facts mentioned above point to the reality of motherhood and confirm the important role of the woman in a family which is the foundation of community.

¹⁴⁴ Simon H. Ominde, *The Luo Girl: From Infancy to Marriage* (London, England: MacMillan & Co. 1952), 8.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

Finally, among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes there is a very strong sense of community emphasized in the culture as an ethical value. The individual does not exist alone but in a community, he owes his existence to others, including the past generation and his contemporaries.¹⁴⁶ The center of life which holds up clan, community, past, future, and present is the woman as the mother. Therefore, the role of women is fundamental in all dimensions of the family and of the community. Mbiti expands this concept of clan and community through a philosophical principle: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."¹⁴⁷ This philosophy extends the significance of motherhood beyond a physical birth relationship to an extended clan-community. She gives birth to an individual as well as to the clan and community.

The important role of the woman in an African family does not mean that she is a rival to the man as the head of the home but emphasizes her central life-bearing role as complimentary and enabling. In the Bantu and Nilotic communities, it is a complementary role to the man and is so balanced that each depends on the other to function well.¹⁴⁸ Sharma observes that such balanced roles must "necessarily be rooted in the nature of traditional African societies."¹⁴⁹ In the daily function of the home, the mutual life of the husband and wife can be compared to a turning wheel; when one wheel does not function well, it gradually affects the whole vehicle. In this case, if the dignity and vocation of a woman as a mother is not fully recognized, respected, and supported, the whole human family is affected.

¹⁴⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Sharma, *Women of Africa*, 34.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

The Kikuyu, the Luo and many others tribes of the Bantu and Nilotic believe that one cannot enter into a mature marriage relationship without proof that she/he understands clearly the value of family life and is able to sustain its functions. The functions and value of marriage and family life must be encouraged through education. In most of the previously mentioned tribes, the value and meaning of marriage is taught during an initiation period before one enters marriage preparations. Thus, the rite of initiation is the gateway to marriage. This is the period of adolescence when young boys and girls are taught about the responsibilities of motherhood and of fatherhood. The traditional initiation ceremony is important in understanding the dignity and vocation of parenthood, especially the vocation of woman as a mother among the Bantu and Nilotic people. Therefore, the following section discusses the traditional Bantu and Nilotic initiation ceremony as the gateway to marriage and procreation (parenthood).

4. The Traditional Initiation Ceremony: The Gateway to Marriage and Procreation

The initiation ceremony is a traditional ritual that prepares young boys and girls who have reached the age of adolescence for marriage and the challenges of family life.¹⁵⁰ The initiation ceremony is known as the bridge between childhood and adulthood. According to the Kikuyu people, and to most of the Bantu people of Kenya, the age for boys who undergo this ceremony is between fifteen and eighteen, and for girls, between twelve and fourteen,

¹⁵⁰ Magesa, *African Religion*, 94. See also B. Hlashwayo, CSSR, "The Sacrament of Marriage," in *Inculturation in the South African Context* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 99.

but it is essential that the time of puberty should not have passed.¹⁵¹ According to Magesa, “the most significant instruction on life of the clan, individual’s rights and responsibilities in society, and the transition from childhood to adulthood is achieved only at or around puberty during the process of initiation.”¹⁵² Also it is the time when the individual’s vital force and power of life are formally confirmed and imprinted indelibly in the individual’s rational consciousness.¹⁵³ Among the Bantu and Nilotic communities of Kenya, initiation ceremony is considered to be a “deciding factor in giving a boy or girl the status of manhood or womanhood.”¹⁵⁴

Note that the word ‘initiation’ does not refer exclusively to induction into physiological maturity but also includes “rites of passage,” from one state of life into another.¹⁵⁵ In African religion, initiation also means “the process of induction into certain groups and societies, blood-friendships, oath of secrecy, or commitments to a certain cause.”¹⁵⁶ Among the Bantu and Nilotic, the moral implication of initiation as an induction into physiological maturity and as a rite of passage is the same because both happen at the same time. There are five significant steps in the initiation which are: “seclusion, instruction, physical impression, integration and covenant.”¹⁵⁷ According to Kenyatta, the process of

¹⁵¹ Cagnolo, *The Agikuyu: Their Customs*, 87.

¹⁵² Magesa, *African Religion*, 95.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 75.

¹⁵⁵ Magesa, *African Religion*, 95.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

initiation is called *mambura* in the Kikuyu language which means “rituals or divine services.”¹⁵⁸

Mbiti points out that once young people have undergone initiation ceremonies, they are considered to be ready for marriage and procreation.¹⁵⁹ Anybody who passed the age without going through the initiation ceremony is considered a foreigner in the community.¹⁶⁰ Such a person cannot marry, due to the deep-rooted pride of being a man or woman in the tribe. Cognolo confirms that for a woman not able to marry and bear children diminishes the community and is unacceptable to the Bantu and Nilotic tribes.¹⁶¹ Thus, the initiation ceremony is before marriage and has a very significant religious and social meaning in the lives of young adults.¹⁶²

Before the initiation rite, there is a long period of education that binds together a group of young adults to ‘one age group.’¹⁶³ Every age group of young adolescents, who pass through initiation ceremony together form a bond of ‘age-group.’ Each group considers itself as one family sharing many things in common.¹⁶⁴

During the initiation period, the candidates are taken from their families and communities for a period of several weeks or months and are taught extensively on subjects

¹⁵⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 75.

¹⁵⁹ Cognolo, *The Agikuyu*, 98.

¹⁶⁰ Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900 – 50* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 74. See also Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 76.

¹⁶¹ Cognolo, *The Agikuyu*: 85. See also Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 73-98. Kanogo exposes the value of the cultural initiation against the missionaries who saw it as an oppression of women thus preventing women from undergoing it; the more they prevented them, the more they practiced it in secret.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 76.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 76 -77.

such as: the historical development of the clan, the tribal values of family, and the role of the father and mother in the family. Here, the instructors emphasize the significant role of each person in the family.¹⁶⁵ The candidates are taught sacred oral stories and myths which reveal the central role of the woman as a mother of the family. What is particular within these tribes, during the initiation period, is that through their instruction the elders hand over to the candidates key moral and ethical values which are passed on from one generation to the next in a sacred and ritualistic manner. In some tribes the initiation occurs annually while in other tribes, it occurs periodically, perhaps with three to five years between every 'age group.'

What is unique about the traditional initiation among Bantu and Nilotic tribes is that the young people go through it at an age when they are expected to take on responsibility for a family. This gives the candidates a sense of awareness of one's dignity and vocation and a sense of belonging and authority to own and inherit property from the family. Therefore, this period of initiation contributes greatly to the ethical development of youth. The Bantu and Nilotic people also believe that life is a mystery which unfolds throughout the stages of human development.

Every African tribe has its own initiation rite and ceremony. Some tribes go through a very rigorous and painful initiation ritual called circumcision for the boys and clitoridectomy for the girls. This involves cutting the foreskin of the male organ. For girls, clitoridectomy, which involves cutting part of the female organ (removal of part of the clitoris), remains the custom of initiation among the Bantu of Kenya. The Luo people of Kenya remove six lower

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 77. See also Magesa, *African Religion*, 96- 97.

teeth of both boys and girls.¹⁶⁶ The rituals of circumcision and clitoridectomy among the Kikuyu people and the removal of the six lower teeth among the Luo tribe are performed very early in the morning after the candidates have spent a whole night in the cold. These people believe that the chilly, cold wind helps to numb the skin, thus reducing blood flow and pain. Some of the ceremonies for the initiation rituals are done along the rivers. Those who are far from the rivers go to the nearby mountains. Ngugi wa Thiong'o observed that: "During the initiation ceremonies, boys and girls came to wet their bodies ... It had long been discovered that cold water numbed the skin, making it less painful during the operation."¹⁶⁷ There is nothing applied to kill pain unless one is taken to the hospital. The question of allowing candidates to go into hospitals came later with the coming of missionaries in the early nineteenth century.

However, going to the hospital for circumcision was not part of the traditional Bantu and Nilotic initiation rite. Moreover, in the hospitals, there was no education and instruction about the culture.¹⁶⁸ Often the person performing the operation was a foreigner to the culture.

The Bantu and Nilotic people strongly believe that someone who is not initiated does not fully grasp initiation and cannot initiate another person. This was a primary disagreement between the missionaries and the Bantu and Nilotic peoples. The tribes emphasized that initiation is not just circumcision or an operation but the whole process which includes instruction or education.

¹⁶⁶ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 91.

¹⁶⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1965), 23. See also Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenta*, 76-78.

¹⁶⁸ Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 75.

The pain which the candidate feels and endures is part of the ritual. The candidate is reminded that there is suffering in life which one must encounter as he/she prepares for marriage and family life. Any difficulties that one encounters in the future should remind one of the pains experienced in initiation ritual. At the end of pain comes joyful life. It is through labor pains that women come to enjoy the dignity of motherhood. For the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, the pains of the initiation reveal the dignity of human person. For a mother, the birth of a child comes with labor pains and only the mother can have this experience. The initiation ritual is a foretaste of the pains of motherhood. For example, the Kikuyu people believe that only a woman who has gone through the initiation ritual can sustain the pain of motherhood and take care of a family.

Sometimes during initiation, there are additional cuttings (decorations) on the face or body, or piercing of an ear and nose to show externally that one has gone through initiation. But these signs may not necessarily have been part of the initiation.¹⁶⁹ Instead, the Kikuyu and Nilotic people view these decorations as signs of beauty and an indication that one has gone through marriage preparation and is ready for family life.¹⁷⁰ There are many other signs and rites of initiation in every tribe of the Bantu and Nilotic which cannot be discussed in detail within the context of this study. However, almost all of them show that the ritual is a “celebration of courage” through which the candidates have declared publicly that they are ready for marriage and all the challenges of life.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Cognolo, *The Agikuyu*, 94, 96, 98, and 100. Also see Magesa, *Africa Religion*, 94-95, and Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 121.

¹⁷⁰ Cognolo, *The Agikuyu*: 94, 96, 100, and 102.

¹⁷¹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 100.

However, Mbiti observes that because of rapid changes taking place in Africa and around the world, traditional cultural values are very much affected.¹⁷² The traditional cultural values of initiation are in some ways in conflict with other cultures, especially in the modern world of the young people.¹⁷³ There are also ethical conflicts coming from understanding the dignity of human person based theological and anthropological ideas different from African values. For example, the modern schooling systems do not allow a long time period for young people to undergo initiation. The following section highlights these theological, anthropological, and ethical conflicts between the traditional initiation rites within the Bantu and Nilotic people and other contending ethical and moral values.

4. 1. Theological, Anthropological, and Ethical Conflicts in the Traditional Initiation Ritual within the Bantu and Nilotic People and Other Ethical Values

It is important to note that the practices of circumcision for boys and clitoridectomy for girls are rituals within the rites of initiation among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes. However, they may not necessarily be accepted in other cultures that do not hold the same ethical and moral values. There are also cultures which do not have such rites at all.

In recent years, the ritual of clitoridectomy for girls/young women has spurred controversy. Kanogo notes that the initiation rite, especially female circumcision, is very

¹⁷² Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 121.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

controversial in part because it involves a very high risk for a woman's health.¹⁷⁴ However, she lamented how many young women still pass through the rite willingly even if they know that it is harmful.¹⁷⁵ For example, the Jewish people practice circumcision for boys but at a younger age and it is a sign of belonging to the chosen people of God. For the Bantu and Nilotic people, the initiation ritual is not only a sign of belonging but a sign which also gives one the right to marry, to inherit, to protect the tribe, and the authority to transmit vital force.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, some of the Bantu people believe that a woman cannot transmit vital force effectively unless she is circumcised; similarly, a man cannot endure marriage and family responsibility unless he passes through the initiation rite.¹⁷⁷

Margaret A. Farley observes that clitoridectomy/female circumcision sometimes known as "female genital cutting," or "female genital mutilation," is not a simple symbolic, cultural, or ethical issue.¹⁷⁸ On the surface it harms women terribly to a degree that one wonders about the courage that impels women to willingly undergo this ritual. In fact, there are various forms of rituals and some of the rituals are very painful. Farley describes some as follows:

The least extensive form involves the removal of only the clitoral hood and some (or sometimes all); the most common form entails the removal of all or part of all the labia majora (in addition to the clitoris and clitoral hood); the

¹⁷⁴ Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 75.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Benezeri Kisembo, Laurenti Magesa, and Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Marriage* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 204. See also Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 78.

¹⁷⁷ Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 78.

¹⁷⁸ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 88. See also Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 78-83.

most radical form (known as “infibulation”) involves the removal of all external genitalia and portion of labia majora (which is then stitched together, leaving a small opening for passage of urine and menstrual blood.¹⁷⁹

This is a very painful and dangerous procedure. Farley acknowledges that “for women who value this practice, it is a source of personal and social identity, and it ultimately allows them the responsibility of marriage which is their entry into the most important gender role of wife and mother.”¹⁸⁰ Circumcision for both female and male is typical for almost all the Bantu people of Kenya. As a part of the initiation, “it stands also as a test of a girl’s capacity to withstand suffering; it is a sign that she is ready for adult life.”¹⁸¹

Nevertheless, these practices have been criticized by some feminists and others who believe that such rituals are based “in traditions of female subservience, fear of women’s sexual desire or pleasure, and concern to prevent women’s engaging in premarital sex and later adultery.”¹⁸² Such criticisms might be true if based on other cultures, but may not be the case among the Bantu tribes because many young women demand female circumcision and sometimes do so against the wishes of their parents.¹⁸³ The fact that it is not a joyful ritual to go through, yet young boys and girls demand it, must be due to a deeper theological and anthropological conviction. A constructive criticism however should offer an alternative

¹⁷⁹ Farley, *Just Love*, 88.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 89.

¹⁸² Ibid. See Also Pacificah F. Okemwa, “Clitoridectomy Rituals and Social Well-being of Women,” in *Groaning in Faith*: 177. For Okemwa, the missionaries who opposed clitoridectomy were concerned with the physical operation but they knew also that that it was connected to some theological and anthropological cultural views which they failed to address. Therefore, the communities continued with the practice but kept the matter away from the missions.

¹⁸³ Farley, *Just Love*: 89.

solution. Most critics fail to suggest an alternative cultural process which would constitute an appropriate initiation to adult responsibility.

Farley notes that “Western scientists and others (including Western feminists) have focused on the issue of female circumcision in ways that are perceived by African feminists as showing disrespect, even contempt, for Africa.”¹⁸⁴ This is similar to that argument raised by the Western missionaries in Kenya, almost all of whom condemned female circumcision as an act of cruelty to women.¹⁸⁵ Circumcision for both male and female is typical for almost all the Bantu tribes in Kenya.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, an African feminist theologian who is critical of violence against women, noted that the first conversations she heard about female circumcision left her “in awe of the dignity that exuded from women whose culture demanded the surgery.”¹⁸⁶ According to her, this became clear only when she studied and listened to more women who are directly involved in this rite as part of their cultural practice.¹⁸⁷ Oduyoye noted that “African women who are studying or challenging such practices tread lightly in their desire to learn and to participate in what they see as a necessary transformation of the practice.”¹⁸⁸ She concludes that “attitudes count more than knowledge, and legislation is but an impotent tool.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. See also Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 74 - 73-98.

¹⁸⁵ Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 74.

¹⁸⁶ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Woman & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 165.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. See also Okemwa, “Clitoridectomy Rituals,” 177-184.

¹⁸⁸ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 165.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

Oduyoye acknowledges that, in the African culture, “to be a real woman is to be married and produce children.”¹⁹⁰ This is because “in some African cultures, without circumcision there is no marriage, so mothers will ensure that their daughters undergo the surgery.”¹⁹¹ But for Oduyoye, even though young women undergo the female circumcision willingly, she believes that this is due to the pressure from a patriarchal society. For her, “a dominant strand in the practice responds to men’s needs and women are socialized to meet these male needs.”¹⁹² According to Oduyoye:

Other bodily modifications like fattening (or in the case of Western women, slimming) are disciplines imposed on women by socio-cultural expectations. Narrow hips, it is said, cannot easily bear children, and in Africa, a marriage without children is unmitigated disaster. As reproduction is not only a socio-cultural but also a religious duty in Africa, women’s bodily discipline takes on a theological dimension ¹⁹³

Hence, it is becoming difficult to convince African women to abandon their cultural initiation by using criticisms from other cultures to abandon their desire for circumcision. Western cultures have no symbolic, theological, and anthropological rite of feminine initiation as do the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya.

From Oduyoye’s point of view, the whole value of initiation is based on an attitude the societies have formed about women and a position shared by some feminist

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

theologians.¹⁹⁴ However, for Kenyatta and some African theologians, initiation is deep-rooted in the hearts and lives of boys and girls as a source of personal and social identity, so that abandoning initiation ultimately diminishes responsibility in marriage and the important gender role of husband and wife.¹⁹⁵

Opposition to initiation comes from other cultures with different theological and anthropological foundations and ethical values from the traditional Bantu and Nilotic people. Certainly the traditional initiation rites, both female and male circumcision, are serious health risks for the individual. But the fact that young people nevertheless freely choose it shows that there is something more to it. And critics must offer an alternative which can match the theological and anthropological values the Bantu and Nilotic cultures perceive in this practice.

The point here is not argue against or support female circumcision, but to highlight some theological and anthropological significance to these cultural practices. These practices are open to different interpretations according to the ethical (norms) values of other cultures. It is clear that female circumcision as a ritual within the initiation rite has symbolic, theological, and anthropological significance bearing upon the dignity and vocation of women among the Bantu and Nilotic people. But, even though these initiation rites are based on traditional and cultural values of these people, the actual rituals of circumcision and

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. See also Elizabeth M. Perry, and James M. Porter, "Materiality and Social Change in the Practice of Feminist Anthropology," in *Feminist Anthropology: Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Michael L Geller and Miranda K. Stockett (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 116; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 20.

¹⁹⁵ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 75-86.

clitoridectomy risk HIV infection because of the way the procedures are performed.¹⁹⁶ One knife may be used for many people. Sometimes death occurs due to bleeding during the operation since there may not be proper medical care. These rites traditionally take place in the bush and not in the hospital. Therefore, there are more risks of life than what one can imagine, but still young men and women go through there initiation rites willingly.

It may not be fair to criticize the Bantu and Nilotic initiation rites based on foreign ethical and cultural values or on theological and anthropological ideas which undermine the dignity and vocation of a woman as a mother and wife. Instead, it would be better to provide education in cultural values for both boys and girls in a way that does not undermine the theological and anthropological understanding of the dignity of motherhood and fatherhood as gifts from God. A constructive critique should consider the theological and anthropological understanding of the people.¹⁹⁷

Indeed a project to develop an alternative initiation rite without surgical application or circumcision is ongoing.¹⁹⁸ This alternative initiation rite involves education for young women which takes about one week. The young women who successfully finish the project are awarded a certificate. This program is designed to offer a sensitive and cultural bridge between the female circumcision rite and a presentation of the same theological and

¹⁹⁶ Bujo, *Ethical Dimension of Community*, 181. According to Bujo, cultural practices such as circumcision must be considered in relation to ethical issues which affect the life of an individual and community. Here, AIDS is a big challenge to the cultural practice of circumcision.

¹⁹⁷ *Catholic Information Service Africa CISA*, no. 086, September 1, 2009. This paper reports an alternative method of initiation without performing surgery among the Bantu people in Kenya. This method involves instructions on cultural and ethical values, responsibility, and the dignity and vocation of women.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

anthropological realities which seems to be gaining acceptance by the community. In 2009, 551 girls completed the project and graduated.¹⁹⁹

Practically, the program of teaching/education involves intensive instruction of young women between adolescence and adulthood.²⁰⁰ The emphasis of the alternative initiation program is placed on what it means to be a woman or a man according to the plan of God in the Bantu and Nilotic traditional culture. This program came about in response to modern and contemporary criticisms about the medical dangers of traditional female circumcision. Maybe a similar project can be organized for the boys, but so far more emphasis is put on the education of girls. Basically, the traditional initiation is all about cultural and ethical education that opens more opportunity for an individual to participate in the family life more effectively.

Perhaps, for Christians, the theological and anthropological values of the three Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation, known as the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adult (RCIA) can be inculturated in the African traditional culture as a form of the traditional rite of initiation. The implementation of such a process requires an inculturation theology. Inculturation theology seeks to reconcile Christian theological and anthropological values with traditional cultural practices.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

5. Traditional Initiation and the Cultural Understanding of the Dignity of Humans among the Bantu and Nilotic People

In most African traditional societies, but especially among the Bantu and Nilotic people, the initiation rite is a cultural symbol conferring the dignity of maturity on the person.²⁰¹ Those who have gone through the rite are viewed by society as people who bear the flag (identity) of the family, clan, and tribe. Passing through the initiation rite gives one a sense of belonging which others who have not passed through do not have. The candidates who have gone through the rite are considered, in their own communities, to possess certain knowledge of the culture which others do not possess. This might be the reason, even though some of the initiation rites are very painful experiences, that young men and women are willing to endure them.

Among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, marriage and family values are taught during the initiation period.²⁰² The dignity of the person depends on the sacred knowledge that one has about life in connection to God, the ancestors, and to the living and living-dead members of the family. These values are taught by one person chosen as the instructor of a particular group and the elder of the ritual ceremony. Usually the candidates go for initiation with their age group. These young people are entrusted to learn the same theology and anthropology under one master who is the elder of the ritual ceremony. The elders use symbols and signs in transmitting the theological and anthropological teachings to the young people during the initiation ceremony.

²⁰¹ Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 78.

²⁰² Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 204.

According to Africans, especially the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, the meaning and the values of the traditional initiation are evident within the traditional liturgical ceremony as a whole. The first missionaries, who came to Kenya in the early nineteenth century, observed some of the traditional initiation ceremonies and concluded that they must be evil. Cagnolo presents a summary of the pre-initiation rite as follows:

Early the following morning, the mother went to draw water from the river, with which they all washed, first the husband, then she and her children ending the ceremony. By this ceremony, the children were believed to have been re-born and legitimized, and there remained no further impediment to their circumcision.²⁰³

Cagnolo narrates what he observed among the Kikuyu people: the rite before the initiation ceremony which is a covenant that confirms that the candidate is made a true son or daughter of the family, clan, and tribe.²⁰⁴ This covenant among the Kikuyu people is like a second birth or *njirano* in the Kikuyu language. The candidates must pass through this rite first before being declared ready for circumcision. The washing ritual has a symbolic covenantal meaning binding the family together. This ritual covenant is done six or more months before the candidates are taken away from their communities for intensive preparation for initiation. The one who is not initiated or who remains uncircumcised in general is a “laughing stock, a butt for derision and contempt; such a person is considered to be a mere child and treated as

²⁰³ Cagnolo, *The Agikuyu*, 87. See also Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 73-90.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

such ... An insult very much resented by a Kikuyu was to be called *Kĩhĩĩ*, uncircumcised girl.”²⁰⁵

The first missionaries who came to Africa in the early nineteenth century for evangelization did not understand the meaning of the initiation ritual in relation to the dignity and vocation of the person. They only observed what was happening and drew the conclusion that the ritual of circumcision was an evil act and that Christians could not participate in it. Therefore, they condemned any religious ceremony in relation to the initiation rite, especially the clitoridectomy of girls.

In actual fact, the early missionaries denied young people the experience of initiation and left a very big gap between traditional African culture and the Christian culture being introduced by the missionaries. The African families who had embraced Christianity, especially the families of the Bantu and Nilotic girls, were in a great dilemma. They had to choose between the traditional initiation rite in order to achieve the dignity of adulthood or choose Christianity and in so doing remain as children in the eyes of their peoples forever. Most probably, the missionaries did not understand the significance of any initiation rite and ceremony in the life of the young boys and girls being initiated into responsible parenthood and traditional culture. Choosing to become a Christian meant that one could not be married, could not have children, or could not inherit land.

Therefore, the young people who had become Christians in Kenya in the early nineteenth century questioned their Christian way of life because they knew their parents had

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 85.

undergone the initiation rite before the missionaries came. Now that Christianity had come, they were being taught that initiation was evil. The young boys and girls wondered how it was evil, especially since this was how their parents had learned the sacred values of marriage and family. Many opted to 'hear' the missionaries in the missions and schools but to live the traditional African values in their homes. This promoted, in essence, a double life. Religion became one component of their lives rather than permeating their daily lives, that is 'moving and living with the people.'²⁰⁶ Such a dilemma promoted a dichotomy in life. Life without moral values can be a great dilemma.

Mbiti confirms the significant value of initiation: that it brings one into another state, which is the state of knowledge, of activity, of reproduction. So long as a person is not initiated, he cannot get married and is not supposed to reproduce or bear children.²⁰⁷ For a woman, the shedding of her blood into the ground during the initiation rite is considered to be a sign of binding herself to the living-dead, the tribal ancestors who are symbolically living in the ground.²⁰⁸ In other words, passing through the initiation ritual and the shedding of blood constitutes a new birth. After the initiation rite, one starts a new life and assumes new status in life.

Cagnolo, a Consolata missionary, who seems to have been more informed concerning the traditional values of initiation, confirmed that initiation in the traditional way among the Kikuyu community has both religious and social dimensions which elevated one to assume a higher responsibilities in life. Candidates are taught moral values and prepared

²⁰⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

for marriage.²⁰⁹ He emphasized that it is not a “mere episode in the life, but a definite stage” at which time young men and women are recognized as adult members of the community and are vested with “social rights and obligation.”²¹⁰ Young women who have gone through the initiation rite are thus able to enjoy the dignity and vocation of womanhood.

After the initiation rite, young women enjoy the respect given to mothers. The young girls/women newly initiated enjoy respect as “mothers” even though they have neither married nor have borne children yet. Society already sees them as the potential mothers of kings, chiefs, or anyone who holds a place of respect in society. Kenyatta comments that:

The term ‘mother’ is considered an honorable form of address, one which is desired by every woman in Kikuyu society. When a woman reaches the stage of motherhood she is highly respected, not only by her children, but by all the members of the community. Her name becomes sacred and she is known by her neighbors and their children as the “mother of So-and-So.”²¹¹

This explains why almost all African women after the birth of their first child, assume the name of the first-born baby. For example, if the name of the baby is Kamau or Atieno, the mother would be addressed as the mother of Kamau, *Mama Kamau*, in Kiswahili, or the Mother of Atieno, *Mama Atieno* in Kiswahili. Therefore, it is usual among the people to treat any woman of marriageable age with respect and honor precisely because in her one sees a potential mother.

²⁰⁹ Cagnolo, *The Agikuyu*, 84.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

²¹¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 6.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

6. Conclusion

So far, the discussion has presented the African concept of life, family, clan, community, and the traditional initiation rite of the Bantu and Nilotic peoples. From the discussion, it is clear that human life is considered by Africans as a sacred gift from God.²¹² It is also clear that Africans do not emphasize the distinctions among human beings such as biological, physiological, and spiritual; rather, they regard human life as “constituting a single, undifferentiated whole.”²¹³ Such an understanding makes room for the mystery of life, the belief in and the influence of the invisible world in the ethical life of the living. There is a unity between the living and the living-dead. There is also a belief in the hierarchy of beings having vital force and religious ontology. The ideas of the hierarchy of being and of religious ontology situate a woman in a special position in the family as mother. All these ideas converge in an understanding of the dignity and vocation of women within the African communities.

This chapter also has described the traditional initiation ceremony as being the gateway to marriage and procreation. These rites have generated some theological and anthropological ethical controversy and conflict, especially on the issue of female and male circumcision. A highlighted theological, anthropological, and cultural awareness will contribute to a better understanding of human dignity among African people. The discussion of theology of inculturation will shed more light on these subjects in the final chapter.

²¹² Bujo, *African Theology*, 2.

²¹³ Ibid.

As a summary, if human life is sacred, then, it is reasonable that the bearer of that life should enjoy a recognized glory and honor. This is the reason a woman as mother is celebrated with such great honor within the Bantu and Nilotic communities. Finally, the initiation rite is the gateway to marriage and procreation, and it is what gives one his or her place in the family, clan, and community. The following chapter examines the traditional understanding of marriage and procreation within the Bantu and Nilotic communities as the source of the dignity and vocation of women.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF MARRIAGE AND PROCREATION IN REFERENCE TO THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN IN THE BANTU AND NILOTIC COMMUNITIES

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, the discussion has shown that traditional initiation rites are directed towards imparting life, marriage and procreation. Their purpose is to impress upon young men and women the need to recognize and appreciate life as a gift from God and to continue to participate in God's plan of creation by transmitting life through marriage and the rearing of children. These initiation rites are the gateways to marriage and procreation.

The discussion will now concentrate on the traditional understanding of marriage and procreation in reference to the dignity and vocation of women in the Bantu and Nilotic communalities. Specifically, the presentation will analyze preparation for marriage among both the Kikuyu and the Luo tribes since these two represent the major tribes of the Bantu and Nilotic peoples. The study will also present the common components of marriage, namely: i) bride-wealth or dowry, ii) the wedding ceremony, and iii) virginity and the meaning of human sexuality in marriage. This discussion includes the traditional African

marriage as a permanent covenant, the implications and challenges of traditional African polygamy.

Finally, the discussion presents the position of single, religious and consecrated persons and the relationship between man and woman in the traditional Bantu and Nilotic communalities. All of these discussions are undertaken with a view toward the dignity and vocation of women.

1. 1. The Bantu and Nilotic Understanding of Marriage and Procreation

The Bantu and Nilotic traditional understanding is that marriage is a formal commitment between a man and a woman to live together permanently as husband and wife.¹ According to Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, there are specific elements which are essential to what makes a marriage not only Christian and civil but respected by other religions and cultures, as well.² Therefore, one can talk about marriage according to a particular faith or culture.

Among the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya, marriage and procreation are interconnected. One exists along with the other. John S. Mbiti, Bénézet Bujo, Jomo Kenyatta and others agree that marriage and procreation mutually imply each other. In addition,

¹ Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 25; See also Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 93-104; and Francis Martin, "Marriage in the Old Testament and Intertestamental Periods," in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, Glenn W. Olsen, ed. (New York: A Herder & Herder Books, the Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 3, here, the ideas and the values in the ancient Old Testament period correspond to African customary marriage.

² Kisembo, Magesa and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 25.

African marriage is not just a personal reality but involves the community in its social, economic, and religious aspects.³

According to Mbiti, marriage is the cultural meeting point of the living, the departed, and the not yet born.⁴ The departed come into the picture because they are the roots on which the living stands. Those living are the link between this life and the next. The unborn are the buds and hope of a couple's marriage. Mbiti emphasizes that marriage is:

the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized. Marriage is the drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. ... Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return.⁵

Therefore, marriage is a dynamic event in which life is dramatized, the departed are remembered, the living members participate, and the not yet born are expected. All the events of the drama of life are experienced in the family, with the family, and for the family.

³ Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy*, 133. See also Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 104-115, Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87-125, Bujo, *African Theology*, 106-112, and Bujo, *African Christianity and Morality*, 108-111.

⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 134.

⁵ Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy*, 133.

Bujo observes that the Bantu and Nilotic peoples cannot conceive of a marriage which excludes begetting children, because children are the glory of womanhood, in which a man participates.⁶ This is clear in various creation myths and oral stories among the Bantu and Nilotic of Kenya. The dignity and vocation of women are fulfilled and confirmed by the birth of the first child in marriage. Oral stories and myths express the belief that since the creation God has commanded them to marry and have children.⁷ According to Mbiti, man comes into the picture of existence as “husband and wife, male and female.”⁸ Thus, one sees that there is a purpose for which man and woman were designed by the Creator. God gives both man and woman the gift of life and a specific mission of ‘being’ to fulfill in the world.

Kenyatta agrees with Mbiti that “marriage is the desire of every member of the tribe to build up his own family group, and by this means to extend and prolong his father’s (*mbari*) clan.”⁹ Kenyatta maintains that the “desire to have children is deep-rooted in the hearts of both man and woman, and upon entering into matrimonial union they regard the procreation of children as their first and most sacred duty.”¹⁰ Children bring joy, not only to the parents but to the clan. For a woman, rearing a child raises her status in all dimensions of the family, that is, socially, religiously, and economically.

In Africa, marriage also is considered a way of reducing and neutralizing death.¹¹ In the human experience, there is sickness and death; African people see that this life is given to

⁶ Bujo, *African Christian Morality*, 108.

⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 104.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 105.

man and woman but lasts only for a short time. According to Mbiti “death captures individuals along the road, but because of marriage and childbearing it cannot keep pace with human life at large.”¹² The human life span is very short in Africa compared to that of the industrialized nations. Through the observation of this pattern of life among the Bantu and Nilotic societies, one may conclude that the focal point of existence is marriage and family. As long as one is able, one should marry and give birth in order to promote life by giving birth to children. Thus, it is the duty of husband and wife to procreate in order to promote life.

This duty reinforces the institution of marriage as both a religious and a social obligation. Man and woman contribute the seeds of life in man’s struggle against death in each community and in society at large.¹³ Mbiti acknowledges that some African creation myths and oral stories encourage people to marry and have children in order to neutralize death.¹⁴ He explains that sustaining life requires being mindful of deceased relatives and friends who are in this context, the ‘living-dead.’¹⁵ One observes that people continue to remember the ones who are dead; they do good deeds in their honor. In fact, some oral stories during the initiation period reveal that no one can escape or conquer death by himself unless life is prolonged through the children and grandchildren. Therefore, according to Mbiti, marriage and procreation together are one way to neutralize death. For him, this

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 104.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 105.

confirms the presence of the idea among the Bantu and Nilotic, that “marriage without procreation is incomplete.”¹⁶

Similarly, François K. Lumbala defines African marriage as a bond that seals an alliance between two families through two persons, a man and a woman. This alliance includes the living and living-dead ancestors, the two families, and the clans to whom the partners belong.¹⁷ Lumbala also observes that an African wedding is not a single event but a process which is presented in a dynamic way centered within the family. ‘Process’ here indicates stages. And ‘dynamic’ means several members of both families are involved. Each person has an active role to play in every stage. One stage follows the other and every stage, celebrated in its own right, leads to the final ceremony. This dynamic process of several stages must occur step-by-step until the process is completed. It is not just a single act or a completed event that takes place in a particular moment as in a Christian or civil marriage.

For the Bantu and Nilotic people, a marriage made up of a one-hour celebration of the Eucharist in a Church, with a contract between the couple and an exchange of rings, is not sufficient to signify a lifelong commitment. The Bantu and Nilotic marriage process entails the man and woman choosing a partner in life, the giving of bride-wealth, the ‘giving away’ of the bride by her parents, the wedding ceremony, and a final ceremony which may come

¹⁶ Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy*, 133.

¹⁷ François K. Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in African Liturgy and Inculturation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 71-2.

after several years of living together.¹⁸ Sometimes the final ceremony is done after the birth of the first child or before the first-born goes into the initiation ceremony.¹⁹

Throughout these stages, the role of the woman is central. Traditionally, there is no next stage without her approval. The woman, in fact, is the core of the celebration of marriage. The following section examines the preparation stages of marriage, the wedding ceremony itself, and the post-wedding ceremonies among the Kikuyu tribes and the Luo tribes of Kenya.

1. 2. The Marriage Preparation Stages among the Kikuyu Tribe of Kenya

The traditional Kikuyu marriage consists of four stages of preparation. Every couple must go through all four stages before they can settle down as husband and wife. Each stage acknowledges the dignity and the vocation of the woman and the important role she plays in the marriage process. There is no valid movement to the next stage unless the consent of the woman is renewed and confirmed ritually. Traditionally, it is the man who proposes the marriage, but unless the woman says ‘yes,’ nothing can continue and the marriage preparation stages cease.

Sometimes the woman’s ‘yes’ may seem to be insignificant, especially when one hears that African women have no rights in choosing a marriage partner. But the fact that the Bantu and Nilotic people have a ritual celebration for the woman’s first consent shows that a

¹⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 140.

¹⁹ Njenga, “Customary African Marriage,” 119.

woman is free to choose a partner of her choice and that her consent is necessary. Kenyatta observed that: “in the Gikuyu community boys and girls are left free to choose their mates, without any interference on the part of the parents on either side.”²⁰ But this does not mean that family and parents are indifferent, not concerned, or not involved. Kenyatta is referring to the social structure of life in the community.

This structure gives young people an opportunity to interact with one another and get to know each other well. This happens during the celebration of initiation ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, and family-arranged meetings. At times, the family and friends organize a ‘matching mate,’ that is, matching possible marriage partners. When it comes to marriage, a wide range of consultation among the parents and immediate relatives of both parties exists before and during the preparation stages. Everyone planning to marry must go through the consultation before making a marriage commitment. For this reason, Kenyatta notes that “hasty judgment in choosing one’s husband or wife is almost out of the question.”²¹

When a boy falls in love with a girl, the culture does not allow him to display his desire or show any sign of romantic love to the woman in public. Such emotional expressions or this type of behavior is “regarded by the Gikuyu as impolite and uncultured.”²² Such expressions or behavior do not reflect the noble dignity of the woman as a mother. Unnecessary romantic public displays by a boy are not considered good moral behavior in

²⁰ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87. See also Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 136-146.

²¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87. See also Kayongo-Male and Onyango, *The Sociology of the African Family*, 16-31.

²² Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 88.

the Bantu and Nilotic culture. The girl may feel embarrassed. Culturally, public romantic expressions are not signs of respect and love, especially when people are gathered as a family. Expressions of affection in private are acceptable.

All these point to the accepted understanding that the dignity and vocation of women goes beyond sensual feelings. The young people have learned about this during the initiation period. These prescriptions are observed when a man wants to propose marriage to a woman. Therefore, when the man proposes, her willingness or unwillingness to accept the man is a confirmation of what she is called to be in life.²³ The Kikuyu woman believes that her dignity and vocation is deeply rooted in motherhood which has been explained during the initiation rite. For the Kikuyu people, a marriage must go through four stages of preparation. That means, there are four rituals of courtship.

In regard to the first stage, Kenyatta describes the marriage preparation process among the Kikuyu people as follows. After the man has identified the woman whom he would like to marry and has done all the necessary consultations, the man informs his best friends. These best friends are the people whom he would like to involve directly in the preparations for his marriage, the marriage itself, and his future married life. They then pay a visit to the girl's home. Upon their arrival at the girl's homestead, they enter her mother's hut. The girl and her mother exchange greetings with them. The mother then offers them refreshment and immediately leaves the room. Now, the boys and the girl are left alone. At this stage, the conversation may start in the following manner:

²³ Ibid.

One of the boys (not the suitor) addresses the girl: “*Mware wa Njuguna* [Daughter of Njuguna], wouldn’t you like to ask us why we have come here to -night?”

The girl answers: “No, it is not necessary to ask you that. Gikuyu custom provides that anyone passing by can come and have a meal with us.”

The boy: “That is right, *Mware wa Njuguna*, but we are looking for a homestead where we could be adopted and be given food and shelter not only when we are passing by, but as children of the homestead.”²⁴

Sometimes two to three visits of this kind are made until the girl may finally say to them: “I am willing that the son of So-and-so should be adopted into our homestead.”²⁵ However, if she does not accept him, they will leave and the boy goes to look for someone else.

Kenyatta demonstrates the important role the woman plays from the very beginning of the marriage preparation process. He also shows that in the traditional Bantu and Nilotic marriage, there are no arranged marriages without the full knowledge of the woman. The fact that they cannot move to the next stage without the woman’s approval or “yes” presupposes that her part is very important.

The parents, family members, and friends of the couple form a consultative body for the couple. The fact that African marriage is a family event has been greatly misunderstood by outsiders who look at marriage from an individualistic point of view. Many reporters who

²⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 88.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

are foreign to the culture have concluded that an African woman has no say in her marriage. Others say that African girls are forced into marriage by the parents in order to gain marriage gifts. According to Kenyatta's description, such suppositions are completely false.

When a Kikuyu woman says 'yes,' I am willing to adopt a man, this is very symbolic. It refers to the natural capacity of a woman to receive a man, 'adopt' him, and provide the first human home-her womb. For the Bantu Kikuyu or Nilotic Luo, there is literally no place for sex without the womb having been given in marriage. Traditionally, sex outside marriage is unacceptable. If it occurs, there is serious disciplinary action imposed on those involved. There are a number of taboos against sexual misconduct and to protect the dignity of women.²⁶

Once a woman says 'yes' to marriage, her whole life changes. She will never again be in the same position as an unmarried woman. Her responsibility becomes that of a wife and a mother in a family. This is why before the woman says 'yes' a wide range of consultations must be undertaken. She takes time to discuss the decision with her friends. She also consults with relatives regarding the proposed relationship. By the time the man comes back to hear from the girl, "Yes, I am willing to adopt you," she is secure in her decision. It is always a solemn and sacred moment. The ritual of pouring beer to celebrate the young woman's 'yes,' is followed with a prayer. This provides an affirmation to move to the second stage.²⁷ Actually, there is no next stage without the consent of the woman. This means that at any

²⁶ Oliver Nassaka, "Women and Taboo," in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi R. A. Nanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publisher, 1996). 163.

²⁷ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 88.

stage if the woman declines, or something happens and she changes her mind about adopting the man, the whole marriage process ends. But occurrences of this kind are rare.

Any woman, consciously or unconsciously, by her womanhood alone has a natural capacity to attract a man. In the same way, a man is capable of attracting a woman naturally because of his manhood. When this happens, these two people form a family. But among the Bantu and the Nilotic people of Kenya, it is the woman who leaves her family to join the new family.²⁸ That is why her ‘yes’ to the marriage covenant usually develops slowly and meditatively with a wide range of consultation. When she finally says ‘yes,’ the relationship of the woman and the man in both families is changed.

In the second stage, the parents of the man pay a visit to the parents of the woman at her home. This is a very important and symbolic visit. First, they are going to approve or disapprove the desire of their son. Secondly, they want to be sure that the woman is fully involved in the process. For example, the man may come from a bad family background, an association with witchcraft, theft, drunkenness, or have a family-clan relationship, or blood relationship that the customs do not allow in marriage. All these findings are established during the first visit of the parents of the young man. According to the Kikuyu custom, the parents of the young man bring along *njohi ya njoorio*, “the beer for asking for the girl’s

²⁸*The African Bible: The Biblical Text of the New American Bible*, edited by Victor Zinkuratire, SSS and Angelo Colacrai, SSP (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), Gen. 2: 24. “A man” leaves his mother and father and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body, in this sense in African understanding, it is the beginning of a new family. But in the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, the woman leaves her family and joins her husband with his family and forms a new family; she becomes the mother of this new family with all the legal rights entailed, giving up the legal rights in her former family. The woman gives up the right to inherit from her paternal family but gains a full right of belonging and inheritance in the husband’s family. Recently, there have been cases attempting to legalize women’s right of inheritance from her parents after the marriage. Originally, this could happen only if the parents expressed this directly in a will, but not as a rule within the culture. Once woman marries, she belongs fully to the family of her husband.

hand.”²⁹ It is supposed to be served by the daughter-in-law to be. This beer is shared by the families as the first ritual in the marriage preparation. It is a confirmation of the willingness of the woman or a celebration of her ‘yes’ to be married into their family.

The ceremony proceeds as follows: upon the arrival of the suitor’s parents they are greeted. The visiting parents talk to the woman’s parents, in words such as, “We have brought beer to share with you and this beer should be served by your beautiful daughter.”³⁰ At this stage, if the girl declines to serve the beer, even if she does not utter a word but just declines to serve the beer, it is enough of a sign to the visitors and to the woman’s family that there will be no relationship between these two families. However, if she accepts and serves the beer, then some prayers would follow to ask God to bless the relationship that has just started. During these prayers, the leader (usually the girl’s grandfather or someone of similar rank is appointed) invokes the names of their ancestors and the living-dead. By the beer and prayers, the young woman and her family affirm that the girl accepts the proposal. The woman’s reaffirmation by participating in the ritual of serving the beer and offering it to her newly-acquired parents and a small portion as libation to the living-dead, adds up to a new relationship in the family. This sets up the third stage.

The third stage, sometimes known as the negotiation of the dowry, or *roracio* in the Kikuyu language, is a ritual organized for a specific appointed date. The suitor’s parents return with another traditional beer. This time it is called *njohi ya gothugumitheria mbori*,

²⁹ Ibid., 89.

³⁰ Ibid.

which means the beer for blessings on the engagement.³¹ The ritual involves killing an animal and mingling its blood with beer to smear on a staff and sprinkle on the girl while facing Mount Kenya (Mount Kere-Nyaga) and offering prayers. This posture, coupled with prayers, signifies that the girl is accepted in good faith in her new home. The ritual confirms the young woman's acceptance and bestows blessings for her new life. Basically, the ceremony asks for God's blessings upon her and protection from any evil.³² The emphasis is on the young woman who is soon expected to go and join her new home and form a new family.

This ritual also links the two families and clans together into one family by sharing the beer mingled with the blood of the sacrificial animal.³³ During this ceremony, the girl holds a place of honor because it is she who actually links these two communities. Through songs with words that express great honor and respect for the young woman and her family, the ritual is completed. After this ritual ceremony, the family of the man offers a marriage gift or bride-wealth out of respect for and in appreciation of the woman leaving her family to join the family of her husband. There may be several other short visits after this third stage, but they are not so pronounced and symbolic or open to the larger community. The composition and nature of the visits vary from family to family. However, the last and fourth stage is very important in the marriage preparation process.

The fourth stage, the farewell ceremony, is the final celebration before the actual wedding. It is held at the home of the woman and it is known as *gothenja ngoima*, in the

³¹ Ibid., 90.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 52.

Kikuyu language.³⁴ When the two communities have gathered, the signing of the marriage contract takes place.³⁵ For this stage to be completed, “the girl’s consent must be obtained.”³⁶ Family and friends of both families are invited and there is eating and dancing. However, before the celebration begins, the woman is asked to provide the knife for the sheep-skinning. She carries the knife as part of the ceremony to reaffirm her commitment to the marriage engagement.³⁷ Again, if she declines to take part in this ceremony, this would mean that the marriage preparation is ended. However, it is not common for the woman to change her mind at this stage. It must be noted that, traditionally, women play a big role in accepting their marriage partners and the traditional marriage rites cannot be performed without their full participation.

Once the girl has reaffirmed her consent, there is a big celebration attended by both girls and boys of the same age-group. This ceremony marks the end of the *ngoima*, (signing of the contract). Kenyatta points out that the “ function of the *ngoima* ceremony (signing of the contract, though not in written form), is to furnish a public wedding celebration in which marriage agreements are concluded and in which the girl is betrothed to her fiancé, not only by the parents, but by the representative body of the clan acting collectively.”³⁸ After this ceremony, the man is free to take the girl to his homestead but not on this very day. He must first build a house and announce to his people on which day he will bring his wife home. The

³⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 90. See also Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy*, 141.

³⁵ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 90.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 91.

day when the woman leaves her home and joins her husband in his home to form a family is what can be called the wedding day.

One can see that there are several stages that lead to this day, the day when the two become one flesh. There are various methods of bringing the woman home; each tribe has its own method, but the most common to both the Kikuyu and the Luo tribes are *mock attack* and *pulling* or *run-away* methods.³⁹ These two methods are presented and explained in the next section on the Luo preparation and stages in marriage because they are similar. Therefore, the following section presents the Luo preparation stages in marriage which preceded the actual bringing of the woman to the husband and his family.

1. 3. The Marriage Preparation Stages among the Luo Tribe of Kenya

The preparation stages of marriage among the Nilotic Luo tribes are similar to those of the Bantu Kikuyu. For example, similar to the role of the groom's best friends, a young Luo man or woman cannot talk about marriage without identifying a person known as the negotiator. In the Luo language, this person is called *Jagam*, that is, the person who "hands over," or "the go-between."⁴⁰ Other similar terms used in the Luo language are synonyms such as *Jatelo*, which means he who "foots it," or "the man of the path" in marriage negotiations.⁴¹ Gordon Wilson confirmed that this person is very important in the Luo

³⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 109, and Wilson, "Marriage Laws and Customs," 93.

⁴⁰ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 109.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 93. See also A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo* (Sweden: Uppsala Offset Center AB, 1976), 134-137.

marriage system.⁴² It is usually the young man himself who seeks out the negotiator but it is not unusual that his parents and relatives may have one in mind.⁴³

Generally, the young woman does not bother about the negotiator (the one who goes back and forth between the two families) until the word comes to her that the son of So-and-So is interested in marrying her.⁴⁴ It is only when she herself reports to her parents her interest that a negotiator or go-between can be identified to represent the young woman and her family. Therefore, there are two negotiators in the marriage preparation process; one selected by the woman's family and the other one is selected by the man's family. Their role is to act as the chief spokespersons and advisers during the marriage stages. Later, if there is a problem in the family, he or she will be the first person the couples turn to for advice. Wilson noted that the negotiator or the go-between must be a person of good and honorable character, a trusted person who can see, listen, and make a judgment without fear.⁴⁵ Anyone, even a friend can be the "go-between" in marriage as long as she or he is qualified.

Once the go-between has been identified and appointed, then the search for a young woman suitable for marriage begins and continues for several days until a matching partner is found. When the young woman is identified, the marriage preparation procedures and negotiations continue. The process is similar to the procedures among the Kikuyu people which were discussed in the previous section. There may be few differences in emphasis, but what underlies the marriage preparation process among both the Kikuyu and the Luo tribes is

⁴² Wilson, "Marriage Laws and Customs," 93.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

the common understanding of the marriage preparation and the role played by both the families of the young man and the young woman.

There are many common components in the marriage preparation that will not be included in this discussion. However, three distinct components are clearly common to both tribes: i) the bride-wealth or dowry, ii) wedding ceremony, and iii) strict preservation of the woman's virginity. However, both the Bantu and Nilotic communities are silent about the man's virginity, although men are expected to respect women at all costs.

1. 3. 1. The Meaning and the Value of the Bride-wealth or Dowry in Relation to the Dignity of Women

Generally, in traditional African societies, a young woman leaves her family and joins the family of her husband. For this reason, the family of the husband-to-be is expected to give some traditional gifts as a sign of appreciation, honor, and respect to welcome the young woman as a wife and mother into the family of the husband. These gifts are loosely called "bride-wealth" or "dowry."⁴⁶ The gifts may include animals such as cattle, goats, or sheep. Other gifts may include farm tools, ornaments, foodstuffs, or money. The gifts vary across the tribes. The Kikuyu and Luo people have tended to give mostly animals. Today, however, they have begun to give money. This is a modification of the traditional marriage gift for it

⁴⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 140. The terms 'bride-wealth,' 'bride-gifts,' and other terms used for marriage gifts are either inadequate or misleading because marriage gifts are symbols which have no English words to express exactly what they mean. Therefore, such terms are used loosely to convey what they represent. See also Bujo, *Ethical Dimension of Community*, 97.

does not reflect the symbolic meaning of the traditional marriage gifts because money has no traditional symbolic value attached to it. Money is spent and then forgotten.

Marriage gifts are verbal and traditional symbols of a serious commitment offered by the family of the young man to the family of the young woman. They are signs and symbols of the marriage bond or covenant.⁴⁷ These gifts have the functions of legal certificates of the marriage covenant which western couples sign and carry home as proof of their marriage covenant. In the Bantu and Nilotic tribes there were no written legal certificates. Written, legal certificates came about as a result of contact with western civilization. Therefore, marriage gifts are very significant. They testify to the worth and dignity of women. Without the dowry, children cannot legally belong to the man's family. A certain number of marriage gifts are required to be paid as proof that the woman is accepted by the husband and his family. If the dowry is not given as a sign and symbol of acceptance, the husband cannot have the children, or rather, their children do not belong to the husband's family. The Bantu and Nilotic people believe that children are the fruits of love between the father and the mother; if the man does not express this love through the required signs and symbols, then the man lacks traditional authority over his children and wife.⁴⁸ He must show love and appreciation first to his wife, then to her family. The woman's family can see in the dowry his commitment to his covenantal marriage.

⁴⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 140. See also Kirwen, *African Cultural Domains*, 113-135.

⁴⁸ Kirwen, *African Cultural Domains*, 116

In the Bantu and Nilotic traditional customs, a marriage gift is considered both a sign and a symbol of the covenant of marriage. Mbiti confirms the essence of the marriage gift in the following statement:

Marriage gift is an important institution in African societies. It is a token of gratitude on the part of the bridegroom's people to those of the bride, for their care over her and for allowing her to become his wife. At her home the gift 'replaces' her, reminding the family that she will leave or has left and yet she is not dead. She is a valuable person not only to her family but also to her husband's people. ... The gift elevates the value attached to her both as a person and wife. The gift legalizes her value and the marriage contract. The institution of this practice is the most concrete symbol of the marriage covenant and security. Under no circumstances is this custom a form of 'payment,' as outsiders have often mistakenly said.⁴⁹

According to Mbiti, "it is not only the man and his people who give: the girl's people also give gifts in return, even if these may be materially smaller than those of the man."⁵⁰ In actual fact, it is an exchange of gifts which is symbolic in the marriage covenant. Kirwen observes that the African concept of a marriage gift is different from the Western one. In the West, marriage gifts are given to "the couple themselves with the idea that they will help them set up a new independent household."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 140.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Kirwen, *African Cultural Domains*, 116.

A.B.T. Akiiki agrees with Mbiti that marriage gifts are like the visible certificate of marriage and that there is no English word that expresses the real meaning of the African traditional concept. He notes that words such as ‘bride-wealth,’ or bridal insurance, and ‘dowry,’ are commonly used by foreigners, but these words do not convey the same meaning in the African traditional concept.⁵² At the same time, Mbiti laments that when words such as ‘payment’ or ‘buying’ of a young woman are used by outsiders, it degrades the dignity of a woman as a marriage partner.⁵³

It is important to note that even though the marriage gift or dowry may be very expensive, no one has ever been denied marriage because he is poor. People have, however, been denied marriage to someone because that person has a bad character, negative moral behavior in the community, or comes from a family with a bad reputation. This means that moral conduct is very important to a community whose life is centered on the family. For example, when a family is associated with witchcraft, or theft, or killing others, or women who are not respected and recognized as good mothers, no one would choose to marry into such a family.

Finally, bride-wealth or dowry has both religious and social significance. The religious aspect is seen in the sense that during the process of giving bride-wealth, prayers and thanks are offered to God as the families enter the relationship of marriage. The social

⁵² A. B. T. Akiiki, “Aspect of Bantu Marriage” in *African Ecclesiastical Review*, (AFER), Vol. 20, no. 5. (Oct. 1998), 263.

⁵³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 142.

significance is that the exchange process brings the two families together in a celebration and binds them together as one big extended family.⁵⁴

Kirwen, an American missionary, through his experience in Kenya for many years and his studies, says that bride-wealth “is pivotal in African culture. It ensures the success of wedding, legitimizes the children as lineal descendants and qualifies (them) for inheritance and it redistributes the wealth.”⁵⁵ A better understanding of bride-wealth requires an inculturation theology to sustain its meaning and value in reference to the dignity of women in traditional African marriage.

While bride-wealth has meaning and value in traditional African societies because of poverty, inter-cultural marriages and modern influences, it is difficult to maintain the concept of bride-wealth in the present society. For example, because of poverty, some parents may demand too much for their daughter and also the daughter may be unaware of the negotiation. Such practices are not typical. There are also tendencies on the part of some wealth.⁵⁶ Such tendencies are not typical in the traditional culture. They undermine the parents to prefer money to animals or some other gifts which are commonly given for bride-dignity of women.

Moreover, in an inter-cultural marriage, bride-wealth is very significant. Modern ways of living modify the original ways. Traditional items given for bride-wealth lose their meaning and symbolism to the families. Nowadays, an African often finds himself or herself

⁵⁴ Kirwen, *African Cultural Domains*, 117.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁶ Kirwen, *African Cultural Knowledge*, 130-131.

born and raised in cities far from the homeland. For this reason, the original mentality of bride-wealth must be adapted to modern reality if dowry or bride-wealth are to be seen in reference to the dignity of women in African marriage. African theologians must provide a harmonized theology whereby these cultural values are maintained in reference to the dignity of marriage. Recommendations will be presented in the last chapter of this dissertation in the discussion of the theology of inculturation.

In the traditional African marriage, once both families are satisfied that a sufficient relationship has been established, and they are certain that their daughter is sincerely accepted by the young man and his family is to organize the wedding feast. The wedding feast is another component of the marriage ceremony which reveals the dignity and vocation of the wife in the Bantu and Nilotic communities. It reveals and expresses the glory of woman as the mother in the family. The following section examines the traditional Bantu and Nilotic tribes' wedding ceremonies and festivals.

1. 3. 2. The Traditional Wedding Ceremonies and Festivals in Reference to the Dignity and Vocation of Women among the Bantu and Nilotic Tribes

The wedding ceremony is one of the greatest events of the marriage and this ceremony is celebrated in almost all African communities. The wedding ceremony involves the families of both the bride and the groom, their friends, and neighbors.⁵⁷ The details of the ceremony vary from community to community. However, in all of them, the songs, prayers,

⁵⁷ Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 202.

and even gifts all symbolically crown the dignity of motherhood.⁵⁸ In reality, it is the woman who is the center of the celebration. She is the ‘Queen’ of the events. And the whole celebration is like an enthronement where she is recognized as a mother of the family. Even if she has not given birth, the culture honors her and recognizes in her the gift of motherhood. At the ceremony the family of the young man is expected to welcome the young woman to his home as his wife and as a mother to their family. This welcome is called the ‘wedding ceremony and festival,’ but, in reality, the process began with the first visit when marriage was proposed and accepted.

The actual wedding ceremony is celebrated differently across the tribes. For instance, certain clans may not hold their wedding feast between the full and the new moon, because they regard this time as the “dark period.” In this case, the suitable time occurs between the new and the full moon.⁵⁹ The reason for having weddings during this period may be because people have depended mostly on natural light and so the best time was when the moon was bright. Wedding celebrations may continue late into the night and for several days.

There are different methods of bringing the young woman home. The Bantu and Nilotic have two main methods: the *mock attack* and *pulling* or *run-away* methods and Mbiti noted them as the most popular methods.⁶⁰

a) The *mock attack* is a method whereby the young man goes with his friends and stages an attack to “capture” her and bring her to his home.⁶¹ It may sound strange and

⁵⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁵⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 109. See also Kenyatta, *Facing Amount Kenya*, 92-93.

⁶⁰ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*, 109.

ridiculous to a foreigner, but this ceremony shows the importance of the woman as she is being brought into her husband's home, carried on his shoulders with songs, praises, words of blessing being showered upon her from all sides. Of course, the method is called an 'attack' because to some people outside the culture it looks to be 'wild,' and meaningless. For the tribes who practice this method, it shows a real honor to the woman to be brought into the home like a warrior who has fought a successful battle. This is the style in which victorious kings and warriors were brought home after the victory. It is the 'drama' of the whole wedding ceremony. A woman will always remember how she was first welcomed.

The young woman may show signs of resistance and even weep as if she were being forced into the wedding ceremony. But all these antics are part of the ceremony. Her weeping is loud and mournful but it hides her joy much as a woman in labor experiences after she delivers a baby. Later, everything turns to joy and celebration. The weeping and crying of a young woman at the time of her wedding is welcomed as part of the ceremony. Without this *mock* cry, her desire to be a mother only remains a dream.

On the other hand, the woman feels honored and respected by the way she is carried up high on the man's shoulders. Some women may refuse to walk and must be carried for a long distance. African marriages do not generally occur amongst clan members and this means that wives and husbands are not usually from the same village. Therefore, the journey may be a distance for the young woman and the people who bring her to new home. On arrival, each tribe has its own style of festivities.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Among the Kikuyu people, the wedding ceremony lasts eight days. Every evening there are songs and dancing. On the eighth day, a sheep is slaughtered, the fat is fried, and the oil is used to anoint the bride in a ceremony by which she becomes a full member of her husband's family.⁶² The traditional wedding ceremony is very exciting. Every young man and woman looks forward to such an occasion.

According to the culture of the people, the *mock attack* method may be considered helpful to women since, traditionally, they are often shy in matters of marriage and sexual relationships in public. By the fact that sex is reserved for marriage and procreation, a woman would feel shy just marching into the new home by herself. Therefore, the 'mock attack' somehow helps the young woman along through the process. Gradually, this process proclaims and introduces the young woman into the new family by the community. Thus, the young woman feels, from the very beginning, that she is not alone but is surrounded by family and friends who recognize and honor her presence.

Finally, this ceremony shows that the Bantu and Nilotic marriage ceremony is a community event. The *mock attack* method announces to the young people that sexual relations, which are prohibited before one marries, are now allowed through this marriage and ritual ceremony. This is expressed in some of the songs and prayers during the ceremony.

The ceremony is an open invitation to all friends and age mates and the families of the bride and the groom; everybody in the community is welcomed to participate in the

⁶² Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 93.

wedding festivals. Some girls (bridesmaids) mainly from the young woman's home come to stay with her and give support and encouragement during this popular occasion and may remain until the woman is settled into her new home. This is the time when these bridesmaids get an opportunity to show their characters to the young men who have not married. This method shows that African marriage is a communal and public celebration. It is not a private and individual affair.

b) The *Pulling or run-away* method is another way of bringing a bride to the home and the family of her husband.⁶³ The reasons for it are similar to the *mock attack* method explained above. The only difference is that the *mock attack* involves the party from the young woman's side, usually her brothers, attempting to protect her from being taken away from them while in 'the pulling' or run-away' method there is no one near to prevent her from running away with the group of young men from her husband's side, and it is planned in such a way that she is not near her brothers.⁶⁴ This may happen when she is alone, going to fetch water, firewood, or very early when she is just rising out of bed.⁶⁵

Once some gifts are given and a confident relationship is established between the two engaged families, the young man is allowed to organize a celebration for his young woman. It is his duty to inform his family and friends who, in turn, help him fulfill this mission. His friends, together with him, plan how they can bring the young woman home on the appointed day. There is great excitement for the young people who are to participate in this exercise. They must have a well-organized and coordinated plan. Once they find her, they take the

⁶³ Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 136-137.

⁶⁴ Ominde, *The Luo Girl*, 47.

⁶⁵ Ibid. See also Magesa, *African Religion*, 126-127.

opportunity to catch her and bring her home by ‘pulling and running away’ with her to the husband’s home.⁶⁶ This is very dramatic and may look as if they are eloping, but it is a part of the African wedding culture. This ceremony generally takes place in the morning or evening, depending on the distance which the groom, bridegroom, and his friends have to travel.

Note that both the *pulling away* and *mock attack* methods are applied only to young women who have never married or have never given birth out of wedlock. These methods show that the young woman is valued and desirable; therefore, her husband-to-be must struggle to bring her home. On her part, she feels dignified.

Wilson observes that it is “a serious insult in Luo culture for a young woman to be told that you were not ‘captured,’ you came as a concubine.”⁶⁷ This means, that there was no involvement of in-laws, friends, family, and the communities in celebrating her coming into the new home. The coming of a woman into a new home is very significant because she comes as a wife and a mother of the family. Her presence is so important that it is proclaimed dramatically and loudly. This ceremony has some symbolic significance in the life of the bride. In almost every case, the young woman is expected to have lived her youthful life faithfully and now it is her chance to enter into a new home and form a family as a heroine with great dignity.

Therefore, the groom and his party, together with the young woman and her sisters (bridesmaids), and her friends who are not yet married, join in with songs of praise and

⁶⁶ Ominde, *The Luo Girl*, 48.

⁶⁷ Wilson, “Marriage Laws and Customs,” 93. See also Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 138.

celebration.⁶⁸ It is customary as a part of the celebration that the bridesmaids follow her into this new home during the first days of her wedding.⁶⁹ There is no limit on the number of invited guests or even a requirement to have formal, written invitation. Such a community event gives both the bride and the groom an equal opportunity to have friends and age mates participate in the marriage ceremony.

Part of this traditional wedding ceremony is a ritual which shows that the bride is accepted and welcomed into the new home by her new parents, brothers in-law and sisters in-law, and the whole family and clan of her husband.⁷⁰ Mbiti describes the ceremony of receiving a bride in the following manner:

On arrival, the party is met by the bridegroom who comes to the doorway of the courtyard and stands there holding a spear. The bride is brought into the house where the bridegroom's parents are sitting against the wall. A rite is performed by which the bridegroom sits on and off, four times, first on the father's lap and then on his mother's lap. The bride repeats this act, but only three times.⁷¹

Among the Bantu and the Nilotic tribes of Kenya, the family of the husband becomes the proper and legal family of the wife. Incidentally, during the colonial period, the British recognized and adopted the African customary marriage laws.⁷² In this case, the ritual

⁶⁸ Ominde, *The Luo Girl*, 48.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 139.

⁷² Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 136.

ceremony, or a similar one, is what confers the right of inheritance upon the woman. Among the Bantu and Nilotic in Kenya, generally speaking, after the marriage the woman belongs fully to the family of the husband. By this rite she has the right to inherit and, in fact, shares fully in all privileges of motherhood in the whole family.

Here, the woman feels the recognition of her dignity and authority. At present, Kenyan marriage law recognizes civil, Church, and traditional marriages. That is, any marriage between a man and woman which falls under civil, Church, or tribal custom of the tribes gives the woman authentic authority to fully belong to the family of her husband with the right to administer their family estate.⁷³

The receiving ritual ceremony also commits the couple to the responsibilities of their new life. Soon the community will expect the woman to bear children and contribute to the expansion of the family and the clan. A similar ritual is practiced by the Bantu of Uganda, especially the Banyoro and Batoro people.⁷⁴

In contemporary African societies, people expect to get formal invitations, but for the traditional Bantu and Nilotic wedding there is no such formality. Invitation by cards is foreign to these people although it is becoming more acceptable. This practice tends to make marriage celebrations individualistic and private affairs, ideas which hold no value in the traditional Bantu and Nilotic communities.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁴ Akiiki, "Aspect of Bantu Marriage," 266.

⁷⁵ Kirwen, *African Cultural Knowledge*, 118-119.

According to Kirwen, individual invitations, especially with cards, exclude community participation, and traditional cultural values. The whole preparation and ceremony are ignored. The modern invitation is an innovation that makes the traditional marriage, which is a community event, more like a private affair of the couple with a few invited friends. This change is contrary to African culture.

There are some very important marriage rituals which can only be performed once in a lifetime. In the case of a polygamous marriage, certain important marriage rituals are excluded or ignored which is an indication that polygamy is not an authentic cultural form of traditional African marriage.⁷⁶ However, polygamy has been practiced in Africa for so many years that several theologians refer to it as the “system of marriage’ in Africa.⁷⁷ Polygamy might have popped up in some African communities out of necessity but not from within the original traditional marriage. Traditionally, only the first wife is fully recognized by the community with clear authority, responsibilities and duties.⁷⁸ The other wives work and cooperate with each other under the first wife. This is evident among the Luo people; when a polygamous husband dies, the body cannot be buried by the second or other wives, and certain funeral rituals cannot be performed without the presence of the first wife.

Another point to note among the Bantu and Nilotic communities, is that the marriage covenant goes beyond the verbal exchange of ‘yes,’ or exchange of consent and the conjugal

⁷⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141

⁷⁷ Magesa, *African Religion*, 136-141. See also Kirwen, *African Cultural Knowledge*, 152-159; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 142-144; and Bujo, *African Christian Morality*, 111.

⁷⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 95. See also Wilson, “Luo Marriage Laws and Customs,” 149.

union in the marriage relationship.⁷⁹ Women will always enjoy the respect and honor from the family and community whether they are married and have children or not. This willingness from the woman, acceptance by the husband, and community assertion correspond to the capacity in a woman's body given by God. From the very beginning of the marriage preparation, a woman is fully aware of the importance of this. The receiving ritual is just a confirmation of what women are called to be in the family.

Sexual relations are very significant in a marriage relationship. Sex is not only sacred and reserved for procreation but also very important as it reveals the dignity and vocation of the woman. This requires ethical discipline on the part of young women and the community in which they live. The following section discusses the understanding of human sexuality and virginity in reference to the dignity and vocation of women in the Bantu and Nilotic communities.

1. 3. 3. Human Sexuality and Virginity in Reference to the Dignity and Vocation of Women among the Bantu and Nilotic People

According to Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, a young woman is supposed to enter into a marriage relationship as a “perfect woman,” meaning that she has not had any sexual relations with a man.⁸⁰ In other words, a “perfect woman” refers to virginity. Virginity is

⁷⁹ Douglas W. Waruta, “Marriage and Family in Contemporary African Society: Challenges in Pastoral Counseling” in *Pastoral Care in African Christianity: Challenging Essays in Pastoral Theology*, edited by Douglas W. Waruta and Hannah W. Kinoti (Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers, 2005), 107.

⁸⁰ Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, ed., *Woman, Who are You?: A Challenge* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 39.

considered not only as a sign of innocence and purity but also of pride in woman's dignity.⁸¹

"Perfect woman" includes also a holistic understanding of a young mature woman from the affective and rational points of view, as well as from the sexual point of view.⁸² The education of a young woman regarding sexuality is very difficult and thoroughly supervised by experienced parents, such as grandmothers and aunts. There are intense activities that prepared the young woman to assume with dignity her role as a wife and mother.

The intense preparation starts at the very "onset of her puberty signaled by her first menstruation."⁸³ Here, the sacredness of sex is clearly spelled out. In fact, in some African societies, sex is preserved for procreation and for ritual purposes. In other words there is sacredness and mysterious power which people attach to sex and God's mystery of creation.⁸⁴

Magesa supports the idea of the sacredness and mysterious power of human sexuality. He observes that it is the central theme during the initiation. The initiation process is to "impress upon the initiates the acceptance of the dignity of their own sexuality and the need to be both very responsible and very proud of it."⁸⁵

Among the Bantu and Nilotic people, there is also a certain belief that human sexuality has a unique power. Its unique power is somehow mysterious; therefore, people do not talk about or discuss sex openly and publicly. The only time that the young people are

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Magesa, *African Religion*, 143.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

taught about and discuss sex openly is during the initiation period but only in reference to marriage, procreation, and the family.

Among the Kikuyu of the Bantu and the Luo of the Nilotic tribes, virginity is observed in reverence to the dignity and vocation of women; men who get involved in sexual promiscuity are punished severely but not as a violation of virginity but as a form of ethical misconduct.⁸⁶ This means that sexual promiscuity is prohibited among women not just as a mere discipline but out of love and respect towards women.

Therefore, for the young women who are not yet married, virginity is a value which reveals something more than just a mere prohibition of sexual intercourse. Teachings about virginity, sex and marriage, all reveal women's dignity.⁸⁷ Virginity applies to not only actual marital acts but to every act or attitude toward sexuality, in all words and actions that pertain to sex. It is the disposal of the attitude which leads to "purity," that presupposes "evangelical counsels."⁸⁸ Thus, casual talk about sex is prohibited unless it is for education. Only when virginity is understood in connection to the sacredness and mystery of life can its value become meaningful in the life of people. This is why the Bantu and Nilotic people abstain from sexual intercourse for several days before important events in life or as a preparation for making a sacrifice to God for the needs of the community. This also explains why priests, religious, and consecrated virgins receive the highest respect from the communities of the Bantu and Nilotic tribes as an act of witness to the highest mystery of God's love.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁸⁷ Ibid. See also Dietrich von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity: An Analysis of the Catholic Ideals of Purity and Virginity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 113-116.

⁸⁸ Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 113. Hildebrand analyzes virginity as a state of life which religious and consecrated virgins freely choose to live. But for Africans it is a disposition towards sexuality as a gift for the dignity of the person. See also Mbuy-Beya, *Woman, Who Are You?*, 39.

Among the Luo, the Kikuyu, and other tribes in the Africa, sex was reserved for use within a marriage and then for procreation. This restriction indicates a necessary belief in virginity. Simeon. H. Ominde, confirms that “cases of pre-marital pregnancy were very rare” within the Luo community.⁸⁹ According to Ominde, virginity is possible, not necessarily from the “strict moral code, but from the conscious effort (commitment) of the young women themselves.”⁹⁰ Ominde observes that among the Luo community, virginity is the personal pride of the girl, not merely because “it was a great honor and a source of much social rejoicing to discover that a married woman had been found to be a virgin as such.”⁹¹ Every tribe has their way of knowing who is a virgin and who is not since at the traditional marriage the first act of sexual intercourse is done in such a way that proves virginity in the traditional cultural rite.

For example, among the Luo community, the term ‘pure,’ refers to a virgin girl, (*Nyako ma silili* in the Luo language). The virginity of a girl is proved at the first act of sexual intercourse on the actual night when the woman is brought into her new home.⁹² For example, on the first night of the wedding, there is the first traditional conjugal rite ceremony which provides the proof of the evidence of virginity. The people who assist in this ceremony of defloration in the Luo marriage are called *Jondaria*, the bridesmaids or witnesses.⁹³

⁸⁹ Ominde, *The Luo Girl*, 41. See also Wachege, *Third Millennium African Single Mothers & Mother Widows*, 174-177.

⁹⁰ Ominde, *The Luo Girl*, 41.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹² *Ibid.*,

⁹³ Wilson, “Marriage Laws and Customs,” 95.

According to Wilson, a group of two young married women who are contemporaries of the bride are appointed to prepare and witness the defloration in the Luo traditional marriage.⁹⁴ The traditional custom of the Luo people is that there are to have been no sexual relations before in the life of this young woman and man; therefore, the presence of *Jandaria* is very important to help them through their first act of sexual intercourse.⁹⁵ Their duty is to prepare their sister and the husband for defloration, witness the ritual and collect the hymen (virginal membrane), and announce if their sister is a virgin or not.⁹⁶ Wilson notes that the *Jandaria* set off very early on the first morning of marriage back to the home of the parents of the girl with a song in the Luo Language, *Kongolo Wadiyo*, which means “We carry the hymen safely.”⁹⁷ This process is known as defloration which is known as (*ngado ringre nyako*, ' in the Luo language).⁹⁸ It is done in order to prove that the girl is a virgin.

If the woman was not a virgin, they go back very early and without any song. In some cases, the man may refuse to marry or he may nevertheless marry the woman but without showing great respect through the presents which normally follow. In such a case the *Jandaria* go back in silence which is an embarrassment to the whole family and the clan of the girl. Wilson notes that this ceremony is regarded as “the most important of all in the series of which make up the act of marriage with the Luo.”⁹⁹ He further emphasizes that:

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Wilson, “Marriage Laws and Customs,” 95. See also Magesa, *African Religion*, 143.

⁹⁶ Wilson, “Marriage Laws and Custom”, 97.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁹⁸ Ibid., '*ngado ringre nyako*', means defloration, or breaking virginity in Luo language and it is a part of marriage rites.

⁹⁹ Wilson, “Marriage Laws and Customs,” 96.

The impression is given to newcomers to Luo land that the defloration ceremony is no longer performed by “modern” Luo. Experience teaches, however, that even in most Christian marriages witnesses are present. ... If there were no witnesses, the girl is still assumed to have been a virgin in terms of the law.¹⁰⁰

Virginity is more than a reason for social pride; it is deeply rooted in the religious discipline based on the theological and anthropological prestige of a woman among other women.¹⁰¹ P. N. Wachege confirms in his observation that: “the discouragement of pre-marital pregnancy among the Luo, as indeed in many ethnic groups, was not just because of strict moral norms, cultural prohibition, and traditional taboos. It was also due to the importance attached to virginity as a matter of personal, familial and communal pride.”¹⁰²

Similarly, among the Kikuyu people, virginity results from the moral education and formation which young men and women acquire from their families, clan, and especially during the initiation rite. They have, for their moral ideal, “a coherent order of things, a moderation in all aspects of life, and above all, an all embracing moral system which effectively catered for one’s integral life.”¹⁰³ This means that virginity is not forced upon the youth but is presented in the system of the family and education of the youth and the consciousness of the young people as a critically important value. This reveals a willful discipline, a proof that one has control over feelings and emotions.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Wachege, *Third Millennium African Single Mothers & Mother Widows*, 177.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 179.

According to Wachege, among the Kikuyu community, “a woman who got pregnant out of wedlock, her honor, respect and dignity is diluted and virtually wiped out.”¹⁰⁴ This is considered as disrespectful of oneself, one’s parents, and the whole community. There is a very heavy punishment, especially to the man who defiles a young woman.

Mbiti also confirms that virginity was very important and that if a young woman was discovered to have broken her virginity, the man could refuse her and send her back with her sisters who had come to entertain her during her wedding feast.¹⁰⁵ In such a case, the marriage would end there and all the gifts which had already been offered would be brought back to the man’s family. In traditional African communities, such a girl could be married as a second wife. Among the Luo community, the young women who lost their virginity before marriage or had children out of wedlock were married as second or third wives, but rarely as the first wife. Such was observed similarly among the Kikuyu people of Kenya.¹⁰⁶

Monogamy and the dignity of a woman seem to be very closely connected as the only form of marriage ordained by God. According to Ominde, “if a woman gave birth to an illegitimate child... There was no possibility of occupying the position of chief wife of a family.”¹⁰⁷ Virginity, therefore, is a very precious value in understanding the dignity and vocation of a mother in the African context of marriage.

Along with esteem for the value of virginity in relation to the dignity and vocation of women, there are norms and rules which protect women among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 181-183. See also Mbuy-Beya, *Woman, Who Are You*, 39.

¹⁰⁵ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 109.

¹⁰⁶ Wachege, *Third Millennium African Single Mothers & Mother Widows*, 183.

¹⁰⁷ Ominde, *The Luo Girl*, 42.

These norms and rules are known as taboos. The following section presents the major taboos in relationship to the dignity of women.

2. The African Taboos as Measures of Moral Behavior: Protection of the Dignity of Women

Among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, life is always perceived within the mystery of being in relationship with God in his plan of creation.¹⁰⁸ This plan involves a sexual relationship between a man and woman in marriage. According to Magesa, marriage ensures “procreation and preservation of life and the life-force through sexuality and its physical expression in sexual intercourse.”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, human sexuality as the source of life is considered sacred and is involved in the mystery of life. Thus human sexuality is shrouded by moral rules or taboos. According to Bujo, “many taboos help the man to respect the woman and the life growing within.”¹¹⁰ For this reason, during the period of her pregnancy, after birth, and until the child is weaned, women are protected by taboos.¹¹¹

The *Encyclopedia of Religion* defines a taboo as a “sacred prohibition or restriction that is sanctioned by supra-societal means, or a socially sanctioned injunction alleged to have the force of such a prohibition. It stands at the intersection of human affairs and the forces of a

¹⁰⁸ Magesa, *African Religion*, 142.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 123.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

larger universe.”¹¹² The concept comes from the term ‘*tapu*,’ which originates from the Polynesian religion and has the function of “segregating persons, objects or activities that are divine or sacred.”¹¹³

However, the Polynesian definition does not express the African concept of a ‘taboo.’ Somehow it gives an impression that the power of a taboo depends on the community, but in Africa, among the Bantu and Nilotic people, the taboo carries its own sanction. The acts themselves committed by the individual member bring about a punishment. In other words, the Bantu and Nilotic people believe that the power of the taboo is in the actions committed; once someone commits the prohibited act, the effects affect the offender. For the Kikuyu people, as well as the Luo people of Kenya, a *taboo* has its own ‘powers,’ which flow from within and affects the offenders.

According to Grace N. Wamue, the power of a taboo is “governed by the principle of ‘*manaa*,’ which is defined as a force that flows from one person to another or from one object to another.”¹¹⁴ It is this force which creates the feeling or the sense of a taboo.¹¹⁵ Therefore, a ‘taboo’ is a spirit connected to the acts of the offender. Similarly, Arthur observes that ‘taboo’ maintains ethics regarding human sexuality and protects women, guiding the values of marriage and procreation. He believes that taboos help to protect and maintain the respect

¹¹² *Encyclopedia of Religion*, (1987), 233. See also Grace N. Wamue, “Women and Taboos among the Kikuyu people” in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge (Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers, 1996), 169 .

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Wamue, “Women and Taboo among the Kikuyu People” 168. According to Wamue, ‘*Manna*’ is a sort of a supernatural force which is believed to be a ‘spirit,’ which has its own force.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

and love towards women in the community.¹¹⁶ In some sense, by protecting and respecting women, taboos confirm the value which women bear.¹¹⁷

Wamue acknowledges, from her experience as a woman living in her Bantu community, that women are “perceived to possess dangerous power, especially during menstruation.”¹¹⁸ Therefore, there is no sexual intercourse during menstruation in order to let women go through this unique experience which is particular and special to them. This is also considered to be sacred in the life of women. According to Wamue, “taboo carries a strange connotation in those societies that believe in it. It is more than mere law or rule. ... The emphasis of a taboo is always upon the thing, act, or word tabooed.”¹¹⁹ This means that there is a certain spirit connected to the object which affects the subject who is breaking the taboo. This is how taboos are viewed: as means of protection, respect, and honor to women in the Bantu and Nilotic communities.¹²⁰

It is important to note that most of these taboos affect women’s sexual behavior or are connected to human sexuality in general. One can understand this because this is the way God wants life to be generated. This idea is not intended to control women, as it may appear, but to protect them from danger and safeguard women as mothers. Most taboos have a theological and anthropological foundation. They are not created by the community for the sake of fear or to create superstitions but for people to believe that what they have in the

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹¹⁷ Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*, 61.

¹¹⁸ Wamue, “Women and Taboo among the Kikuyu people,” 169.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 172.

¹²⁰ Ibid. See also Paul Mboya, *Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi*, translated by Jane Achieng (Nairobi, Kenya: Atai Joint Limited, 2001), 101; and Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*, 62.

family came from God and that the family must be protected by all means. Otherwise, if a taboo is considered only a form of moral control of human behavior, then it loses its original meaning among the Bantu and Nilotic traditional communities.

In a similar fashion, the idea is connected to human fertility and procreation. Among the Luo community when planting or harvesting season begins, sex is performed (first night of the planting) by parents who are the first to plant the seeds and to bring home the first crop at the beginning of harvesting season. This is in a certain way to acknowledge God's mystery of creation through the woman. Then, after the first night, other members of the family can perform sex starting with the eldest in the order of birth and the rest follow accordingly on subsequent nights. This reality of *taboo* is explained by the Luo elders to foreigners or to research students, among the Luo tribe. For example, Abe Toshisharu was told, in his research among the Luo community that "the head of the 'compound' family or (*won dala* in Luo language) should have intercourse with his first wife on the eve of the first night of the days of sowing, weeding, and harvesting."¹²¹ Failure to adhere to these rules bring consequences to those who breach 'taboo' and can affect the individual as well as the community.

¹²¹Abe Toshisharu, "The Concepts of Chira and Dhoch among the Luo of Kenya: Transition, Deviation and Misfortune," in *The Themes in Socio-Cultural Ideas and Behavior among the Six Ethnic Groups in Kenya: The Visuka, Iteso, The Gusii, The Kipsigis, The Luo and The Kamba* (Kunitach, Tokyo: Hitotsubaschi University, 1981), 129. Toshisharu seeks to show that the head of the homestead, meaning a compound with several families, recognizes one woman as the mother of the entire family. Usually every clan recognizes one family as the head of all the families present and that particular family knows and recognizes one woman as the first woman (first mother). Therefore the unique experience of sexual intercourse would be left for the first woman as mother of the whole family. Even if they are too old or sick, still they would perform sex symbolically as a ritual.

There are many things which children cannot understand until they reach the age of initiation. Therefore, the teachings about taboos, human sexuality, marriage, and family life are handed over in a special way during initiation. For example, among the Luo of the Nilotic tribes, anything that directly or indirectly affects life in its relationship to marriage and the family falls under the category of “*chira*” and “*dhoch*.” These concepts are taboos or violations of moral laws that can cause misfortunes and the communities believe that they can affect marriage and family directly or indirectly.¹²²

For example, if someone is habitually associated in any way with things that the community considers as undermining the dignity and vocation of another person, such a person is referred to as ‘*gath*,’ a disordered or disoriented person in the Luo language.¹²³ Such a person evidently has a tendency towards a same-sex union; this may be by lifestyle, or by a deeper orientation. These people do not accept, recognize, or respect the dignity of being a man or a woman in a family; nor can they promote human life. The behavior and attitude of such people towards life may be easily observed since, among the Bantu and Nilotic, life is centered in the family and community. The initiation period provides ‘the school’ for human life and sacred values. In Africa, the traditional marriage between a man and a woman is permanent in nature. The permanent nature of marriage, in a certain sense, confirms the dignity and vocation of women because it is the woman who leaves her family

¹²² Ibid., 127.

¹²³ Wilson, “Marriage Laws and Customs,” 87. The term *Chira* and *Dhoch* have some similarities among the Luo community in the sense that they are described as acts which violate certain rules and promote the misfortunes resulting from these acts. For example, the rules which are prohibited are called *kwer* in the Luo language; violation of them causes *Chira*; while *Dhoch* referred to abnormal phenomena which people believe can cause misfortunes if one acts in an abnormal way. For example, if one claims to be oriented towards same sex that attraction can bring misfortune automatically to the individual who performed the acts, to the family, and the clan, because in same sex union, there is no procreation which is part of God’s plan of creation.

and joins her husband and his family. The following section presents the understanding of traditional marriage in the Bantu and Nilotic communities as a permanent covenant in reference to the dignity and vocation of women.

3. The Traditional African Marriage as a Permanent Covenant in Reference to the Dignity and Vocation of Women

Among the Bantu and Nilotic peoples, traditional marriage between a man and a woman is understood as a permanent covenant. This concept of “permanent” is important to understanding traditional African marriage.¹²⁴ As explained earlier, the marriage covenant, viewed as a permanent reality is a confirmation of the dignity and vocation of women. Moreover, the mutual understanding of the reality, of marriage strengthens the love and the bond between the husband and wife and their families. Because marriage is viewed as a permanent covenant, one can understand the reason for so many stages of African marriage and the involvement of so many people.

Bujo notes that when a young woman and man enter into the marriage covenant, the parents advise them that: “Marriage is a life-long affair. There is only one son-in-law and one wife. A son who respects his parents marries only once and never twice. ... The same is said

¹²⁴ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 96.

to the woman.”¹²⁵ This idea seems a contradiction to the idea of polygamy in African society.

But in actual fact, there is no contradiction. According to Bujo:

Polygamy does not endanger the place of the first wife. Rather, it puts her in a privileged position since she is often regarded as the mother of all subsequent wives. She is the one who really ‘owns’ the marriage. One could refer to polygamy as multiplicity in unity.”¹²⁶

This understanding will be explained later in treating the implications of African polygamy.

But one can understand that the traditional customary marriage recognizes monogamous marriage, but tolerates polygamy. Once a woman is married, according to customary law she will not only be considered as a wife, but she also becomes a mother of the entire family.¹²⁷

Therefore, one cannot divorce a mother. These two titles of ‘mother’ and ‘wife’ are one reality for an African woman. A mother is a mother forever. According to the Bantu and Nilotic traditional customs, the indissolubility of marriage becomes a reality at its final ritual stage of marriage as explained above.

Here, John Njenga presents African marriage as a permanent covenant. In 1973, Njenga presented a paper on “Customary African Marriage” to the Regional Conference of East African Bishops, in Nairobi, Kenya.¹²⁸ This study presented marriage as a permanent reality in Africa which is indissoluble once it has reached its final stage. The process starts

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid. See also Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 95.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ John Njenga, “Customary African Marriage,” in *African Ecclesial Review*, (AFER), vol. 16, no. 3, (1974), 119.

from the very day of the proposal of marriage and it continues, stage by stage, until its final rite which may last months or years. For example, the Matego tribe of Tanzania has *Kutwik* as a final ritual rite; the Kikuyu of Kenya have *Kuguraria ngoima*; and the Luo of Kenya have *Riso*, as a final ritual rite of ceremony among other tribes.¹²⁹

Wilson notes that the Luo custom, the final ritual ceremony (*Riso*), is also called “the Bull of Finality.”¹³⁰ After this ceremony, no further gift can be legally required and the woman cannot leave the family under any circumstances.¹³¹ Wilson explains that after the final ritual:

The skin of the animal becomes a sacred part of the bed of the couple and with the modern Christian Luo, it may be seen placed under an iron bed or between the mattress and springs. In some advanced homes, the skin itself may not be used but a piece of it is invariably kept as a symbol of the legal status of that wife. I have occasionally seen it used as a bed side carpet in modern Luo homes. It has so many social, legal, religious and supernatural connexions (connections) that it is impossible to enumerate all of them here. It gives the Luo woman high status to be able to tell her co-wives or her female friends that she has been “*Riso*.”¹³²

The displaying or exposing of the ‘sacred animal skin’ which was slaughtered for the final marriage rite *riso*, demonstrates the permanent covenant among the Luo community. This

¹²⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹³⁰ Wilson, “Marriage Laws and Customs,” 112.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

sacred symbol is in the family house and cannot be wiped away easily. This reveals the dignity of and the respect for the woman in the family. This makes sense in light of most of the African customs because a woman is not married to the individual person but to the family and the clan. Furthermore, the Luo community believes that '*Riso*' or, the final rite, "wields an important link between the woman, her husband, and her husband's ancestors."¹³³ Once it is final, not even death can dissolve it. For example, even if a woman is remarried, her name, and even children born after his death maintain the name of the late husband.

According to Wilson, when the woman dies, "children can better be cared for in the sphere of the supernatural when she dies, through her ghost, and this link with the agnatic ancestors of the clan into which she has married."¹³⁴

The animal skin, the symbol used for the Luo final marriage rite has both a theological and anthropological significance. It is a religious link to the invisible reality of faith (traditional religion), and it is anthropological because it is an identification of meaning to the particular tribe. However, for the woman, it is a symbol of honor in the family and to the whole clan. Such a symbol may be compared to religious monuments which are normally built in honor of successful heroes in various fields or a flag of a nation. In the context of marriage it is seen in connection to the faith of the people in the invisible worlds, faith and religion. More so, from a sociological aspect, humanly speaking, it reveals the dignity and vocation of women because it shows that being a mother and wife is respected and celebrated as a permanent relationship with the husband, his family, and the clan, and it lasts forever.

¹³³ Ibid., 114.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Among other tribes, like the Bantu in Northern Cameroon, at the final stage of the marriage process, the two partners cut pieces of a cord, a cord which is prepared by the clan elder as a “sign of no return” in the marriage.¹³⁵ This is based on the fact that when one cuts a piece of a cord it can never return to its original form. Thus, even when one dies, the covenant forever remains and the ‘surviving part’ will never fit the cord which was already cut.¹³⁶ Therefore, it is logical that even the children born after the death of a husband bear the name of the one who had cut the cord. Therefore, the final stage of marriage not only shows the permanence of marriage but also its indissolubility.

In Bantu and Nilotic traditional marriage customs, there are elements which ensure that the permanency and indissolubility of marriage is possible. These are: (1) the woman is married to the individual man, his family, and the clan. The community concept in marriage thus strengthens and supports the couple especially when there is some misunderstanding between the wife and husband; and (2) religious aspect which links the couple to the invisibles, the living-dead, ancestors, and God. Therefore, these elements play a big role in the faith of the people regarding marriage as permanent and indissoluble. In some sense, the dignity and vocation of women is conceived by the Bantu and Nilotic people beyond the visible world. From these points one can see that marriage has deeper, dynamic theological and anthropological elements.

¹³⁵ Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in African Liturgy and Inculturation*, 75.

¹³⁶ The ‘surviving part’ refers to the living husband or wife. This means that when a partner in marriage dies after the final marriage covenant and one remarries, traditionally the woman remains part of the first cord. Tradition applies this specifically to the woman because it is the woman who is married to the family of the man. The man is never married to the family of his wife.

According to the Bantu and Nilotic traditional marriage customs, “divorce was unknown, except at the early stages of negotiations (preparations). The traditional pattern provided that either party could break off the match simply by refusing to go on with the ceremony and ritual.”¹³⁷ This is not really divorce because the final rite, ‘*Riso*’ has not been finalized. There is a distinction between ‘divorce’ and ‘separation’¹³⁸ Divorce involves legal actions whereby some of the dowry, or bride-wealth is returned while ‘separation’ means the husband and wife are not living together because of particular reasons. They still are recognized as a legal husband and wife but without sharing a common home.

The reason for separation could be something such as witchcraft which means using evil powers to harm life.¹³⁹ This is considered to be dangerous for the family. Therefore, a man or a woman found to be involved in such activities may call for a separation. Also barrenness or impotence in marriage may be seen as a cause for separation. Any of these issues mentioned show the emphasis on marriage and procreation as one reality. There may be other reasons, but witchcraft and barrenness or impotence are the most harmful to marriage according to the culture. In the case where the reason is so serious that it demands a total divorce, then the process takes long because it would involve so many people to look into alternative solutions. Just as marriage preparation involves so many people and consultations, in the same way it would require much for the ado disruption of the marriage process. Therefore, the long preparation in the stages of marriage and the involvement of the community serve to protect the dignity of marriage. Any decision or action which

¹³⁷ Wilson, “Marriage Laws and Customs,” 130.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 131.

undermines or disrupts marriage must take into consideration the family, the clan, the community, respect for the *living-dead*, and the invisible world, which includes God and the ancestors.

Thus far, this presentation has explained the understanding of marriage and procreation in an African family, especially among the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya. It has shown that marriage and procreation are one reality in the Bantu and Nilotic understanding of family life which reveals esteem for the dignity and vocation of women. However, the emphasis put on marriage and procreation as one reality may have some negative implications, especially in cases of marriages without children.

This is so even though in Africa the culture provides ways and means of protecting the dignity and vocation of women. Those who have no children born from their own womb do suffer. This means that too much emphasis on marriage and procreation as one reality has some negative implications or challenges in reference to the dignity and vocation of women.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, the following section presents and analyzes i) implications and challenges of viewing traditional African marriage and procreation as one reality, and ii) negative implications of the traditional African polygamy in reference to the dignity and vocation of women among the Bantu and Nilotic communities.

¹⁴⁰ Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in African Liturgy and Inculturation*, 132.

4. Implications and Challenges of Putting Emphasis on Marriage and Procreation as One Reality

According to the Bantu and Nilotic traditional culture, marriage and procreation together are one reality that promotes the dignity of women as mothers in the family.¹⁴¹ In nearly all African traditional societies, marriage is not seen as valid unless there are children. Children are seen as the seal of marriage and it is very rare to see a broken marriage once couples have procreated children.¹⁴² Even if the couple's life becomes challenging, both parents and the community make the marriage work for the sake of the children.

This is a fact in almost all African communities. If procreation does not occur in a marriage, then the dignity of the woman is less significant and might result in less respect and love for the mother who should be the central figure in the family. For example, among the Bantu people, "the desire to have children is deep-rooted in the hearts of both man and woman, and on entering into matrimonial union they regard the procreation of children as their first and most sacred duty. A childless marriage in a Gikuyu community is effectively a failure, for children bring joy not only to their parents, but to the clan (*mbari*) as a whole."¹⁴³

The idea of marriage and procreation as one reality seems to be acceptable to many women. For example, Lisa Sowle Cahill, who is critical of the patriarchal culture of the West, in her book *Sex, Gender & Christian Ethics*, acknowledges that "in Africa, motherhood can be a greater source of independent power for women than it has been in the

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴² Kisémbó, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 116. See also Waruta, "Marriage and Family," 105.

¹⁴³ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87.

industrialized nations.”¹⁴⁴ She acknowledges that “motherhood is in many cultures, and perhaps universally, an avenue of fulfillment and flourishing for women.”¹⁴⁵ Cahill seems to recognize the distinctive nature and role of a woman but rejects the oppressive patriarchal society.¹⁴⁶ She rejects the “oppressive patriarchal society” but offers no specifics on what practices she finds oppressive and why they are oppressive. According to Cahill, the “distinctive nature and role” of a woman is based on a “distinctive experience.” For her:

motherhood as a distinctive experience of women is not argued that women are defined only or primarily by motherhood; that authentic mothering has to begin with genes and pregnancy (not adoption); that women who are not literally mothers cannot be fulfilled; men’s fulfillment does not integrally involve sharing parenthood with women. Paternity, if different in texture, should still be as strong a component of male sociability as motherhood is for women.¹⁴⁷

For Cahill, man cannot have any insight into the role of the woman in a family. She is not happy with the fact that only woman can be mothers. Therefore, parenthood should be “both care-filled connected to and responsibility for mate and child.”¹⁴⁸ The care-filled responsibility or a shared responsibility does not affect the ‘distinctive role’ of a woman as long as it is based on the complementary responsible role of men. The shared responsibility

¹⁴⁴ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender & Christian Ethics* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 88.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Cahill, *Sex, Gender & Christian Ethics*, 89.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

in parenthood must be “deep-rooted in the heart,” as Kenyatta said.¹⁴⁹ However, the shared responsibility in parenthood based on experience, as Cahill seems to suggest above, is open to other interpretations based on values other than traditional African values. Shared responsibility of parenthood to a great extent comes after the child is born, not before the birth of a child, and this does not exclude cooperation from the man. But for an African, the responsibility of a mother takes precedence since she shares more natural instinct with the child than the father.¹⁵⁰

The traditional African emphasis on marriage and procreation as one reality means that the couple cannot simply choose to marry and not to have children. In some cases, because of reasons of health or genetic conditions, a man or woman cannot have a child. That is not a matter of their own choice. In such cases the traditional culture provides ways and means to have children which may not be in line with Christian teachings or may undermine the dignity of woman; for example, permitting polygamy in order to have children.

The emphasis on marriage and procreation as one reality would imply that a woman without a child is less important and deserves less respect, and this should not be the case, although such a situation may make a woman feel less fulfilled and loved. Putting emphasis on marriage and procreation as one reality can create negative implications for the childless woman in regard to her dignity and vocation as mother and wife.

¹⁴⁹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87.

¹⁵⁰ Temples, *Bantu Philosophy*, 18.

However, Cahill's argument does not deny the distinctive nature and role of women but challenges patriarchal oppression or control over women.¹⁵¹ Patriarchal oppression of women in society is wrong and has negative implications not only in the African communities but in western societies as well. Such insight needs to be discussed in each specific cultural context.

For example, in the West, the patriarchal dominion of men over women seems to have been promoted and supported in the concept of women proposed by Aristotle which became influential in the western anthropology, philosophy, and theology. The Aristotelian concept of woman in relation to man suggests that men are superior and women are inferior in this relationship of shared responsibility.¹⁵²

The criticism of Cahill may be reacting to this old western tradition of the Aristotelian school which dominated western theology and anthropology up to the Renaissance. Aristotle believed that "female is inferior to male as mother was inferior to father."¹⁵³ Certainly, patriarchal domination is a negative in any culture and does undermine the dignity and vocation of women. It is not in line with God's plan of creation. Human life is so precious a gift that it cannot be thought of in terms of superiority and inferiority in its relationships. The nature of relationships in marriage will be discussed in detail in chapter four.

The point of emphasis here is that among the Bantu and Nilotic people, the reality of marriage and procreation is very important to the family and to society. Whether a woman

¹⁵¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87.

¹⁵² Prudence Allen, R. S. M. *The Concept of Woman: Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B. C. -1250* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 95.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

has a child or not, she should still share and enjoy the gift of motherhood though not in the same sense. As woman, she has a natural capacity to provide the first home for human life; this is deep-rooted in her heart.¹⁵⁴

Sometimes a woman may not accept her natural gifts and values in life but this does not alter her being as a woman. Instead, she remains a woman who rejects her very being. The joy of motherhood escapes her and she fails to value and appreciate her womanhood. A woman who is not able to bear a child for some reason still enjoys the dignity of motherhood. The traditional community should provide room for her fulfillment as a mother of the family and the clan.

Christian tradition offers couples some options when they cannot have children. They may adopt children or use other means which are consistent with Christian morality. This can work very well in the Bantu and Nilotic communities since in the African family every child addresses every woman respectfully as ‘mother.’ No outsider would know which child was conceived by the couple and which was not. Therefore, it is much easier for the mother and father to bring home orphaned children or children of other relatives when they realize that they cannot have children of their own to cover up the ‘shame’ of not bearing children. In the Bantu and Nilotic culture, a woman feels fulfilled to have children in the family, even if they are not born from her womb. She feels sadness and emptiness when she cannot maximize her role and her relationship with her husband, community, and God is dispelled. In this way she is able to actualize the dignity and vocation of her womanhood.

¹⁵⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87; and Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 96.

Among the Bantu and Nilotic traditional communities, such a relationship is not based on power or human rights but on the authority which comes from traditional African values and the concept of life and cultural values.¹⁵⁵ It is hard to justify the positions of some foreign anthropologists who did not understand the fundamental role women play in African society and drew wrong conclusions about the position of women in African societies.¹⁵⁶ African women, especially the Bantu and Nilotic women are proud to be the mothers of kings, chiefs, bishops and priests, doctors, judges, and all those whom any society may consider to be important. This means that one cannot be what one is in society without being born of a woman. Therefore, any attempt to dishonor women diminishes the dignity of women as mothers of a community. However, there are some African cultural practices which undermine the dignity and vocation of women. Traditional African polygamy is one of the cultural practices which fall under this category.¹⁵⁷

4. 1. The Implications and Challenges of Traditional African Polygamy

Polygamy is a form of a customary marriage practiced in many African communities and other parts of the world whereby a man has more than one wife. For many years, it has been practiced and accepted in many of the African tribes; however, at present it is practiced

¹⁵⁵ Sharma, *Women of Africa*: 34. See also Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 85. See also Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Interpreting Old Testament Polygamy Through African Eyes" in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Mayknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 88.

¹⁵⁶ Sharma, *Women of Africa*, 35. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique" in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, 101.

¹⁵⁷ Sharma, *Women of Africa*, 39.

less and is gradually dying a natural death.¹⁵⁸ Technically, the term ‘polygamy’ in Greek implies many wives or husbands at the same time.¹⁵⁹ But this discussion treats the concept of polygamy in the traditional patriarchal African society; one man married to several wives.¹⁶⁰

There are many theologians who acknowledge that polygamy is a traditional form of marriage in several communities in Africa.¹⁶¹ Mbiti acknowledges that getting married to two or more wives is acceptable in many African societies; Cognolo accepts that polygamy is common, one man can “marry, eight, ten or fifteen wives as a sign of wealth;”¹⁶² And Kitembo, Magesa, and Shorter confirm that polygamy exists in Africa for “the desire to have a large family, and the ideal in nearly all traditional African societies to have as many children as physically possible.”¹⁶³

The practice of polygamy is not only a reality in Africa. Kirwen observes that polygamy is not only practiced in Africa but in other societies as well. He points out that:

Having multiple wives is in no way peculiar to Africa. It is currently practiced in one form or another in cultures all over the world, and has been part of human history from the earliest time. Witness the polygynous

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 90.

¹⁵⁹ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*; 108. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 142; and Kitembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 85.

¹⁶⁰ Kitembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 85.

¹⁶¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 142.

¹⁶² Cognolo, *The Agikuyu*, 126.

¹⁶³ Kitembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 95.

(polygamous) relationships of most of the Old Testament leaders and heroes beginning with Abraham and continuing with his descendants.¹⁶⁴

If it is true that polygamy is a reality in traditional African communities and in other parts of the world, does it promote the dignity and vocation of women? If it does not, what does this practice imply? Even though polygamy is practiced and accepted or tolerated in certain traditional cultures, it is not the norm in the traditional African system of marriage. It might have cropped up because of necessity.

Mbiti observes that the practice of polygamy is an “additional custom” found in African societies of marrying several wives.¹⁶⁵ This means polygamy is an additional custom, created for convenience. This makes sense because in the traditional African concept, marriage and procreation are considered one reality; therefore, if there is no child between the couple, another woman is allowed in for the sake of having children.¹⁶⁶ This is what Mbiti means by ‘additional custom.’ According to Mbiti, where polygamy is practiced, the communities respect the couples and accept them without any feelings of guilt about marrying many wives.¹⁶⁷

Similarly, Bujo observes that “polygamy was not and is not an obligatory institution.”¹⁶⁸ An individual man and his wife decide if there is a need to take another wife or not. But he also notes that for one to enter into a polygamous marriage, he has to prove

¹⁶⁴ Kirwen, *African Cultural Knowledge*, 152.

¹⁶⁵ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 112,

¹⁶⁶ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 110.

¹⁶⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 8.

¹⁶⁸ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 108.

that he can sustain one or several wives materially and economically maintain harmony and peace to prevent jealousy between the wives, and care for his children's needs and moral education.¹⁶⁹ According to Bujo, whoever has not fulfilled the above mentioned criteria in a monogamous marriage cannot enter into polygamous marriage because he would contravene the ancestral statutes by ruining his wives and children and not contributing to the transmission of life in the broader sense as he had received it from the ancestors.¹⁷⁰

There are several reasons which might have contributed to the practice of polygamy in Africa: barrenness, lack of both genders in family, or socioeconomic motives,-that is, the need to have many people to produce enough food to feed a large family.¹⁷¹ Even though there are several reasons to support the traditional African practice of polygamy, there are indications that polygamy was and is unacceptable and recognized as an inauthentic form of marriage in African society.¹⁷² First, the second wife could be a girl or other woman who had broken her virginity prior to marriage or who had given birth out of wedlock and thus no one could marry as a first wife.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷¹ Francisco Javier Urrutia, "Can Polygamy be Compatible with Christianity?" in *African Ecclesiastical Review (AFER)*, vol. 23, no. 5, (1981), 276 – 277. See also Eugene Hillman, "On Polygamy: A Response" in *African Ecclesiastical Review (AFER)*, vol. 23, no. 5, (1981), 292-305; and Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 109-110.

¹⁷² Urrutia, "Can Polygamy be Compatible with Christianity?" 276 – 277. See also Eugene Hillman, "On Polygamy: A Response" in *African Ecclesiastical Review (AFER)*, vol. 23, no. 5, (1981), 292-305.

¹⁷³ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique" in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, 112-116. The practice of purity in sexual matters and virginity are directly attached to the concept of the dignity and vocation of women. The loss of virginity and the births of children out of wedlock are some of the reasons which promoted polygamy in Africa. Nasimeyu-Wasike and other theologians do not include these two reasons for African cultural polygamy, but all others reasons which such theologians give such as socio-economic, religious, political and personal needs, are, according to Nasimiyu-Wasike the reflection of a culture which is repressive and dominated by men. See also Judith Mbula Bahemuka, "Social Changes and Women's Attitude towards Social Changes in East Africa" in *The Will to Arise*, 124-133.

Second, some traditional African marriage rites are performed only once in a lifetime. This tradition proves that monogamy is the ideal in the Bantu and Nilotic traditional society.¹⁷⁴

Third, according to Bujo, the first wife is “the one who really ‘owns’ the marriage.”¹⁷⁵ She is in a privileged position because she is always regarded as the mother of all subsequent wives.¹⁷⁶ The idea of the first women being in a privileged position is reflected in the etymology or meaning of the first wife in the Nilotic Luo and in the Bantu Kikuyu languages. In the Luo language, first wife or senior wife is known as ‘*Mikaye*,’ ‘which means the owner of the seat or throne.’¹⁷⁷

Similarly in the Kikuyu language, the first or senior wife is called ‘*Nyakiambi*,’ which means ‘the one who always is the first,’ or ‘the one who is in charge.’¹⁷⁸ Given these facts, it seems that polygamy was permitted in the society out of convenience to accommodate women who could not otherwise be married as a first wife.

Incidentally, in the cultures which accommodated or tolerated polygamy for the above mentioned reasons, it was an honor for the first wife to see that her husband had more wives after her. This showed people that her marriage was not for her personal interest but for the interest of her husband and the community. This was achieved as the clan was getting larger and larger. She took all the women married to her husband as co-wives, helpers, and

¹⁷⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141.

¹⁷⁵ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 96.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. See also Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 95.

¹⁷⁷ Wilson, “Luo Customary Laws,” 13.

¹⁷⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 94.

companions in community life, while for the husband, it was a sign of prestige and respect that he could manage a large family; therefore he could become a leader or a chief of the community. Also, the greater respect went to the first wife from her community because she was recognized not only as the first wife but also the mother of such a large family. On the other hand, the other wives were also respected and given their honor by the society and they were never considered concubines or prostitutes; each had a certain degree of recognition in order of protocol.¹⁷⁹

Arthur notes that there is the Nilotic Nandi proverb “*Mami tie ne Makituini*” which means no woman will be unmarried for her lifetime because if a woman misses her chance as a first wife, polygamy becomes an alternative.¹⁸⁰ Polygamy is not an ideal marriage custom but was adapted into society out of necessity. Arthur gives reasons for polygamy in traditional African culture. According to him:

It was considered a curse to have either bachelors or spinsters in the community, polygamy was a necessity, as the community had to respect the gift of girls by ensuring that they were married. Polygamy was, therefore, the lesser of two evils, it did provide a basis for marriage of all girls and so the raising of a legitimate family with them.¹⁸¹

Thus polygamy was allowed into the societies which practiced it out of necessity. Arthur thinks that there is an imbalance number of the sexes. But an imbalanced number of the sexes

¹⁷⁹ Wilson, “Luo Customary Laws,” 14.

¹⁸⁰ Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*, 50.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

is not a convincing reason to promote polygamy in Africa. People cannot simply marry more wives because of an imbalance in the numbers of the sexes; if this is the case, then what would happen when the number of boys becomes higher than that of girls, especially in a patriarchal society? Would the system of marriage change so that one woman marries several men? The three theological and anthropological reasons given above seem to be more convincing than the imbalance of sexes suggested by Arthur. Therefore, one can conclude that the claim that polygamy is a traditional system of marriage is not typical to African traditional culture, but is a vice as it may be anywhere else. The practice of polygamy undermines the dignity and vocation of women.

This presentation does not go in-depth into the question of whether polygamy is right or wrong, or good or bad, but simply presents it as a form of marriage which seems to have been allowed into traditional African communities and has significance in its implications in reference to the dignity and vocation of women.

From the argument, it should be clear that polygamy is not an ideal or authentic form of traditional African marriage even although it is practiced extensively in many communities. In spite of many reasons given to justify it, the practice does not promote the dignity and vocation of women even though it may be seen as a lesser evil in some situations.¹⁸² However, in spite of many reasons given in support for polygamy as a traditional form of cultural marriage, the fact remains that it does undermine the dignity of women and it has no respect for the dignity and vocation of women as presented in the

¹⁸² Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*, 50.

biblical creation account from the “beginning,” although the patriarchs of the Old Testament practiced it. The culture of polygamy and any other culture which undermines the dignity and vocation of women can be associated with or linked to the “culture of death” in the words of John Paul II.¹⁸³ Since a woman is a mother of human life, any culture that undermines her dignity and vocation diminishes life itself and contributes to “culture of death.”

This presentation shows an awareness of and necessity for inculturation to allow Christian values to penetrate traditional African culture. Education of both African men and women is needed to promote and integrate new values. The new values of Christian Marriage are discussed in detail in the last chapter of this dissertation about inculturation.

Thus far, this chapter has explained the understanding of marriage and procreation in an African family, especially within the Bantu and Nilotic peoples. Marriage and procreation are seen as one reality in the Bantu and Nilotic family. This reality generally reveals the dignity and vocation of women in the cultural context. In the Bantu and Nilotic communities, life is family-centered. To consider life ‘family-centered’ may raise questions and concern about the place of other vocations such as single life, religious, and consecrated life in the tradition Bantu and Nilotic communities.

¹⁸³John Paul II, “The Gospel of Life Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*,” Vatican translation (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1981), no. 19, AAS 87 (1995):-401-522.

5. Single, Religious, Celibate and Consecrated Life in African Communities

Marriage and procreation are one component in the concept of African communities, especially in the traditional Bantu and Nilotic view of family life. Here, life is family-centered. This means that every young person is expected to participate in marriage and bring up children for the good of the society.¹⁸⁴ If this is true, then one wonders about the value of single, religious, celibate, or consecrated life within the Bantu and Nilotic communities. Can one choose to live the single, religious, celibate or consecrated life as a vocation and still be respected and honored within the Bantu and Nilotic communities?

Certainly marriage and procreation are highly valued within these communities. Traditionally, marriage and procreation are viewed in relation to God as means for continuous life. The mysterious power of God's procreation is revealed through how marriage and procreation is understood in relationship to his people. God created man and woman and commanded them to marry and procreate. Kenyatta observes that "marriage and its obligation occupy a position of great importance" in the life of the whole community.¹⁸⁵ Marriage and procreation are considered forms of fulfillment of God's commandment.

However, the obligation to marry and procreate does not contradict or devalue the vocation to the single, religious, celibate, or consecrated life among the Bantu and Nilotic communities. These vocations are lived in sacrifice to God through service to the community or the people of God. For an African, marriage and procreation are connected to service to

¹⁸⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87. See also Lloyd Fanusie, "Sexuality and Women in African Culture" in *The Will to Arise*, 162-166.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

the community and to God, that is, making sure that the family is not extinguished and at the same time fulfilling the Commandment of God to increase and multiply.¹⁸⁶ Kenyatta confirms that it is the “desire of every member of the tribe to build up and prolong his own family group, and by this means to extend and prolong his clan.”¹⁸⁷ Therefore, entering into matrimonial union and procreation are regarded as the first and most sacred duties of a young man and woman to fulfill.¹⁸⁸ However, those who choose not to marry for the sake of God’s Kingdom and for the service of the community have an even higher and more respected place in the community. Celibacy for a purpose or as a sacrifice for a higher cause is not a new thing in traditional African communities, especially among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes.

For example, among the Luo community, as well as among other tribes of the Bantu and Nilotic of Kenya, there are people who choose to abstain from a sexual union for several days, weeks, and months before they perform certain ritual rites as a sacrifice pleasing to God. The leader of that sacrifice would abstain from a conjugal union in order to offer a pleasing sacrifice to God. The abstaining would be just for that particular period of time, not for the whole of a person’s life. Therefore, to see an individual offering a lifetime of celibacy for the sake of God’s kingdom and for the service of the community is considered a greater sacrifice than that of married life and thus given respect and honor in the traditional African communities. For example, an ordained priest is called ‘*Jaduong*’ in the Luo language, meaning an elder, a title of honor which is given only to people who have achieved certain

¹⁸⁶ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 123.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

stature in a community.¹⁸⁹ Sometimes, in a community, ‘*Jaduong*’ has both spiritual and political powers over his community.

When he leads people in a ritual sacrifice, he is referred to as ‘*Jadolo*,’ in the Luo language, which means the one who presides over (presbyter), or *Jabilo* - one who heals.¹⁹⁰ Wilson points out that each clan within the Luo community has its own type of such a person whose function was sometimes to serve as both a chief and a diviner (healer).¹⁹¹ Such a man or woman was required to abstain from sexual intercourse for several days before leading the community in offering a sacrifice for a particular need. The Luo people believe that the greatness of the sacrifice is measured by the purity of heart of the leader. This involves self-sacrifice and a deeper relationship to the ancestors in order to present the needs of the community to God.

Therefore, the idea is that religious life, priesthood, and consecrated life are gifts in the highest service to God and the community. This is in line with the African concept of religion and spirituality, which is experienced in ‘relationships.’¹⁹² According to Evan M. Zuesse, the more one lives a sacrificial life, the more power and transcendence one has, for power flows through relationship with God to the community.¹⁹³ Africans consider priests and religious people who live a celibate life to be in a certain special state of relationship

¹⁸⁹ Wilson, “Luo Customary Laws,” 3.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Evan M. Zuesse, “Perseverance and Transmutation in African Traditional Religions,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, edited by Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 173. See also Charles Nyamiti, “The Church as Christ’s Ancestral Mediation,” in *The Church in Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, edited by J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1990), 129-168.

¹⁹³ Zuesse, “Perseverance and Transmutation,” 173.

with God. Therefore, they possess a certain power that helps their ministry to the community.¹⁹⁴ Most Africans have no problem embracing the religious life, priesthood, or consecrated life, or showing reverence to the women and men who choose not to marry for the sake of God's kingdom.

However, single life without any religious attachment or communal service attached to it for the sake of God is not acceptable. One who lives a single life for its own sake may be looked at with suspicion and fear. This is because marriage and procreation are considered to be commands from God; therefore, refusing to marry without a considerable reason is viewed as disobeying this commandment which could be a very bad omen for the community. Mbiti notes that the one who refuses to marry is "a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a law-breaker, he is not only abnormal but 'under-human.'"¹⁹⁵ Kenyatta agrees with Mbiti that such a person is seen as an offense to the Creator and to the community in which one belongs.¹⁹⁶ He brings fear in the community because disobeying God's commandment would result in natural calamities like earthquakes, heavy rains which cause floods, or plague which may take many lives.

These beliefs cannot be scientifically proven but are very significant in understanding the concept of life in traditional African communities. The Kikuyu people believe that God can punish the whole community because of one person having neglected God's command of marriage.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, single life out of choice, that is, when a young man or woman

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 133.

¹⁹⁶ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

chooses to remain single on his/her own without any religious reason is considered living without a purpose or rejecting the vocation as a gift.¹⁹⁸ Among African communities the belief in vocation as a gift is meaningful in relation to total service to the people/community just as in the Catholic Church vocation to priesthood, religious or consecrated life. What is important in vocations is commitments to serve God and his people. The concept of religious communities reflects the African concepts of family, community, and clan as explained earlier. However, the relationship between man and woman is essential in building a good family, community, and a bond within a clan. This bond depends to the greatest extent on the relationship between man and woman within the traditional family.

6. The Relationship between Man and Woman in the Traditional Bantu and Nilotic Family in Reference to the Dignity and Vocation of Women

In most African communities, especially in the traditional Bantu and Nilotic communities, the relationship between boys and girls and men and women are clearly set forth in traditional cultural norms. If one follows them well, he or she avoids conflict. Bujo notes that every judgment about the position of man and woman in traditional African society has to “start from the concept of life.”¹⁹⁹ For Africans, imparting life is the “highest commandment and all members of lineage are called to promote this life both individually

¹⁹⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 133.

¹⁹⁹ Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 123.

and jointly.”²⁰⁰ Therefore, the relationship between man and woman is devoted to the promotion of life and is supported in African cultural systems.

For example, Anna Mary Mukamwezi Kayonga, notes that “culturally, males are encouraged from childhood to think of themselves as invulnerable, as above weakness. Females, on the other hand, are both subtly and overtly taught to think of themselves as entirely vulnerable and in need of the protection of the male.”²⁰¹ This way of thinking influences the role and the position of man and woman within the family and community in general. The young people learnt by observing the rhythm of nature, from socialization, and through traditional oral stories taught from early age through the initiation period.

From such cultural influences, whether conscious or unconscious, it is common to hear statements like “boys behave like men,” and “girls behave like women.”²⁰² In Africa, especially among the Nilotic and Bantu of Kenya, the girls are generally taught from a very young age to tend to things inside the house while boys are responsible for the external affairs of ‘home.’²⁰³ For example, girls are responsible for cooking and cleaning of the home,

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Anna Mary Mukamwezi Kayonga, “African Women and Morality” in *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christian Christianity*, edited by J. N. K. Mugambi and A. Nasimiyu-Wasike (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1992), 140. Note that cultural distinctions of what boys and girls should do and not do are values in traditional communities, but they also have causal and reactions among other cultures, e.g. feminists who may look at them as expressions of patriarchal domination. It is not possible to divide human experience into male and female traits. It is possible to discuss the differences in male and female behaviors and values which have developed from the impact of cultural force.

²⁰² M. N. Getui, “The Family, the Church and the Development of Youth” in *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, edited by J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publishers Ltd, 1990), 75.

²⁰³ Ibid. Note that ‘home’ is a marked boundary in which there are several houses built by extended family members. Although some people may have houses in different towns and cities where they are working, when a Nilotic Luo dies the body must to be taken for burial to his traditional home which they believe is the place where human life begins and ends. In other words, a traditional African home is the shrine of human life. The Bantu, and especially the Kikuyu people, bury the body on the ancestral land, which they still call home.

while boys are responsible for caring for cattle and defending their sisters. By the time of the initiation ceremony, young men and women are already aware of their duties and roles. They also know the relationship between man and woman in their communities.

The relationship between boys and girls is again strengthened by their education during the initiation period; girls stay away for several days while being taught, among other things, what it means to become a good wife and a mother in the family.²⁰⁴ Young men have a similar rite to prepare them to become husbands and fathers in the family.²⁰⁵ Both go through very tough training ceremonies which help them carry out and appreciate their responsibilities in life. In reality, boys are taught to respect the gifts God has inscribed in their bodies and prepare for all the challenges and responsibilities of being a man. Similarly, the young women are taught to respect the gifts God has inscribed in their bodies and be prepared for the challenges and responsibilities of being a woman.

It is obvious from the human body that a man cannot become a mother and a woman cannot become a father. These differences are given in nature by God and they point to a mutual relationship which serves as the basis for theological anthropology. Most African women, especially the Bantu and Nilotic women, have always been proud to achieve the

Therefore, home is very significant and symbolic. Considering a woman to be the owner of a home is understood in connection to her role in the family and its values. 'Home,' is also like a sacred shrine of the family to which all family values can be referred.

²⁰⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 75-86. The initiation ceremony is the highest ritual ceremony that defines manhood and womanhood with all its challenges and responsibilities in life. If the presumption is that gender is constructed by the societies, in Africa this would have been the forum where such a claim could have taken its root. But none of the traditional African society questioned the original vocation of being a mother or being a father. It is generally believed that what man and woman is, is given by God that needs a mutual responsibility and cooperation.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. Note that division of labor is not be positively accepted in other cultures since modern society claims equality, but equality should not undermine cultural values.

peak of their natural dignity and vocation as mothers and eventually become grandmothers. There is a common saying in most African tribes that, “behind a great man stands a woman,” and it fits very well in the understanding of the traditional relationship between a man and a woman in the Bantu and Nilotic societies. Judith M. Bahemuka observes that:

Over the years, the African woman has played major roles in the socio-economic, political, cultural, and religious development of the society. Traditionally, women played the role of providing food for subsistence, were primary socialising agents, giving values, aspirations, and moral foundation to their children and, therefore, being the pillars for the construction of balanced societies.²⁰⁶

What Bahemuka observes as an African woman theologian is true, but traditionally, women did all their wonderful work behind the scenes. They were proud to be called “women” as a title of respect and honor.

This is confirmed by Odinga, who is not a theologian but a well-known and renowned elder. He notes that giving responsibilities to women in the formation of children’s character and care for food is not “really a harshness directed to woman, but an insistence that women are the custodians of children and their educators.”²⁰⁷ He holds that the role of women in society is very important. In actual fact, the relationship between a husband and wife is very carefully distinguished and culturally supported. Therefore, Odinga insists in his

²⁰⁶ Judith M. Bahemuka, “Rising from the Ashes,” in *AMECEA Documentation Service, ADS3*, /4 1995, nos. 433/4, (1st February, 1995), 1. See also Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 123-132.

²⁰⁷Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru*, 11.

wisdom that: “We are taught that a good statesman would not give precipitate judgment, but would defer his decision; when an elder said ‘I must consult the pillow before I make a judgment’ it was understood that he would discuss it with the woman.”²⁰⁸ A “pillow” is the resting place of the head. But in this context, the head does not use the ‘pillow’ only for resting but also for seeking knowledge and wisdom. This indicates that the relationship between a man and woman in traditional African society is a mutual relationship. Thus, African women, especially the Bantu and Nilotic women, are proud to be the mothers of kings, chiefs, bishops and priests, doctors, judges, and all those whom any society may consider to be important. This womanly pride points out that one becomes what one is in society by first being born of a woman.

In the Bantu and Nilotic traditional communities, the relationship between man and woman is based on traditional cultural values.²⁰⁹ For one to understand the relationship between man and woman in traditional African societies and appreciate it, one has to understand traditional cultural values. Therefore, it is difficult to justify the positions of some foreign anthropologists who do not understand the fundamental role women play in African society and draw wrong conclusions about the position of women in African societies.²¹⁰ Traditional culture and customs provide complementary roles whereby men and women know their duties and positions in the family. The relationship has both theological and

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 12.

²⁰⁹ Sharma, *Women of Africa*: 34. See also Kitembo, Magesa and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 85. See also Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, “Interpreting Old Testament Polygamy Through African Eyes” in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Mayknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 88.

²¹⁰ Sharma, *Women of Africa*, 35. Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Polygamy: A Feminist Critique,” 101. See also Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 123.

anthropological foundations with its purpose being to protect and promote human life. However, in some cases, where the individual rights of men and women are not respected, such customs may undermine the dignity and vocation of women. It is, therefore, the mission of the African Bishops and theologians to identify traditional customs which do not promote and support human life. The following chapter presents a reflection of the African Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1994 and the thoughts of theologians on the “Church-as-Family” in reference to the dignity and vocation of women.

7. Conclusion

There are many good values in the African family which can be developed in light of the gospel to become truly Christian values in reference to the dignity and vocation of women. Pope John Paul II was aware of this possibility. When he came to Nairobi, Kenya, to commemorate the Synod of African Bishops in September 1995, the Pope expressed a hope that African theologians “would work out the theology of the Church-as-Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church.”²¹¹ This is possible only if one understands the African concept of life, family, marriage and all of its stages and processes, and understands finally the relationship between a man and a woman in traditional African society. All these together show the values of the African family which is like the image of the “Church-as- Family.”

²¹¹ John Paul II, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*,” Vatican translation (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications, 1995), no. 63. AAS 88 (1996): 55-71.

The image of the ‘family’ is significant in an understanding of the model of the African “Church-as-Family.” This was presented and discussed during the African Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1994, and then in 1995 the Pope wrote the “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*.” Since then the African Church: Bishops, theologians and Christian communities have been promoting the image of the African “Church-as-Family.”²¹² This image has emerged even more clearly during the recent African Synod of Bishops in 2009 but still has not stipulated clearly the dignity and vocation of women as mothers and wives. Thus, the following chapter examines the dignity and vocation of women in light of the African Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1994 and the thoughts of African theologians regarding the African “Church-as-Family.”

²¹² *The African Synod: Pope’s Opening Homily, Message of the Synod, Message of the AMECEA and IMBISA* Paulines Publications Africa, no 28, May 1994. The “Church-as-Family” implies the creation of the small communities within family circles, a group of families living in the same neighborhood, or sometimes called or basic ecclesial communities. Such are the cells of the “Church-as-Family.” Here, Christians are called to experience African traditional family life, concretely and authentically experience fraternity in Christian life.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AFRICAN SYNOD OF BISHOPS IN ROME IN 1994 AND THEOLOGIAN'S ON HOW THE “CHURCH-AS-FAMILY” REFLECTS THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN

1. Introduction

This chapter demonstrates that the title “Church-as-Family,” chosen by the Synod of Bishops of Africa in 1994 to describe the African Church reflects the dignity and vocation of women in the African context of the family. According to the teachings of John Paul II as expressed in both *Mulieris Dignitatem* and *The Theology of the Body*, the dignity and vocation of women comes from God and is given in nature, therefore, it is applicable to every woman in any culture.¹

The agenda for the discussions at the Synod in Rome was based on responses to the questions of the *Lineamenta* document, which had been sent out to all the dioceses of Africa five years before the Synod.² Bishop Dennis H. de Jong desired that, “All bishops, priests, pastoral workers and people in the small communities should be involved” in this great event

¹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29, the dignity and vocation of women is “something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships which, in the most varied ways, shape society and structure the interaction between all persons-men and women.” See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 161, the dignity and vocation of women is revealed in the identity of human nature; duality on the other hand shows, on the basis of this identity, that constitutes the masculinity and femininity of created human being.

² Aylward Shorter, *The African Synod: A Personal Response to the Outlined Document* (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul Publications, 1991), 12 – 20. The *Lineamenta* was a preparatory document with questions sent out in preparation for the Synod of the Bishops for Evangelization in Africa. This document was sent from the Synod secretariat office in Rome to be used for the preparation agenda in 1989, five years before the Synod. See also Dabula Mpako, “The African Synod,” in *Inculturation in the South African Context* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 56.

concerning the African Church.³ At the time of the Synod, all members were aware of the main issues for discussion of the needs of the African Church. The views of the whole African continent were presented for proper theological and pastoral guidance by the Church.

One of these matters, which the bishops and theologians discussed often, was the concept of the “Church-as-Family” of God in Africa. This idea emerged from the *Lineamenta* document under the theme “family.” This theme appeared in almost every report in the discussions. The fact that the idea of the “family” recurred several times and formed the theme of the Synod under the image of the African “Church-as-Family,” presupposes that the concept of fatherhood and motherhood are honorable in traditional African culture. Fatherhood and motherhood form the content of the family. But the concern of this dissertation is to show that motherhood is a gift from God, inseparable from womanhood and integral to the dignity and vocation of women in traditional African theological anthropology, and that since the teachings of John Paul II concerning the dignity and vocation women is for all women, therefore, it is applicable to the traditional African family of the Bantu and Nilotic of Kenya.

The African respect for the dignity and vocation of women is evident in the concept of the “family.” This respect is evident through the role that women play in their families.

Mwaura points out that:

³ *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 31, 30th July 1990, p. 10. See also, *The African Synod: Pope's Opening Homily, Message of the Synod, Message of the AMECEA and IMBISA Bishop* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), no.31.

Women in Africa are the evangelizers of their families. As mothers, “they pass on life to their children and bring them up. They are their teachers, counselors, and spiritual directors. ... they provide trust without which they cannot develop properly, acquire personal identity and self-esteem.”¹

Such respect confirms the idea of the Synod that “the vitality of the Church-as-Family ... can only be effective insofar as all our Christian families become authentic domestic Churches.”² It is within the families that vitality of motherhood reaches the image of the Holy Family, the richness of the love which is the heart of God.³ The idea of the ‘family’ during the Synod appeared in almost every discussion.

John Mary Waliggo, one of the African theologians in the preparatory committee who also participated in the discussions during the Synod, pointed out that the recurring concept of the “family” in almost all the discussions points to something special about the traditional African family.⁴ Therefore, it is important to find out what is special and specific in the “family” in reference to the dignity of motherhood in the traditional African family. In Africa, the discussion on the dignity and vocation of women has never been considered except in the “family,” therefore, the concept in the African family is key to understanding the dignity of motherhood. This presumption is based on the fact that family cannot be

¹ Philomena Njeri Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization: A Challenge to the Church in the Third Millennium,” in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections of the 21st Century*, edited by Nahashon W. Ndung’u and Philomena N. Mwaura (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 131.

² *The African Synod: Pope’s Opening Homily, Message of the Synod, Message of the AMECAE and IMBISA Bishops*, no. 27. Paulines Publications Africa, 8 May 1994.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Mary Waliggo, “‘The Synod of Hope’ at the Time of Crisis in Africa,” in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, edited by Maura Browne, SND, Africa Faith & Justice Network (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 208.

significant without special recognition of a woman in her dignity and vocation as the mother of human life.

In Africa, the concept of the ‘family’ is significant in almost all the tribes. African life is family-centered. It may be that the Synod members chose the image of the “Church-as-Family” because it is common in traditional Africa and can be found in other cultures as well. Otherwise, they would have chosen more developed and popular themes of the Second Vatican Council such as the “People of God” or the Church as “Communion.” For Africans, the concept of the ‘family’ expands organically to ‘communion’ with the people of the clan. The ‘People of God’ concept is also accepted within African culture since they believe that God is the Creator.⁵

Incidentally, John Paul II seemed to understand the spirit of the African ‘family’ when he said that the fundamental concept of life is ‘family.’ He notes: “In African culture and tradition, the role of the family is everywhere held to be fundamental. Open to this sense of the family, of love and respect for life, the African loves children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of God.”⁶ The Holy Father saw the reason “The Bishops of Africa cannot talk about inculturation without talking about the family, since ‘African traditional culture is

⁵ Oliver Alozie Onwubiko, *The Church in Mission in the Light of Ecclesia in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 89. Onwubiko includes the relationship between the ‘mother Church’ and the ‘daughter churches.’ In Africa, the image of the Church is familiar because of its reference to the family relationship. See also *The African Synod Pope Opening Homily Message of the Synod, Message of the AMECEA and IMBISA Bishops* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), no. 24. Here, the Pope sees the image of the Church not only common and familiar to the culture but also an authentic expression of human culture. According to him, African family relationship is an authentic to the domestic church, whereby fathers, mothers and children participate in their roles.

⁶ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 43.

centered on the family.”⁷ According to Maura, that is why the Synod affirmed that Africans recognize ‘family’ as the cradle of human life or ‘family’ as the center of human life.⁸

This fact about family is evident; when foreigners come to the continent they recognize the unique African family life. For example, when Pope Paul VI first visited Uganda, he recognized that the ‘family’ is very dear to the African culture. He said that “... even if it is the same everywhere, to some extent, it is so extraordinarily widespread and deeply rooted that it is rightly considered a mark of African tradition in general.”⁹

Similarly, Pope John Paul II observed that within the family ties, “Africans have a profound religious sense, a sense of sacred, of the existence of God the Creator and a spiritual world.”¹⁰ And because African traditional culture is centered on the family:

Africa cannot flourish unless its families survive present social upheavals. The African family must find new strength, reaffirm the positive values contained in tradition, and assimilate a more personal dimension of understanding, commitment and love.¹¹

Therefore, it is important to examine what makes the ‘family’ so special and unique in Africa and perhaps someone may apply elsewhere in the world.

⁷ Maura Browne, SND, ed., “Our Bishops Want Family on Synod Agenda: Inter-regional Meeting of Bishops of South Africa (IMBISA),” in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, edited by Maura Browne, SND, Africa Faith & Justice Network (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 46.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*, translated from Italian by Fr. Pascal Mwambi (Bologna, Italia: Dehona Bologna, 1979), no. 11, page 1411, AAS 66 (1979) 1963-1967.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 42.

¹¹ John Paul II, “Address to the Laity in Harare, Zimbabwe on September 11, 1988,” quoted in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, edited by Maura Browne, SND, Africa Faith & Justice Network (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 45.

If it is true that the trademark of African life is that it's centered in the "family;" and, the woman is considered within the traditional Africa not only as the mother of an individual person but also of the family, then the dignity and vocation of women must be a special and fundamental feature of African culture.

Tempels points out that woman as a mother is at the center of the African family.¹² According to him, the role and the position of a woman in the family is a 'religious ontology,' which means, being in relation with God, the giver of human life and community.¹³ The concept of religious ontology asserts the hierarchical position of motherhood in the family. The divine power of life is seen to flow through a woman, and respect for this status is a belief that governs the moral life in the family. This special status of women in the family is generally accepted in almost all African tribes.

Even though the dignity and vocation of women is respected in almost in all the tribes of Africa, it is rarely discussed; but the women remain the backbone of the family and fundamental in the moral formation of the family.¹⁴ A family with a good mother, with the support of a father, imparts deep moral values to the children. The result is a harmony, reflected in the daily activities of the family in the community.

The dignity and vocation of a woman is reflected in her life as mother and wife. The respect and honor given to African women as mothers have sustained traditional African

¹² Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 61, See also Bujo, *African Morality*, 50.

¹³ Temple, *Bantu Philosophy*, 61. See also Waliggo, "The African Clan," 117. 'Religious ontology' here means that her very being a woman, the mother of human life evokes religious awareness; a reminder to the family the link with God the Creator of human life through a woman. Therefore, the very being a woman is respected by the community.

¹⁴ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 3. Oginga, *Not Yet Uhuru*, 11.

family values for many years. The Synod insisted that “it is precisely this element of the ... old values of our African family culture,” that will save the African family.¹⁵ Traditional African family values have always prevailed, generation after generation. The traditions are deep and dear to African people.

Accordingly, the Synod affirms that having offspring is of the highest importance in this culture, not only in economic terms but also in spiritual and religious terms. This desire to cherish and foster life and to make great sacrifices for it is a central African value.¹⁶ These values become reality in most special way through a woman as the mother of human life. The values that cherish and foster life are connected to the recognition of the dignity and vocation of women.

It is important to note that during the African Synod of Bishops the discussion on ‘the dignity and vocation of a woman as a mother and wife’ was not treated exclusively on its own as a subject. Theologians treated the dignity and vocation of women through perspectives of the traditional role of women in the family and the family values. The African understanding of the dignity and vocation of women is properly demonstrated in the family. The respect and love for women as mothers is at the heart of traditional African family values.

Therefore, the choice of the Synod to select the image of the African “Church-as-Family” of God is appropriate because the ‘family’ is a common and familiar metaphor for Africans. Woman, as a mother, is at the heart of the traditional African family life. For

¹⁵ Browne, “Our Bishops Want Family,” 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

Africans, the reality of the central theme of the Synod, “Church-as-Family,” comes to be through the role of woman in the traditional family, which points to the dignity of motherhood.

Therefore, this discussion will focus on the view of the Synod on the “Church-as-Family” as buttressed by the traditional role of woman as a mother within the Bantu and Nilotic communities. The discussion will progress through the views of the Synod and theologians on the “Church-as-Family” as buttressed by the traditional role of woman as a mother within the Bantu and Nilotic communities. The chapter will also reflect on the “Church-as-Family” based on theological and anthropological beliefs.

Through the reflections on theological and anthropological beliefs on the dignity and vocation of women, the discussion will show the role of women in the traditional African communities is based on essential values which mesh with the Synod theme the “Church-as-Family.” Thus, a woman is seen as the essential agent of the family values in the African “Church-as-Family” of God. The discussion will also include the role of the African woman in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the “Church-as-Family.” Here, women are seen as the backbone of traditional African communities and in SCCs in the “Church-as-Family.” Their essential role is supported by African theological and anthropological beliefs on the dignity of motherhood.

All these reflections show that, in traditional African communities, there are theological and anthropological beliefs that support the dignity of motherhood. However, because of the theological and anthropological differences in other cultures, the discussion

will highlight some of such differences as challenges to the role of women in the SCCs, namely, the understanding of the ministerial priesthood of Christ and the feminist theological and anthropological understanding of patriarchy. The highlights will point out that there are theological and anthropological values that differ from the African concept of woman. While the content of such differences may not be exhaustively addressed in this presentation they are important for a wider knowledge. The last part, the conclusion, will be the synthesis of this chapter.

2. The Views of the Synod and Theologians on the “Church-as-Family” as Buttressed by the Traditional Role of Woman as Mother within the Bantu and Nilotic Communities

For Africa, the reality of the central theme of the Synod and the theologians, the “Church-as-Family” of God, comes to be through the role of the woman in the traditional family, the woman as mother. For example, the image of the “Church-as-Family” implies a responsibility to nourish the spiritual, moral, and material life of the faithful and the entire people of God. The Church is both sacred and human, but the image of the “Church-as-Family” implies a central role for women in the culture. The sacred gift of women as mothers is not limited to the traditional African culture but is open to other cultures which perceive similar theological and anthropological concepts of women.

In Africa, human life is considered so sacred that an inherent respect is given to the woman as the mother of human life. As a mother, a woman has a more fundamental sacred

responsibility than the father to accept human life, nurture it, and offer the first moral and spiritual education to the child.¹⁷ Nyabahika points out that, “although man and woman are equal partners, man cannot carry another person in his body for nine months, neither does he bear the pain of giving birth to another life through his flesh, nor does he often possess the patience, sacrificial love and ability to care for the helpless, tender life of a growing person.”¹⁸ The sacred responsibility for the life of a child depends squarely on the mother. The “Church-as-Family” has a similar mission to carry on in society both spiritually and morally. She is also identified as “Holy Mother Church.”

During the Synod, it was clear that the Synod members were very aware of the role of a woman in her motherhood. To confirm this awareness, the Synod recommended that “woman is given ... a place which corresponds to the real importance conferred upon her by the responsibilities she already exercises.”¹⁹ The Synod was convinced that “to educate a woman is to educate a people.”²⁰ The education of a people includes the entire society and starts with the most intimate of her family. The Synod insisted that “woman be given quality formation to prepare her for her responsibilities as wife and mother, but also to prepare her for social careers from which traditional and modern society tend to exclude her without reason.”²¹

¹⁷ Ndyabahika, “Women’s Place in Creation,” 25.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *The African Synod: Pope’s Opening Homily, Message of the Synod, Message of the AMECAE and IMBISA Bishops*, no. 66, page, 32. Paulines Publications Africa, Rome, 8 May 1994. The most specific responsibility which the woman exercises is the responsibility for human life in the family and society.

²⁰ Ibid., no. 67.

²¹ Ibid., no. 66.

In fact, the formation of a woman reaches beyond mere education to the core of her being created as an asset which enlarges her natural gifts, her disposition towards mothering life. The idea of the formation of a woman is linked to the sacred responsibility for life. In African society, “women who had acquired the role of mother were not just mothers to their own children alone but to all children in the neighborhood.”²² It is in such spirit of honor and respect that the Synod proclaims that it is their “desire to render homage to all courageous mothers who consecrate themselves without reserve to their families, who suffer in giving birth to their children and who are ready after that to endure every fatigue and to face every sacrifice in order to transmit to their children the best that is in them.”²³

According to Mwaura, such spirit is confirmed by the Christian women in the Archdiocese of Nairobi who are mothers to all in the family of God.²⁴ They extend motherly care to their neighborhood and in a special way in Small Christian Communities. Small Christian communities are unique in Africa; they were initiated and promoted by the African Synod of Bishops.

The Synod was convinced that the charism of the “Church-as-Family” depends centrally on women-folk, be they married or living the consecrated life.²⁵ As participants in the mystery of procreation, women are the source of hope for the continent in the times of

²² Philomena Njeri Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization: A Challenge to the Church in the Third Millennium” in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections of the 21st Century*, edited by Nahashon W. Ndung’u and Philomena N. Mwaura (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 132. See also Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 6. According to Kenyatta, when a woman reaches the stage of motherhood, “Her name becomes sacred and she is highly respected not only by her children but by the all members of the community.”

²³ *The African Synod: Pope’s Opening Homily, Message of the Synod, Message of the AMECAE and IMBISA Bishops*, Paulines Publications Africa no. 66 .Rome, 8 May 1994.

²⁴ Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization,” 132.

²⁵ *The African Synod: Pope’s Opening Homily*, no. 68.

crisis if they are recognized and encouraged. They are like Mary, the New Eve, the Mother of Christ, the Redeemer of mankind.²⁶ The Synod recognizes all women, in their unique dignity as primary nurturers of human life, are fundamental to a vibrant Church. The Synod also encourages consecrated women “to persevere in their holy vocation and assume joyfully the grace of spiritual motherhood that Christ offers in the Church.”²⁷

The role of women in the family is very important. Family values cannot be fruitful unless they are taught and lived in the family. Values cannot function unless they are practiced as well as taught. Moreover, moral values, especially, survive when they are taught, witnessed, and passed on to the next generation. In such cases, women are the first and the best teachers in families. Mwaura, points out that:

Women in Africa are the evangelizers of their families. As mothers they pass on life to their children and bring them up. They are their teachers, counselors, and spiritual directors. In the “miniature church,” they provide the trust without which they cannot develop properly, acquire personal identity and self-esteem. This enables them to relate positively with others outside the home.²⁸

The image of the “Church-as-Family” requires and assumes that women in the traditional family foster specific theological and anthropological values. Women teach children their roles in society, respect for others, and social responsibilities.

²⁶ Ibid. no. 69.

²⁷ Ibid., no. 66.

²⁸ Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization,” 131.

By choosing the image of the “Church-as-Family,” the Synod fathers and theologians have expressed their belief and convictions that African Christians should experience love in the Holy Mother Church and feel comfortable as they do in their traditional families and communities. This belief and conviction comes from respect and honor for the dignity and vocation of women as mothers because of their central role in the traditional African family. The image of the “Church-as-Family” of God reveals and extends the theological and anthropological beliefs of the African people.

3. The “Church-as-Family” Based on the Theological and Anthropological Beliefs

The image of the “Church-as-Family” has theological and anthropological beliefs which can support the dignity and vocation of motherhood in the African family. The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 32, acknowledges that the Church has a basic structure of human family ties. The Council states that:

In revealing the Father’s love and men’s sublime calling, he made use of the most ordinary things of social life and illustrated his words with expressions and imagery from everyday life. He sanctified those human ties, above all family ties, which are the basis of social structures.²⁹

Gaudium et Spes no. 40 reads that, “the dignity of the human person, the community of mankind, and the deep significance of human activity provides a basis for discussing the relationship between the Church and the world and the dialogue between them.”³⁰ This unifying concept of the relationship between the Church and the world also provides a basis

²⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 32. See also John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 40.

for the use of familiar language in the discussion of the family. Family is the basic experience that expresses human relationships. Thus the Council acknowledges Christ as the head of the Church which is easy to understand because the concept of the ‘head of the family’ is a common experience in natural family life.

Although the concept ‘head of the family’ is that of a male in the traditional African family, it is analogous to love between a man and a woman. It is possible to understand the love between man and woman as analogous to the supernatural love of God as the head of human family and, at the same time, the source of human life. The experience of love within the family gives a sense of the supernatural love of God in the “Church-as-Family.” The experience of love in the traditional African family stems from the love of women in their central role in the family. The role of women in the family is that of the ‘religious ontology.’ The idea of ‘religious ontology’ will be explained in the reference to the traditional African woman. In this context, the analogy is an attempt to understand how love and life which are of God can be expressed in a special way in the love between man and a woman in a family.

Gaudium et Spes, no. 40 expresses that the love of God exists in the “Church-as-Family.” Here, God’s love is compared to the love which the father of the family has for the rest of the members. In a theological sense, this love proceeds as follows:

From the love of the eternal Father, the Church was founded by Christ in time and gathered into one by the Holy Spirit. It has a saving and eschatological purpose which can be fully attained only in the next life. But it is now present here on earth and is composed of men; they, the members of earthly city, are called to form the family of the children of God even in this present history of

mankind and to increase it continually until the Lord comes. ... this family has been 'constituted and organized as a society in the present world' by Christ and 'provided with the means adopted to its visible and social union.'³¹

The visible and social union between Christ and the Church is analogous to the union in marriage of the family between a man and a woman consolidated and perfected by the unity which Christ established here on earth among the children of God.³²

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah compares God to a nursing mother in the family relationship. He asks, "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb?" (Is. 49:15).³³ And in the New Testament, various writings, speak of the Church as "the household of God" (cf. Eph. 2:19).³⁴ These biblical theological images are consistent with the traditional African understanding of the family and the role of the woman as the center of the family. In Africa, a mother has implications beyond a single family and one man. The role of a mother extends beyond a single family to the clan and community with theological implications. In the traditional Bantu and Nilotic family, marriage is a communal covenant. The marriage covenant is not only between the man and woman but also between both families and the clans. In reality, the Second Vatican Council and

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 42.

³³ Isaiah 49:15 refers to the maternity of God. Some African tribes, like the Luo and the Kikuyu tribes of Kenya, compare the tenderness of the love of God to the tenderness of a mother's love. Some African languages, like Kiswahili, do not have different words for "begets" and "bear." God begets and bears as well. For instance, the Swahili word "*Kuzaa*" is applicable to both a man and a woman. Similarly, the Luo people of Kenya have one word "*Nyuol*," which means both to "bear" and to "beget" and is applicable to both a man and a woman.

³⁴ See also 1 Tm. 3:15; 1 Pt. 4:17. Theologically, Jesus is in a family relationship with his disciples (Mt 12:49, Mk 3:33-34, Lk 8:21), where those who hear the word of God and keep it are "my mother and brothers;" (Jn 19:26-27), where Jesus' mother Mary becomes the mother of John and he her son; Mt 28:10, and where Jesus speaks of the disciples as "my brothers."

Scriptures offer some theological and anthropological insights into the beliefs on the “Church-as-Family” of God but Western sense of the Family.

However, the Synod Fathers understood family, first of all, in the African sense.³⁵ Given that in Africa the dignity and vocation of motherhood are inherent in the African understanding of the family, the theme of the “Church-as-family” resonates with traditional anthropological understandings and significance in light of the family. Therefore, searching for the theological beliefs of the family through the Council and Scriptures is important for understanding the African theological reflections. They give sense to the theological beliefs of the ‘family’ which, for Africans, point to the dignity of motherhood. The Council and Scriptures reflect the theological and anthropological beliefs of the image of the “Church-as-Family.”

According to the Council, the revelation of God’s kingdom is often presented through various images in the Old Testament that are familiar to people. They are taken “either from the life of the shepherd or cultivation of the land, from the art of building or from the family and marriage, these images have their preparation in the book of the prophets.”³⁶ Here, the Council shows that the theological interpretations and applications of the image of the Church are not limited to a particular object or theme; any image can be considered depending on the significance of that image in reference to the life and culture of that particular community.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63. The African sense of the family emphasizes blood relationship and traces this relationship through the woman, the mother of the family in internal relationship and the man as the father and external protection.

³⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 42.

The choice of the image must, however, be considered in reference to the culture of the people and should not contradict either Christian or ethical values. Therefore, the choice of the African Synod of Bishops of the “Church-as-Family” brings together a theological and anthropological understanding which, in Africa, is deeply rooted within the traditional African culture.

There is a theological and anthropological link between the “Church-as-Family” of God and the dignity of motherhood seen as in the mystery of God’s creation. God is the Creator of human life carried on through the human family in the relationship between a man and a woman. In the mystery of procreation, the cooperation of woman is special and particularly linked to her being a woman, the very bearer of life. In her ontological structure, the woman has the capacity to receive and carry life in her body, the womb.

The Synod and the African theologians were aware of the significant role of women in traditional African families and they wished to promote women’s influence in the life of the “Church-as-Family” as they care for human lives and families. The influence of women is evident in their role in traditional African communities, serving as enriching as models in the Christian African “Church-as-Family,” with its theological reflections.

4. The Role of Women in Traditional African Communities and the “Church-as-Family”: Theological Reflections

As explained above, the model of the African “Church-as-Family” of God is a biblical image. Being a biblical image presupposes that it is also theological in nature, that is from its foundation. Jesus Christ is the founder of the Church. This section explains the role

of women in traditional African communities, the “Church-as-Family” from a theological perspective in light of the Synod. The role of the Women in the “Church-as-Family” of God theologically is analogous to the role of women in traditional African communities.

The theological role of women in the “Church-as-Family” of God and the role of women in the traditional African communities is analogous in character. Jesus entrusted the whole life of the faithful to the Church just as God entrusts the life of an infant to its mother. The Church is like a mother because she carries the spiritual life of the faithful. The baptized are in the care of the Church, the Holy Mother. It is possible to compare theologically the role of a mother to that of Jesus Christ and God the Father in the “Church-as-Family.”

In the traditional African family, the mother is the first to introduce all the teachings and moral traditions of the clan and the tribe to her children.³⁷ The Church has a similar mission through her teaching, administration of the sacraments, and works of charity. The Church is the mother of the people of God. She is the pillar and the promoter of family values and the truth about life.

The lives of children are entrusted to the care of mothers. The molding of children’s character is in their hands. Naturally, there is a closer bond between the mother and her offspring than the father and the child. This close bond may come from the natural ties from the blood and the air they share during the nine months in the womb. The caring here does not mean that mothers do not need help and support from their husbands. The help and support of a man is essential, but the emphasis here is on the role of the woman.

³⁷ Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru*, 11, See also Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*; and Wilson, “Luo Customary Law,” 5.

Remember that African spirit and the names of clans are all derived from the female side of the family, from the mother. Children are well-traced from their mothers.³⁸ In such cultures, the role of woman reflects the centrality of a mother. The African charism of the mother is to be the vital force of family unity through her enduring love. This love of the mother is an active, natural family bond. Through this bond of love, by her teaching and her example, a common stream of values flows to her children.³⁹ Of course, the values given by the woman, who is the very source of her children's life and physical being, are transmitted in mutual cooperation with the father in a traditional family life although the mother plays a major role.

The emotional bond uniting the mother and her child comes through the reality of motherhood. In the African context, being a mother, having become a giver of life for the clan, a woman is recognized as a mother of human life, a mother of the community. Therefore, in the traditional African community, a woman enjoys abundant recognition and privilege in the communities. Kenyatta is correct that the influence and guidance of a mother goes beyond her own family to the clan.⁴⁰ And so the Synod expresses, "to educate a woman is to educate a people."⁴¹

The role of a woman as a mother is theological in nature. Reflecting on the biblical and the theological anthropology of the book of Genesis, recalling the second biblical creation account, when Adam saw Eve, the first woman, he proclaimed: "This one, at last, is

³⁸ Wilson, "Marriage laws and Customs," 114.

³⁹ Wilson, "Luo Customary Law," 5.

⁴⁰ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 4.

⁴¹ *The African Synod: Pope's Opening Homily Message of the Synod, Message of the AMECE and IMBISA Bishops*, Paulines Publications Africa no. 65, Rome, 8 May 1994.

bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (cf Gen 2:23). The first impression one gets here is that of excitement, feelings of joy and warmth. This followed God’s statement, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a suitable partner for him” (cf. Gen 2:18). These words are relevant and meaningful within the natural relationship between man and woman, not only as husband and wife but also eventually as mother and father of children. The natural relationship between man and woman as husband and wife is biblical and at the same time theological in nature. Husband and wife are the principles members of human communities. In Africa, the link from the family to the community is easily traced from the mother to the clan.

The natural feeling, the bond between a mother and her children, reveals the unique role of the mother in the family. Reflection on the ‘family,’ and particularly the link from a woman to the family, aids the understanding of the relationship of man and woman in Genesis. The understanding comes through her natural attraction that is revealed in Genesis. The presence of the first woman, Eve, helped the man, Adam, to become self-conscious and self-determined, thus he overcame natural solitude, ‘loneliness.’⁴² However, from an African understanding, the bride brings to the man (husband), children and clan, a ‘natural sense of belonging and a bond within the family.’ This unity in marriage is augmented in African culture and similar to the teaching of John Paul II. When both partners, husband and wife,

⁴² Gen. 2: 18-24 (The Africa Bible: Biblical Text of the New American Bible), refers to man and woman who were created equal in order to complement each other as partners. As soon as Adam saw the woman, who became his wife, he realized that she was completely different from all other creatures; she is flesh from his flesh, bone from his bones. This is a Jewish expression which means that they are of the same human dignity: For John Paul, the woman in a certain sense, gives meaning to the original unity. The unity of the two, man and woman becoming flesh, is the foundation of the communion of persons.

accept each other as a gift, they become one flesh and all of their children find a home, first in the womb, and then in the family, and then in the clan.⁴³

Both man and woman are complementary partners in family life. In the book of Genesis, the woman comes into the man's life to overcome "original solitude" (cf. Gen.2:18-25).⁴⁴ African culture involves the families at all stages of marriage and at all these stages the woman is at the center. According to John Paul II, the "original solitude" brought the "original unity."⁴⁵ That is the desire of the Creator. "It is not good that the man should be alone; I want to make him a helper similar to himself" (Gen 2:18). The fact that the man is 'alone' brings into focus within itself the "ontological structure" of a woman and gives an authentic reason for being in a relationship.⁴⁶

The "ontological structure" of human beings is evident in sexual differences.⁴⁷ Being a man and a woman in a relationship is relevant here in the sense that it is through the ontological structural difference of the male and female 'body' that the natural desire of the man overcomes his original solitude and stimulates the woman's natural attraction to man.⁴⁸

⁴³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 156. For John Paul II the woman, in a certain sense, gives meaning to the original unity. The unity of the two, man and woman becoming flesh, is the foundation of the communion of persons.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*: 150-160. The original solitude is man without the woman. This state is what is what John Paul calls the "original solitude," therefore it is that state which brought the 'original unity.'

⁴⁶ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The fact that man is alone contains within itself this "ontological structure," and at the same time, it indicates authentic understanding of the sexual differences.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 152. "The 'body,' by which man shares in the visible created world, makes him at the same time aware of being 'alone.'" This reality of being alone, original solitude, is a state of being which is actively searching for meaning and identity. Meaning and identity are realized and fulfilled through the 'original unity' between man and woman in the thought of John Paul II.

In the African thinking, ‘original solitude’ is compared to ‘vital force’ which is not just an empty space, or lack of something, rather it is a power, which reveals itself in (searching), the joy at unity (meeting point) between a man and a woman, eventually with their family and clan.⁴⁹ In African culture, the woman is the center of marriage relationship which brings the woman, man, children, and the clans together.

The theological and anthropological meaning of the ‘original solitude’ involves both “self-consciousness and self-determination.”⁵⁰ Self-consciousness means that of all the created beings, man was aware that there was none like him, and self-determination means that he had freedom to choose (free will) someone who shares his own humanity; he can choose life or death together; he is now not ‘alone.’⁵¹ For this reason, the woman was created as “‘*partner of the absolute*,’ inasmuch as they must consciously discern and choose between good and evil, choose between life and death.”⁵²

It is from this natural attraction between male and female that family members come to experience a common bond existing among the family members in different relationships, as such a husband and wife, a son, or a daughter. The emphasis on this relationship that flows from the “original solitude,” the ‘vital force’ that comes from the desire of man is that, “It is not good that man should be alone” Gen 2:18).

⁴⁹ Nkemnikia, *African Vitalogy*, 166, ‘vital force’ in African thinking is “mediated by the different entities which determine its intensity, grade, kind and species of the daily life, made up of relationships and will.” ‘Vital force’ is an experience beyond a mere sense, it has deeper implications which are revealed in a man and a woman relationship in marriage.

⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 151.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. According to John Paul II, the ‘man,’ whom the account of the first chapter of (Gen 1:27) as “created in his image” means human being, indirectly reveals this man is capable of making a covenant the partnership seen in the light of the second chapter of “I will make a suitable partner for him” (Gen 2:18).

The traditional African theological understandings of the image of the “Church-as-Family” and the role of women do not derive from the book of Genesis, but are central African insight into the ontological position of women in the family. It is important to note that this thesis argues that motherhood is a gift from God, inseparable from womanhood and integral to the dignity and vocation of a woman in the African theological anthropology of the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya. Furthermore, this African understanding is in accord with John Paul II's teaching that the dignity of motherhood is an ontological reality. There is a natural bond between women and men, children, and the clan. This bond is believed to flow from the woman as mother. The presence of a woman evokes reactions. Such natural reactions constitute the attraction between males and females. The attractions may be taken for granted, but if they are carefully examined, they can help in understanding the fundamental role of women in founding a family.

John Paul II understands the theology of the family and the role of a woman as a vital organic link. He brings his reflection to the ‘vital force’ in women. In his understanding, he stated his belief that:

The family has vital and organic links with the society, since it is its foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life: it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself. Thus, far from being closed in on

itself, the family is by nature and vocation open to other families and society, and undertakes its social role.⁵³

This reflection of the Pope is applicable to family universally. African life emphasizes family and community where there is care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue, and trust. John Paul II observed that the most important of all these values is “love and respect for life, the Africans love children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of God.”⁵⁴

In the Bantu and Nilotic communities, marriage is not only a covenant between a man and a woman but also a relationship which involves the families of spouses. This does not mean that the man and the woman are not the principle partners in the marriage relationship. They are, but the Bantu and Nilotic put the emphasis on the woman as the mother of the family. Such emphasis is of a cultural and customary value. In African communities, the emphasis is on the ‘vital force’ that comes through the woman, thus making it possible to unite the family of the woman and the family of the husband and eventually form a clan. From the biblical perspective, the emphasis is on the ‘original solitude’ which brought the ‘original unity.’ That is “The man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body” (cf Gen. 2:24). In Africa, it is the woman who leaves her family to join the husband in his family. Then, the woman becomes the center of unity and a point of reference. The lineage is traced through mothers, not fathers, clans, or tribes as in other cultures.

⁵³ John Paul II, “Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*” Vatican trans. (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications, November 1881), no. 42, AAS 74 (1982).

⁵⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 41.

The African ‘family-clan’ ties in marriage do not contradict the biblical idea of the “original unity” between man and woman: “This one, at least is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). Instead, the African ‘family-clan’ model strengthens the relationship between the wife and the husband, extending it beyond the two persons to others, to the living and departed members, clan, ancestors, and God. The ‘family-clan’ tradition also highlights the dependence of the culture on the stability of marriage and the social consequences of divorce.

In the traditional African family, a woman as a mother draws from the Creator respect, love, security, and a sense of belonging within the family. One observes, among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, that life is ‘family-clan-centered.’ John Mary Waliggo explains ‘family-clan-centered’ value in the traditional culture in terms of “essential and accidental” values in the traditional African cultural context.⁵⁵ One is required to look for the deeper meaning of the ‘essential’ in traditional African culture and general meanings as ‘accidental’ values.

In reflecting on Waliggo’s explanation, ‘essential’ in terms of traditional cultural life in a family is the woman as the mother of the family. She is the mother of human life; the center which binds the family together. Her significant role can also be explained with African wisdom and understood through the following age-old proverb: “No one is without a shadow, and the shadow follows you wherever you go.” This means that no one exists without a mother and the influence of the mother remains with the children throughout their

⁵⁵ Waliggo, “The African Clan as the True Model of the Africa Church,” 119.

lives.⁵⁶ The fundamental roles and values of the woman as a mother add meaning to the dignity of women in the traditional African context of the family.

To continue reflecting on Waliggo's idea, the 'accidental' in the traditional African family constitutes the other members, this including in-laws, brothers and sisters, among others who are brought into the marriage relationship either through the man or the woman. They form part of the traditional African clan/community. However, in the traditional African family set up, each community traces its origin from the woman, the mother of the family. Regarding family values, John Paul II challenges African theologians to "work out the theology of the Family with all the riches contained in the concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church."⁵⁷ In the traditional African family, there are some values which are essential within the family relationship. These values reside in the family, namely, "the richness of love which is the heart of God," among other values.⁵⁸ The traditional typical agent in realizing essential values in the African family context is the woman, the mother of the family. Therefore, a woman can become the agent in the realization of essential values in the "Church-as-Family" of God.

⁵⁶ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 7.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63.

⁵⁸ *The African Synod: Pope's Opening Homily, Message of the Synod, Message of the AMECAE and IMBISA Bishops*, Paulines Publications Africa no. 27, Rome, 8 May 1994. See also John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 42 that talks about the African profound sense of sacred, respect for life, love for children and veneration of ancestors, among others.

5. The African Woman Seen as the Agent in Realization of the Family Values in the “Church-as-Family” of God

Due to contemporary secular influences, when speaking about the African family, the idea should be clear that it is the traditional African family which is being envisaged and not the secular contemporary and modern one.⁵⁹ The vision of the African “Church-as-Family” must reflect a true African family where there is respect, love, sharing and recognition of the invisible beings and of the ‘hierarchy’ of being without any discrimination.⁶⁰ The woman as a mother is the best agent in the realization of the essential traditional African family values. The traditional family believes in the spirit of communion and participation in the traditional African sense.

John Mary Waliggo describes African traditional family values which are characterized by sharing roles that involve every member in the family.⁶¹ The spirit of sharing and involvement is experienced in the traditional African community’s families. In traditional African communities, there is an experience of the spirit of involvement of every member in the life and activities of the family. For example, every member of the family is involved at the celebrations of events such as births, during initiations, marriages, funerals, and other events of life. The involvement gives everyone a sense of belonging, and mothers play crucial roles in imparting the spirit of belonging in each family and community.

⁵⁹ Waliggo, “The Synod of Hope,” 208.

⁶⁰ Temples, *Bantu Philosophy*, 18; Shutte, *Philosophy For Africa*, 52-58; Tihagale, “Saints and Ancestors,” 28-37; and Mulago, “Traditional African Religion,” 120 -121, all these authors show that there is an African concept of ‘hierarchy’ of being. The concept of hierarchy places the woman as a mother ontologically higher in the family in regards to human life.

⁶¹ Waliggo, “The Synod of Hope,” 208.

Cecil McGarry shares a similar sentiment with Waliggo that the traditional African family is the:

most authentic experience of loving relationships, relationships of solidarity, genuine belonging and participating, of loyalty, support, security, self-sacrifice and sharing, within the family, which in Africa is an extended family, including, not only the Ancestors, but also those yet unborn. In the family each one finds true identity as well as their place and role in society. In choosing this image for the Church, the synod fathers were well aware that the family in Africa today is changing, is under threat, even in crisis. Nevertheless, traditionally the family means all these positive values and the Synod fathers wanted to say in the church of Christ all these values are present in an even higher degree, if Christians are truly committed to Christ as his disciples, his brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of one Father.⁶²

Essential traditional family values are typical on the identification of what is the African family. Similarly, there are Christian Gospel values that are essential in identifying what is the “Church-as-Family” of God. In Africa, women are involved in nurturing, caring, and educating their children, but they are also the custodians of traditional family values. Therefore, women are the agents of essential traditional African family values. Because of the women’s significant role in the traditional African family, it is also possible that they can be agents of Christian values in the “Church-as-Family.”

⁶² Cecil McGarry, SJ, ed., *What Happened at the African Synod* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1995), 164.

According to Joseph Israel, women are very important in promoting moral values and caring for human life. Their nurturing and caring role is unique motherhood. In his book, *The Church as the Family: A Theological Pastoral Study with reference to the African Synod*, Israel notes that:

The child is formed and fed in the body of the mother. After the birth of the child, the mother holds a child in her arms with concern, kindness, and attention. She feeds him with milk, protects him from dangers and fear, encourages him, teaches him to speak, to walk, and to know the world around him. In human experience the close bonds between the mother and the child creates a profound love. According to the Old Testament, God has a profound love towards his family like that of a mother and the fruit of her womb. We find the image of God as a mother in the song of Moses. .. (cf. Deut. 32:11).⁶³

Israel confirms the importance of the role of mother in understanding traditional African family values. He believes that the concept of the dignity and vocation of a woman as mother forms part and parcel of traditional family values without which the other family values cannot make any sense.

It is in a similar spirit that the woman is seen as the agent of essential values in the “Church-as-Family.” In most of the traditional African families, the caring and concern of a

⁶³ Joseph Israel, *The Church as the Family: A Theological Pastoral Study with reference to the African Synod* (Roma: N. Domecnici-Pécheux, 1998), 31.

mother is for the good entire family.⁶⁴ A loving mother is not limited to caring for her children only but for the whole family.

Sometimes her self-giving and caring for the family may be misunderstood when she is in public because to casual observers, an African woman may appear like “an adult child.”⁶⁵ But such appearance is not reality “Traditionally, the position of the African woman in the family was not ... as it would seem on the surface.”⁶⁶ Inside her home, “she is mistress over her household. To her husband she is an indispensable partner and supporter. She has a say at every stage of many affairs of the family. She can moderate or even overrule the husband’s decision.”⁶⁷

Moreover, it is mothers who help the children and the family keep and preserve the traditions and values of the clans and tribes. This confirms what Kenyatta says that “when a woman reaches the stage of motherhood she is highly respected, not only by her children, but by all members of the community.”⁶⁸

In the traditional Bantu and Nilotic family dynamic, the woman is the unifying figure in the family; the mother becomes the center of unity. Kenyatta confirms that when a woman becomes a mother “her name becomes sacred and she is addressed by her neighbors and their children as ‘mother of So-and-So.’”⁶⁹ This honor continues her whole life. On her part, she maintains “her prestige by being hospitable to visitors and render assistance to their

⁶⁴ Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 122. See also Anna Melchior, *Mothering: A Spiritual and Practical Approach* (London England: St. Paul Publishing, 2007), 18, 31.

⁶⁵ Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 122.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 6.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

neighbors ... in difficulties or in need.’’⁷⁰ This is the kind of service the Church is expected to render her members.

The Church’s service to her members is possible when there is a close relationship between them like the one which exists within the traditional African family between a mother and her children. According to Kenyatta:

The bond of kinship between the children of the same mother and father is stronger than that of children of one father and different mothers. The feeling between the former is that of inseparables, and it is said that, having slept in the same womb (*maraire nda emwe*), and having suckled the same breast (*mongire nyondo emwe*) they are one another’s flesh and blood, and as such they ought to live for one another.⁷¹

Considering women as agents of the essential values of the “Church as Family” of God, it makes sense to reflect on the bond between the mother in the traditional African family and the children and the community.

The reality of a woman’s nurturing and caring, in a certain sense forms the central role of a mother’s relationship with her children and family members. This close relationship can be better understood in the biblical poetic language found in the Gospel of Matthew. That is, the Mother-hen and her natural desire to gather her chicks: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 7.

wings, but you are not willing” (cf. Mt 23:37). The natural instinct of the Mother-hen in Jesus’ image demonstrates the natural desire and the role of a woman as a mother. It expresses the closeness which children have to the mother. This bond originates long before the child is born; it is the security which babies develop within the womb.

In most traditional African communities, the central role of a woman is part and parcel of the concept of ‘family.’ It is like the concept of religion and God: One cannot talk about religion and ignore the existence of God. Religion presupposes the existence of God. If one mentions religion, even without mentioning the name ‘God,’ the concept is presumed. Similarly, one cannot talk about a traditional ‘family’ and exclude the central role and value of a woman as a mother. The role of a woman and her value in the family may be ignored, overlooked, or undermined, but it is always present despite such ingratitude. Generally, the dignity and vocation of women are silent but very powerful elements in the family. The role of women as mothers in an authentic traditional African family is unquestionable, just as the existence of God in religion is unquestionable for those who believe.

The essential care of the “Church-as-Family” may reasonably be seen as parallel to the role of women in the caring, nurturing, and teaching as mothers in the family. This spirit reminds us the essential role of the African women in the “Church-as-Family.” Mwaura points out that, “Women are also seen as builders of life and have a great capacity to love and give themselves selflessly without counting the cost ‘in order that every human being may have life.’”⁷² She sees women as the ‘sanctuaries’ in which every living person grows.

⁷² Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization,” 129.

Women are more aware of their vocation, and as mothers, have a more profound respect for human life and attachment to their children.⁷³

Mwaura continues in “the multiple work of evangelization women demonstrate a special capacity for implanting deeply the seeds of Christian conviction and for building up, in a hundred ways, the family of God.”⁷⁴ The motherly love of a woman explains why women in the Church have been instrumental in promoting, supporting and preserving certain devotions in the Catholic tradition. Therefore, the growth and flourishing of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa depend more on the active participation of women. The SCCs are primary, supported by the active participation of women in the life of the Church.

The role of women in evangelization begins in the homes, spreads to the communities, neighborhoods, parishes, dioceses, and, eventually, to the world. The Catholic Church in Kenya, as well as in other parts of continent, after the Synod of the African Bishops, adapted the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as the model of the “Church-as-Family” as a means of evangelization. These SCCs can be compared to traditional African families and communities where women are the agents for transmitting/imparting essential traditional African family values.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

6. African Women and Small Christian Communities (SCCs)

The general impression one gets from the Synod is that in Africa, the concept of the “Church-as-Family” is appropriate because of the high regard for ‘family’ in the culture. The high regard for family in African communities implies deep respect and love of women as mothers, the unifying figures in the family. A mother has authority and her authority is not limited to one family but to several families which form the clan and the surrounding communities. In her capacity as a wife and a mother, a woman links several families together with the special love of motherhood.

The image of the “Church-as-Family,” in itself, a positive characteristic of motherhood, confirms the dignity and vocation of women in African society. The role of women in traditional Africa is to protect, preserve, and promote ethical values. The African woman as a mother is significant in the unification of families that together form communities.

In traditional African culture, life is only worth living within the community. Human life is lived and experienced more in the community, specifically within age groups, families, clans, and tribes. Because of the African sense of community, one observes that there is an experience of moral values in the communities. The moral values are tied to the dynamic reverence of a unique sense of sacredness and respect for the dignity of motherhood. The members know each other because of the influence and the shared common origin which is traced through their mothers. In traditional communities, women are available and attend to

the growth and development of their children. In fact, more than the fathers, women nurture and develop a child's personality and sense of morality.

Therefore, the roles of women in the SCCs are similar to those they play in traditional African communities. Thus, adaptation of the SCCs as an avenue for implementation of the resolutions of the Synod and the promotion of the image of the African "Church-as-Family" of God was a confirmation that African men and women, present during the Synod, acknowledge the role of women in their families and communities. Even more so, the choice of the image of the "Church-as-Family" is a promotion of the dignity of motherhood in traditional African communities. One can conclude that the Synod fathers and the theologians honor and love women as mothers.

Nyamiti confirms that a mother:

Surrounds the child with meticulous care, she caresses, nourishes, protects and shelters, she helps, she is patient and effective. Like all female beings the mother is fecund receptivity, warm tenderness, source, and bearer of life, 'veiled gift,' interiority, profundity, intensity, refuge, she is always present, she welcomes and discovers what is delicate. ... The mother is nature, earth, water, sea center or home.⁷⁵

According to Nyamiti, in "the absence of maternal values, the human desire ends by being abolished. Man needs the experience of security, of happiness and original integrity in

⁷⁵ Charles Nyamiti, "The African Sense of God's Motherhood in the Light of Christian Faith," *African Ecclesiastical Review*, (AFER), vol. 23, no. 5 (1981), 272.

order that he may have hope.”⁷⁶ Therefore, the model of the “Church-as-Family” brings to mind the caring experience of the Church as mother of human families. So, the African Church developed the model of SCCs in order to allow the active and individual participation of all Christian members just as they participate in traditional communities.

The Synod of African Bishops promoted the formation of the SCCs which typically mirrors traditional African families and communities. These SCCs act as the links between the Church and the traditional African family life. The Synod wanted to use the experience of the tradition of African families to invoke the spirit of the traditional African community within the Catholic Church. As the Gospel message is read and preached every Sunday, so should the word spread to every member of the family.

The work of evangelization is possible through the participation of women because they are the community unifiers and readily organize weekly meetings in the SCCs. Women in traditional African families are teachers and mothers. Accordingly, they make SCCs resemble African extended families which include clans and neighbors living within a given area.

By identifying the central role of the woman in the family, the African Synod drew a parallel between the heart and the backbone of the Church. The Synod expressed it this way: “the woman stands at the heart of the African family, just as she is the backbone of the Church.”⁷⁷ Africans have a profound religious sense of life, a sense of the sacredness of life,

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ *Message of the Synod Nuntius*, Vatican City, 6/5 1994. See also *The African Synod* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications), no. 28.

the existence of God, and the spiritual world.⁷⁸ In Africa, all women are recognized as mothers whether they are married, religious, or consecrated virgins. The role of women in the family is very significant and, can add moral values in all cultures, but especially the African culture where the family is center of the community.

Experience has shown that in Africa, a Church that has no link to the family is not effective and the Gospel message cannot penetrate into the lives and culture of the people. The consequences of such an experience may force the Christian to live a double life in which he or she may attempt to follow Christian faith on one hand and, on the other hand, traditional African culture. The Church must have a link to the family and African women have proved to play the role of linking family with other members of traditional African communities. Therefore, women can be the best link between the SCCs and the entire “Church-as-Family of God” in terms of Christian faith formation.

On the other hand, the mission and life of the “Church-as-Family” must be wider than that of the African family, clan, and tribe. It must be able to link the faithful to the extended members of the Christian families who are united by the faith and the grace of baptism and not by the clan. Today, because cultures are mixing and spreading, even in the smallest possible church in any town in Kenya, or any part of Africa, one finds various nationalities and people from different cultures of the world. The structure of the SCCs as modeled on the traditional African family, has a wider vision than that of traditional African

⁷⁸ Ibid.

communities and is open to members from different communities, backgrounds, and nationalities living near each other and sharing the same faith and social environment.⁷⁹

The main aim of SCCs is to strengthen and support traditional African family values and share them with other communities of different backgrounds and cultures.⁸⁰ It is also to strengthen its members and to encourage them to grow in Christian faith within traditional African culture. This outreach is not possible without the involvement of women because their role, just as in the traditional family, is indispensable. The Synod acknowledges the “indispensable contribution which African women make to family, church, and society.”⁸¹ The backbone of the SCCs in Africa is deep rooted in the theological and anthropological values of the traditional African family and community which reflect the dignity of women.

7. African Women: The Backbone of Traditional African Communities and the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the “Church-as-Family”

The development of the SCCs in the African “Church-as-Family” of God reflects the traditional community life, deeply-rooted in theological and anthropological community ethics. Hence, the backbone here is theological and anthropological ethics. In Africa, the foundation of ethical value is God and community life, particularly within the family and marriage. The community recognizes marriage between a man and a woman and emphasizes

⁷⁹ Elochukwe E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 112-113.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Browne, “Proposition” no. 48.

this unity which brings together the family, clan, and community. It is the two persons forming a family whose aim is community life. When the two, man and woman, get married, they have an obligation to form and expand a family and the clan.⁸²

Therefore, the husband and wife have a duty to fulfill by the bearing of children. Without children, for an African, the marriage is not fruitful. It is like a plant which is planted but failed to bear fruit. Infantless couples are saddened by not having children and look for other solutions, for example, the reason for the traditional African 'polygamy.'⁸³ The source of life, marriage and community is the Creator. Africans believe that it is God who created and commanded man and woman to marry and multiply.⁸⁴ Thus, in Africa, procreation is the reality of marriage. The idea or the spirit behind marriage and procreation is the desire to expand the family and clan and live in a community according to the will of God.

The theological and anthropological concept of community is a fundamental characteristic of the African family. In the African philosophical principle of community, the idea of community is expressed this way: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."⁸⁵ The more we are, the greater I am. This principle joins marriage and procreation into

⁸² Bénédet Bujo, *Plea for Change of Models for Marriage* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007), 94-106. According to Bujo, there is a principle in African ethics which may be enunciated as follows: a person cannot be free unless the community is free and vice-versa. What matters is the dialectic relationship between the individual and community. "I am related, therefore we are." Not only do I exist through others but others exist through me. Marriage is the only institution which makes this ethical principle a reality, and the woman is the central figure in the African traditional marriage process.

⁸³ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 112.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 133. See also Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 87.

⁸⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108-109.

a single reality. In Africa, anything that touches marriage and procreation touches the dignity and vocation of a woman since she is the mother of human life.

In the SCC, there is the idea of the different, individual persons coming together and forming a community with a family spirit. In traditional African communities, the foundation of the community is the marriage between a man and a woman. In Christianity, the SCC builds its foundation on the “Church-as-Family,” founded on the “Blessed Trinity at the depth of which the Holy Spirit is the bond of communion.”⁸⁶ Therefore, like the traditional African family, clan and community, the center of the marriage is the woman, while in the “Church-as-Family” the Holy Spirit in the Blessed Trinity is the basis of the theological foundation. In the traditional African community, it is the marriage between a man and a woman that aims to expand the community. Here, the woman is the center of the traditional African family, clan, and community. This assertion emphasizes the dignity of motherhood because a woman is the mother of the family, clan and community.

Bénézet Bujo noted that the African community is deeply rooted in the typical tradition which has an ancestor as its ‘nucleus.’⁸⁷ “An ancestor is the main pillar on which a community or clan rests.”⁸⁸ In the Bantu and Nilotic tribal spirit, an ancestor is the nucleus of a clan. The names and the spirit of the clans are derived from its mothers. Therefore, the spirit of the nucleus of the clan and the community is the woman.

⁸⁶ Browne, “Message of the Synod” 76.

⁸⁷ Bénézet Bujo, “On the Road Toward an African Ecclesiology: Reflections on the Synod” in *African Synod Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, edited by Maura Browne, SND (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 140.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

From the sociological and anthropological perspectives, men and women have their different roles. Men have duties which pertain to the external protection of the family. Children as well, have roles and duties within the family. However, generally, the mother designates the duties to the young ones in the family. Within the family context, Africans recognize women as the unifying figure of the families, clans, tribes, and nations.

The traditional African concept of the dignity and vocation of women is based on African theological anthropology. African concepts of womanhood and of manhood have complementary roles that can be used interchangeably without undermining the integrity of the one or other having any contradiction. This understanding exists because of the theological anthropological concept of a woman. For example, for an African, God can be the Mother or the Father. One can call God Mother, and the role of Motherhood is understood without any contradiction to the position of God, the Father. Similarly, one can understand God as the Father without any contradistinction that undermines the role of God the Mother.

The dynamic development of the SCCs in the African Church is nevertheless primarily growing fast due to the participation of women. The SCC is a place where dialogue and communion through sharing the gospel message takes place without segregation. Women are the promoters of traditional and Christian values that are lived within SCC. The role of women is carried on freely without any conflict with the role of men as it is in the traditional family. This is possible because the roles, that of the father and that of the mother, within the traditional African family, are grounded in theological and anthropological values that

coexist. Men and women have always been the central pillars in forming traditional African communities without conflicting roles.

Therefore, the traditional mutual respect among members in traditional African communities prompted the Synod to adopt and develop the SCCs to become centers for implementing the values of the African “Church-as-family” of God. This image of the “Church-as-Family” supports the important roles of motherhood and fatherhood in African society. Both motherhood and fatherhood have theological and anthropological support in African communities.

8. The African Theological and Anthropological Support for the Dignity of Motherhood

The African concept of God is not altogether masculine. In some African communities, especially among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, God is conceived of as male as well as female.⁸⁹ The theological and anthropological characters of God in these tribes compare God to a loving mother, or a caring mother. The Nuba of the Sudan, the Bantu speaking tribe, “regard God as ‘Great Mother,’ and speak of him in feminine pronouns.”⁹⁰ In His caring and loving characterization, human growth depends much on the mother’s care.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Joseph Akinyele Omoyajowo, “The Role of Women in African Traditional Religion and Among the Yoruba,” in *African Traditional Religions in the Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1990), 74-75. Omoyajowo confirms that both the masculine and feminine character of God are generally appealed to when there is need for mercy and moral stability by most African communities. Thus one hears “Mother goddess, or Queen of the under-world,” who is accountable for moral responsibility. Moral responsibility counts for the interior formation, the internal structure of human beings.

⁹⁰ Ibid. Cf, the Nilotic Luo of Kenya, refers to God as “Nyasaye Min Oganda,” meaning, God, Mother of the Nation. Such address is common in prayers when they need the intervention of God.

⁹¹ Omoyajowo, “The Role of Women in African Traditional Religion,” 74-75.

Therefore, when an African theologian speaks of God as the Father, or God as the Mother it must be understood from African theological and anthropological perspectives of the Fatherhood or the Motherhood of God. The African theological perspective of God as the Father is drawn from God himself as the Father of the whole human family. The supremacy of fatherhood is proper to God himself as the head of His family, the human family. God is spirit, and His presence to human beings is experienced in both visible and invisible ways. His fatherhood is visible through the fatherhood in a traditional family and invisible through the spiritual authority of fatherhood within the family. The African perception of God, having both the feminine and masculine qualities of a mother as well as a father is logical because God is spirit, therefore, as such, can assume both qualities.

In the traditional African family, the father is the head of the family and the mother is the molder of the family since the name of the clan is drawn from the female. The role of the father is determined by custom as well as that of the mother. These roles are specific, different, substantial, and complementary. There are specific roles for a woman as the mother and specific roles for a man as the father of the family. The roles have substantial differences yet are complementary. For example, mothering and nurturing life pertains to the mother, but the father has a complimentary role. Therefore, the family cannot exist without the father and the mother; their roles are mutual and unique to their personhood. The father cannot replace the mother and the mother cannot replace the father. Both of them are the principle founders of any natural family.

Applying both masculine and feminine qualities to the theological character of God, the Father as well as the Mother, Nyamiti demonstrates the traditional African understanding of God as follows:

when the African calls God ‘Father,’ His fatherhood has to be understood as being dynamic, living and sacred: a mystical vital power that leads to living and mystical solidarity and participation in human community (of living and dead), for the benefit (life, power, well-being, protection, liberation, etc.) of the individual as a member of the community in living contact and solidarity with the whole cosmos.⁹²

These qualities are symbolic and analogical in God. They can be applied to God the Father as well as God the Mother of the human family. God is spirit, and there is no way that Africans would understand these qualities literally. For them, the Fatherhood and the Motherhood of God presuppose a certain power which is believed to be eminently present in God. Therefore, God can be thought of as both ‘Mother’ as well as ‘Father’ of the family depending on the roles one has in mind in the family without any contradiction.

In the Bantu and Nilotic tradition, as well as in other cultures, “manhood often symbolizes intelligence, wisdom, power, and authority.”⁹³ On the other hand, femininity is “a frequent symbol for life, fecundity, tenderness, compassion, meticulous care, devotion, receptivity and beauty.”⁹⁴ All these qualities are positive and they are eminently present in God as the source of all perfection. Both the motherhood and the fatherhood of God are

⁹² Nyamiti, “The Doctrine of God,” 61. See also Ndyabahika, “Women’s Place in Creation,” 26-27.

⁹³ Nyamiti, “The Doctrine of God,” 62.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

believed to be analogously present in the roles of the father and the mother in the traditional family.

According to Nyamiti:

The mother is, therefore, a symbol which is profoundly religious. Being a symbol it is an image which, by its affective connotations, represents a reality whose richness of meaning can hardly be exhausted by the human intellect. The maternal symbol is polyvalent. It contains threads and promises. It is the symbol of primordial totality, of universal harmony, of vital source, or happiness which appeases nostalgia. ... That is why when sublimated the maternal image symbolizes the country towards which every religious desire aspires.⁹⁵

Nyamiti argues that the feminine qualities of God exist in the sense that motherhood is a perfect quality in God “at least as much” suggests a quantitative comparison is appropriate.⁹⁶ In God, there is an exaltation of different, not comparable qualities of motherhood and fatherhood. For an African, theological anthropology is guided by the desire to be reborn to oneself and to find again one’s own total integrity, and it is precisely in and through the mother that one is born to selfhood.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Nyamiti, “The African Sense of God’s Motherhood,” 271. See also Ndyabahika, “Women’s Place in Creation,” 26.

⁹⁶ Nyamiti, “The African Sense of God’s Motherhood,” 271.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

The African concept of woman is positive and is the source of the perception of the dignity and vocation of women. According to M. N. Getui, women have a 'vital force' and special unique roles in the family that cannot be taken for granted. For Getui, "fathers symbolize power, authority and responsibility, qualities that make life possible, while mothers symbolize love, nurturing and gentleness, qualities that make life worth living."⁹⁸ Moreover, the feminine qualities which symbolize life, fruitfulness, tenderness, compassion, concern and so forth are very real values and uniquely attributed to women.⁹⁹

Nyamiti confirms that motherhood is a gift from God endowed with mystical powers which are present in woman's nature and different from man. He believes that a woman possesses an "active principle of offspring, not merely passive."¹⁰⁰ Therefore, a woman as mother is the source of life, love and goodness; all children must pass through the womb of a mother. Africans realize that a woman takes a more active part in the generative process by accepting the man (his sperm), and by providing the womb as the first home of new life and nurturing this life after giving birth. The power to receive and nurture comes from God and is given, through marriage, between a man and a woman. In a woman, the power manifests itself most profoundly because she bears within her the new life. For an African woman, to be considered by the community as a source of life is a sign of love and respect. A woman as a mother is a source of life, love, and several family values together with a father.

⁹⁸ Getui, "The Family, the Church and the Development of the Youth," 81.

⁹⁹ *Message of the Synod Nuntius*, Vatican City, 6/51994. See also *The African Synod*, no. 65.

¹⁰⁰ Nyamiti, "The Doctrine of God," 63.

The African Synod of Bishops and theologians recognized that women stand at the heart of the African family, just as they are the backbone of the African church.¹⁰¹ From the African perspective, theologically, it is possible to draw the idea of the ‘Motherhood’ of God parallel with to ‘Fatherhood’ without any contradiction or conflict with God the Father. These theological and anthropological perspectives have shown that the African concept of womanhood is a gift from God, inseparable from motherhood and integral to the dignity and vocation of a woman. The idea of the dignity of motherhood is linked to the gift of motherhood as well as to the role women play in traditional African families and communities.

Probably, because of the indispensable role women play as mothers in the traditional African family, the Synod and the theologians look at women as the agents of evangelization in the SCCs within the African “Church-as-Family” of God.¹⁰² Just as women have the essential role in their traditional families, they can bring that same gift and spirit to evangelization.

As much as there is theological and anthropological support of the dignity of motherhood in the African “Church-as-Family,” there are, as well, several challenges and theories that can undermine or reflect negatively against women regarding their active participation in the SCCs. Some of the challenges may arise as a result of the different

¹⁰¹ *Message of the Synod Nuntius*, Vatican City, 6/51994. See also *The African Synod*, no. 28.

¹⁰² Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, “Women in the Churches in Africa: Possibilities for Presence and Promises,” in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, Muaura Browne, SND (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 175 – 186. Mbuy-Beya is talking about the inclusive of women in all areas of evangelization of the Church based on the traditional African model of the family. See also Synod Documents, *Proposition*, no. 14.

ideologies rooted in different theological and anthropological views and cultures. For example, the feminists' understanding of the ministerial priesthood of Christ and the patriarchal tradition of the Catholic Church stand out among these challenges. This paper may not address all the challenges and their theological and anthropological ideologies, but it is important to highlight them for wider knowledge.

9. The Challenges: Theological Anthropological Ideologies on the Role of Women in the SCCs in “Church-as-Family”

In the light of the Synod, the bishops and the theologians wanted the Church to feel that sense of family in Africa. In Africa, “The family is the place where the deep African value of life comes to be, is protected and nourished, a place of belonging where sharing and solidarity are at the heart of daily life and where each feels himself or herself to be truly at home.”¹⁰³ Basically, it is the life-giving experience and the true African values of African family life that the Synod wishes all the members in the SCCs to bring into the Church.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, African family values provide a model for the evangelization agenda.

¹⁰³ *The African Synod Comes Home: A Simplified Text*, edited by AMECAE Pastoral Department (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995), 20.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Evangelization in this context aims at “building up the Church as ‘family’ is imbued with warmth of human relationship, mutual acceptance, dialogue and trust.”¹⁰⁵ Just as African women play key roles in traditional communities, they must play a key role in the process of evangelization. In fact, women throughout the Church’s history have been involved in evangelization “not only in bringing people the message and grace of Christ, but also in improving the whole range of temporal life.”¹⁰⁶

The promotion of the SCCs in the “Church-as-Family” of God in Africa is an indication that the Synod fathers are open to all the members of the families to taking on active part in the evangelization process. Such an attitude opens a wider way for the African Church to participate in evangelization in a dynamically as a family. In Kenya, besides the SCCs, there are also well-organized women’s action groups as well as solidarities at different levels from parishes, deaneries, dioceses, at and national levels. For example, St. Monica and St. Anne are women’s Groups, and the youth have the Daughters of Blessed Virgin Mary (Wana Maria in Kiswahili).¹⁰⁷ The Synod Fathers recognized that women are potential leaders in religious devotions, prayers, service, teaching and peace-making.

But, even though women actively participate in the Church, there are challenges and ideologies which question the status of women in the Church. Some feminist theologians are asking: What is the nature of this participation? What is the position and status of women in

¹⁰⁵ Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization,” 123. See also Madipoane Masenya, “African Women Read the Bible,” in *Inculturation in the South African Context* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 65-70.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

the Church? Are their abilities utilized in full?¹⁰⁸ These questions reveal that some women are dissatisfied with the way the Church is governed. They claim that they are not adequately represented in “decision-making positions in the Church.”¹⁰⁹

Therefore, some women feel that their role in the scope of evangelization is restricted and limited. Such feelings stem from the fact that the Catholic Church has always restricted the ministerial priesthood of Christ to men, (the ordination to the ministerial priesthood of Christ). Thus, the demand for women to be included in the ministerial priesthood of Christ poses challenges to the “Church-as-Family.”

Most of these challenges are based on feminist theological and anthropological understandings of the ministerial priesthood of Christ and the patriarchal Church which they claim is oppressive to women. The Catholic Church is governed by men in leadership roles at the parochial, diocesan, and pontifical levels. For this reason, some feminist theologians think that the Church has excluded women from this tradition and is, therefore, oppressive to women. Probably, they consider patriarchy in the Catholic tradition similar to other patriarchal societies. In fact, for some feminist theologians, ‘patriarchy’ is understood by them as ‘oppressive’ to women. However, a patriarchal society need not be oppressive to women.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 137. See also Mary N. Getui, “Women’s Priesthood in the Relationship to Nature,” in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household*, eds. Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 1996), 31-38. According to Getui, women are included in other aspects of life such education, politics career employments, but with regards to “priesthood in the Church” they are sidelined.

¹⁰⁹ Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization,” 138. See also Sera Butler, MSBT, *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* (Chicago/Mundelein, Illinois: Hillenbrand Books, 2006), 1-17. Butler points out that question about the restriction of ordination of priesthood to men are asked not only by the ‘critics’ in the Catholic Church but also by other partners in the ecumenical dialogue. But it is a very recent problem; it is not old as the long old traditions of the Church.

The justification arises from the Western feminists' ideology that women are oppressed by men. This should not be the case. In the first articles of *Orinatio Sacerdotalis*, John Paul II explains very concisely the basis for his judgment, namely, that the tradition of reserving priestly ordination to men can be traced to the will of Christ in reference to the evidence found in scripture and tradition.¹¹⁰ Further, in reference to the will of Christ and tradition, the document reaffirms the equal dignity of men and women in the Church. Therefore, the preservation of the ordination of men alone does not indicate oppression to women.

For Africans, Mwaura points out "Traditional African Religion provides avenues for women to play very important roles as priestesses, custodians of shrines and temples of deities and spirits, medicine persons, diviners, herbalists, mediums, prophetesses, and even as goddesses."¹¹¹ African religious anthropology provides roles for both men and women to play in the society. Mwaura claims that "Western Christianity and 'civilization' came to Africa with their male dominated hierarchies which had neglected opportunities for women in their ministerial structures."¹¹² Such claims may not be accurate because women were very instrumental in the foundation of Christianity. Both men and women have played different roles in evangelization without any conflict.

However, such ideas and confusions might have come or are influenced by secular concepts of women. Secular feminism claims that the Church headed by men, on the face of

¹¹⁰John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men alone, *Orinatio Sacerdotalis*" Vatican translation (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), nos. 1, 2, & 3. AAS 86 (1994), 545-548. See also Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood and Women*, 3.

¹¹¹ Mwaura, "Women and Evangelization," 139.

¹¹² Ibid.

it, is oppressive to women.¹¹³ Such a claim poses a challenge to the “Church-as-Family” because the family aims to promote love and respect among children of one mother. The following two sections examine the ministerial priesthood of Christ and the pastoral services as challenges to the role of women in the “Church-as-Family.” These challenges come from outside African tradition where the dignity and vocation of women are not supported in the community but they can influence in the African communities as well.

9.1. The Ministerial Priesthood of Christ: A Challenge to the Role of Women in the “Church-as-Family”

The question which some Catholics and other Christians ask is: If other pastoral services can be done by women, “Why reserve the priesthood to men?” According to Sara Butler, reading through Church documents, councils and Papal encyclicals, this question is a recent one.¹¹⁴ The Synod was aware that there can be such questions not only in the African community but in the Church at large regarding the ordination and participation of women in the Church. Therefore, the Synod suggested that “women be included in appropriate levels of decision making in the Church and that the Church establish ministries for women and intensify efforts towards their formation.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Mary N. Getui, “Women’s Priesthood in Relation to Nature,” in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, eds. Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 1996), 36. See also Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization,” 128-131.

¹¹⁴ Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood and Women*, 1.

¹¹⁵ Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization,” 139.

However, the ministries in which women participate in the “Church-as-Family” do not require an ordained minister. Ministries such as caring for the sick, teaching, prayer, service to the family, and participation in the sacramental ministry of the Church already include women.¹¹⁶ It is only the consecration of the Eucharist, Holy Orders, Confessions, Anointing of the sick, and Confirmation that the Catholic tradition has reserved for the ordained minister.

According to John Paul II, the Catholic tradition reserves the ministerial priesthood of Christ based on the will of Christ which has been passed on through the sacred tradition through generations.¹¹⁷ The Catholic Church believes that the ministerial priesthood of Christ is from Christ himself. Since the foundation of the Church, women have actively participated in different roles in this tradition, but not as ordained ministers.

Therefore, John Paul II, in his “Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women” pronounced a solemn judgment that “the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women.”¹¹⁸ This solemn declaration is based on the “divine institution” which has been lived through generations as a tradition.

In Africa, customs prescribe all the traditional roles played by men, women, youth, and children in a family. Such tradition provides reasons for respect, love, and above all respect for the traditions passed on as sacred patrimony. Therefore, using the explanation that the ordination to priesthood is reserved for men alone based on the will of Christ passed on

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹¹⁷ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, no. 3. See also Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood and Women*, 2-3.

¹¹⁸ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, nos. 2 and 4. See also Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 2.

as a sacred tradition can be easily understood in the African context that already has values prescribed in traditions as sacred patrimony.

Traditions are not considered on the same level in terms of patrimony. Some customs are governed by sacred patrimony while others are mere customary tradition. The belief of the Catholic Church that the ordination of men conforms better with African tradition, because in Africa, certain roles of man and woman in the family are believed to be of patrimonial tradition must be kept without much alteration. Therefore the roles cannot be altered or performed by the other gender.

It is important to note that what determines or controls gender roles in the relationship between a man and a woman in the Church and in any culture, requires an answer to the questions, “Who is man?” and “Who is woman?” in a given cultural tradition.¹¹⁹ African culture revealed through the concept of women as explained earlier, shows an attitude that gives them the opportunity to perform their roles with equal dignity and respect. The answer to the question “who is man?” or “who is woman?” may not be applicable for anyone who wants to judge African culture based on other cultural values. In African traditional customs, the roles of women in communities are based on the levels of traditions, customary practices, and the patrimonial inheritance which are all considered sacred traditions.

¹¹⁹ Laurenti Magesa, “The Challenge of African Woman: Defined Theology for the 21st Century” in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections of the 21st Century*, eds. Nahashon W. Ndung’u & Philomena N. Mwaura (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 94.

The Catholic Church tradition is a mother of revelation which is considered sacred in the whole Catholic Church, the place where God is found as sacred and so should be treated with care and respect. Here, traditions are accepted as Gifts from God himself.

For Africans, the different roles of women and men in the family and community are respected as they are given by God. Many feminist theologians do not refute the belief that African culture recognizes the concept of life as sacred and that a woman is the mother of human life. This recognition is a sign of love and respect for woman, and their roles in the traditional communities as a gift from God.¹²⁰

Therefore, it may be unfair to demand ordination of women on the grounds of the “decision-making positions in the Church” for an African woman, because the decision-making is within the family structure in Africa.¹²¹ Traditional African customs do not exclude women from the decision-making. According to Magesa, the demand for ‘decision-making’ has nothing to do with the ordination of women but rather the “will-to-power.”¹²² Struggling for ‘decision-making’ can turn women into the mere image of men. Women and men have equal dignity. Yet a man is not a woman nor is a woman a man. “Each needs the other and his or her innate sexual qualities which God has endowed each sex.”¹²³ Magesa laments that for some feminists, motherhood is a source of oppression for women.¹²⁴ Note that “motherhood is more than the physical act of bearing a child; its deeper significance lies

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization,” 138.

¹²² Magesa, “The Challenge of African Woman,” 100.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

in the ability to nurture life, even if this capability is not actualized physically.”¹²⁵ According to Magesa:

To nurture (and bear) life is uniquely woman’s quality, and here the “womb” has a deep symbolic sense. For even though modern scientific technology is succeeding to separate the beginning and development of biological (including human) life from the necessity of the womb, life still needs a womb-like environment to develop and mature (mature). Motherhood may be misused, but it cannot be jettisoned for that reason. The true meaning of motherhood does not work against, but in favour of, women’s and human dignity in general.¹²⁶

Note that the reservation of ordination for men alone in the Catholic Church does not mean in any way oppression or making of women less important than men. It is being faithful to the will of Christ and faithful to the sacred tradition as it has been handed over throughout the history of the Catholic Church. In the “Church-as-Family” of God, both men and women have significant roles to play as members of God’s family.

The Synod saw the SCCs as avenues to implement already threatened traditional African communities and to promote the dignity of every human person. Ministries in the SCCs resemble the traditional African family where every member is involved and takes an active part, a community where everyone knows his or her role and does it responsibly. They are supposed to be exemplary gospel-based communities.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 101.

The ministries or services in the SCCs arose from the needs within each particular community. The needs of those who live in urban areas are different from those who live in rural villages, but they have the same structures. These include care for the sick, preparation for marriage and other sacraments, catechism for the children and youth, care for the poor, and support for the Church, among others. All these needs are met within the context of sharing the gospel message and answering to the needs of the people.

Most of these ministries have been taken up by women, whether religious or lay people in the SCCs. Therefore, the recommendation of the Synod that the African Church “establishes ministries for women and intensifies efforts towards their formation” is being fully realized within the SCCs in Africa.¹²⁷ For the African Church, the role of women in the SCCs may not be a problem in the “Church-as-Family” of God but a realization of the traditional African family life experience in the Church.

Another challenge for the “Church-as-Family” is contained in certain views feminists hold about ‘patriarchal’ society. These feminists claim that the ‘patriarchy’ oppresses or dominates women in society. The African “Church-as-Family” of God is patriarchal in structure; therefore, the image stands for oppressing women due to men’s leadership. For the feminists, the leadership of the “Church-as-Family” would discern the roles which women have to play in the SCCs as given by God, and that is oppression to women. Such decision-making on behalf of women is not acceptable because this would limit women in public service. Although most African communities are patriarchal, this in no way implies

¹²⁷ Ibid., 103.

oppression of women.¹²⁸ It is necessary to highlight feminist theological and anthropological understanding of patriarchy as a challenge for role of women in the “Church-as-Family” of God.

9. 2. Feminist Theological and Anthropological Concept of Patriarchy: A Challenge to the Role of Women in the “Church-as-Family” of God

Before presenting the underlying views of feminists on ‘patriarchy,’ a clarification of the term “feminism” is significant and how it is understood in this context. When asked to define ‘feminism,’ few can agree on its meaning. One finds the definition reduced to vague generalizations and descriptions expressing the oppression of women. Nevertheless, little consistency exists among feminists. There is a great diversity in feminist thought.¹²⁹ Sandra M. Schneiders, a feminist theologian, acknowledges that among scholars today, “there is no such thing as ‘feminism’ but only ‘feminisms.’”¹³⁰ There are a variety of women’s ‘movements’ which fundamentally disagree with each other in ideology and agenda. However, there is one underlying ideology which most of them share. That is:

A comprehensive ideology, which is rooted in women’s experience of sexual oppression, engages in a critique of patriarchy as an essentially dysfunctional

¹²⁸Patriarchy in Africa, culturally, and may be in other cultures as well, refers to the external sociological identification by name. This name in actual fact is a protection of the interior identification of the individual, who in human cultural pride proclaims an authentic identification, ‘son of a woman.’ From a woman, the names of the family and clans are given.

¹²⁹ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church*, Second edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 5.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

system, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realization.¹³¹

The ideology of oppression encourages women to enter into conversations and expressions of their experience as oppressed by male domination in the culture, religion, and civil society. Therefore, many feminists claim that:

Nothing short of the full recognition of the full humanity of all women, in family, society, and the Church can respond to the feminist vision. And women's full humanity cannot be affirmed and honored unless all those who are oppressed – not only because of gender but also because of color, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or any other qualification – are likewise fully recognized, affirmed, and honored.¹³²

Such a claim is becoming popular and is supported by some theologians. Elizabeth A. Johnson, in her book *Truly Our Sister*, shares Schneiders' ideology. She believes that their brand of feminism is "the women's voice" that is resounding throughout the world in male-dominated cultures as women become increasingly conscious of their human worth, claiming both in public and domestic life the rights and duties that befit a human person.¹³³ According to Johnson, feminism is the "intellectual and practical stance that promotes the well-being of

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³² *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹³³ Elizabeth E. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 6.

women as genuine human beings, fully gifted while diverse, and worthy of equal dignity, rights, and power in every sphere of life.”¹³⁴

Mary Daly defines feminism as women’s movements of all “types” struggling for liberation of their sex from its ancient bondage.¹³⁵ Her feminism aims to bond women into a sisterhood for liberation from the worldwide phenomenon of a ‘sexual caste.’¹³⁶ Here Daly uses the term ‘caste’ in reference to certain Asian traditional cultures whereby the caste one belongs determines one’s human dignity among fellow Asians, even though all are human beings. In such Asian communities, caste seems to be more important than human nature. Thus Daly claims that being a woman determines the level of humanity, so women must struggle and liberate themselves from this ancient tradition and become like men.

One can see that Johnson and Daly have a “family resemblance.” Johnson’s struggle is for ‘women’s voice,’ which means women studying theology, making other women aware of their domination by men, and then raising their voices for their rights. While Daly’s struggle for women’s liberation includes any type of action that will liberate women from patriarchy, the two movements are similar in having women’s liberation as their goal, but differ in defining the problem.

Sneja Gunew, who represents a radical feminist theological perspective, points out that the various streams within radical feminism share the first and fundamental theme that “women as a social group are oppressed by men as a social group and this oppression is the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹³⁵ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 1. Daly’s rejection of Christianity is based on ‘patriarchal’ structure which is oppressive to women.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 2.

primary oppression for women.”¹³⁷ Steven Rhoads, who has taught for over thirty years at the University of Virginia and has done extensive research on the subject, confirms this. In his book *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*, writes that eight out of nine feminist theologians hold one fundamental tenet in common: “they believe that femininity and masculinity and the gender roles that flow from them are socially constructed.”¹³⁸

Johnson seems to agree with Rhoads’ idea. She claims that: “gender is not a given in the same sense as sex is. It is the socially constructed expectation of how sexually embodied male and female persons should act, what characteristics each should develop, and what social roles they will be allowed to play.”¹³⁹ Another noted feminist, Gerda Lerner, supports the same concept that “gender is the cultural definition of behavior as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time.”¹⁴⁰

Most of these claims against patriarchal society have been raised by western feminist theologians but have now been taken up by their African counterparts. Nyambura J. Njoroge, claims that there is a “pain and anguish that an African Christian woman experiences” from the Church headed by men.¹⁴¹ The pain and anguish consists of women’s exclusion from the order of priesthood. Sharon Potgieter claims that African women, who are about 70 percent

¹³⁷ Snaja Gnew, editor, *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 273.

¹³⁸ Steven E. Rhoads, *Taking Sex Difference Seriously* (San Francisco, California: Encounter Books, 2003), 14.

¹³⁹ Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 20.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Nyambura J. Njoroge, “Groaning and Languishing in Labor Pains,” in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, eds. Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 1996), 4.

of the Church population, are “usually absent from its decision-making bodies and hierarchies.”¹⁴² Mary N. Getui claims that:

Even though it has been assumed above all that priesthood is open to both men and women, and that women do carry out the stated functions and duties, the contrary is the reality. As has been the case in other aspects of life such as education, politics, careers employment and even at the domestic front, with regard to priesthood in the Church, women are sidelined.¹⁴³

Given all these different views and theories, and many other similar on the patriarchal tradition of the Church, it is important to consider them a challenge in presenting the “Church-as-Family” in Africa. Such views are often popular and influential; feminism as a movement is spreading throughout the world. Some African women embrace feminist ideology and, as such, are a challenge to the model of the “Church-as-Family.”

Therefore, Gnew thinks that some women have been lured to reject the gift of motherhood. She believes that:

The patriarchal ideology of motherhood has also been scrutinized. During the early years of this most recent wave of the Women’s Liberation Movement, many women rejected motherhood as an enslaving role within patriarchal culture. Since that time, feminists have tried to rewrite the definitions of

¹⁴² Sharon Potgieter, “Church and Praxis and Women who Remain Within the Church,” in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, eds. Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 1996), 16.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Getui, “Women’s Priesthood,” 36.

motherhood, leading us to a more positive vision of what the experience might be like if the woman could determine the condition.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, Eleanor Humes Honey, another feminist thinker, holds the same opinion that patriarchy is oppressive to women. According to her, the primary responsibility of women is the liberation of women; liberation from an ethos that corrupts hearts and minds; from the religious and philosophical constructs that support and reflect that ethos, and from the concrete institutional and physical expressions of that ethos.¹⁴⁵

The justification for the struggle for women's rights, equal rights in rearing and caring for children in the family, and freedom of choice, among others, can undermine the dignity and vocation of a woman as a mother of the family. The feminist views mentioned above present severe challenges. It seems that the feminist struggle is based on the presumption that man thinks he is superior to woman. This has a negative impact on the family. The negative thrust in this context may be referred to as the 'superiority in Sexes.'¹⁴⁶ This is a supposition that seems to demand a choice between man and woman, who is greater, or more important. The supposition has a negative implication.

According to Nyamiti, the negative implication could be the reason why Thomas Aquinas had "refused to ascribe maternal functions to God because there is no passivity in

¹⁴⁴ Gunew, *Feminist Knowledge*, 295.

¹⁴⁵ Eleanor Humes Honey, "What is Feminist Ethics?: A Proposal for Continuity Discussion," in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 7.

¹⁴⁶ An attitude where the 'male sex' is considered as superior to the 'female sex.'

God; he saw maternity as passive.”¹⁴⁷ For Aquinas, the puzzling question was on the ‘active’ and ‘passive’ power of generation. Such a negative assertion could influence the understanding of the role, and the position of a woman in the family and society. Indeed, the concept of woman in relation to man and her position in the family and society can easily be misinterpreted or manipulated so as to put woman in the inferior position in relation to man.

The supposition which seeks to know, between man and woman, who is greater or more important, is not typical in African theological anthropology. Africans are more concerned with the ‘vital force,’ the ‘hierarchy of being,’ and the ‘sacredness of human life’ as presented previously in chapter two.

Being a man or a woman is a gift given in God’s plan of creation and it is fulfilled in motherhood and fatherhood. In the culture of the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya, womanhood and motherhood are inseparable as a singular gift of God. Motherhood is integral to the dignity and vocation of women. This is the fundamental assertion of this study and it is in accord with John Paul II’s teachings concerning the dignity of motherhood, which “means something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships,” and is applicable to every woman in any culture.¹⁴⁸ The African Synod seeks this reality of dignity and vocation of women through the “family,” which forms the central theme of the African “Church-as-Family.”

10. Conclusion

¹⁴⁷ Nyamiti, “The Doctrine of God,” 63. See also Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1946), Q. 92, p. 466.

¹⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29, See also *Man and Woman*, 161.

This discussion has revealed that the theme and the title of the “Church-as-Family” of God in Africa chosen by the Synod of the African Bishops in Rome in 1994 is an acknowledgement of traditional African family values and this fact points to the dignity and vocation of women in the African family context. From the African theological perspective, the concept of motherhood is deeply-rooted in the belief in the ‘abundance of life.’¹⁴⁹

From the anthropological perspective, the African concept of God is not altogether masculine. In some African communities, especially among the Bantu and Nilotic tribes, God is conceived of as male as well as female.¹⁵⁰ The theological and anthropological characteristics of God among these tribes compare God to a loving mother, or a caring mother. The Bantu tribes consider, “God as ‘Great Mother,’ and speak of him in feminine pronouns.”¹⁵¹ In His caring and loving character, human growth depends much on the mother’s care.¹⁵² The belief in this image of the “Church-as-Family” of God is both theological and anthropological and is applicable to the role of women in traditional African communities. They are the founders of family and clan.

Therefore, it is important to note that the image of the “Church-as-Family” of God is a gift of the Synod fathers to the African Church. The African “Church-as-Family” of God is

¹⁴⁹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 77. For Magesa, the ‘Abundance of life’ means the mystery of human life experienced in the power of procreation presented in the man and woman’s relationship. The relationship between man and woman determines and balances ethical and moral life in African communities.

¹⁵⁰ Omoyajowo, “The Role of Women in Africa,” 74-75. Omoyajowo confirms that both the masculine and feminine character of God is generally appealed to when there is need for mercy and moral stability by most African communities. Thus one hears “Mother goddess, or Queen of the under-world,” who is accountable for moral responsibility. Moral responsibility counts for the interior formation, the internal structure of a human being.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* Cf, the Nilotic Luo of Kenya, refers to God as “Nyasaye Min Oganda,” meaning, God, Mother of the Nation. Such address is common in prayers when they need the intervention of God.

¹⁵² Omoyajowo, “The Role of Women in Africa,” 74-75.

meant to be a mothering church. In the culture of the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya, womanhood and motherhood are inseparable as a singular gift from God. Motherhood is integral to the dignity and vocation of women and this African understanding is in accord with John Paul II's teaching that the dignity of motherhood is for all women and applicable to every woman in any culture. Therefore, it was acceptable for the African Bishops and theologians to apply this fundamental gift of women to the African Church since in Africa, human life is family-centered.

The discussion has shown that women are essential role in traditional African communities which meshes with the Synod theme of the "Church-as-Family." Thus, in Africa, women are seen as the essential agents of family values in the African "Church-as-Family." The discussion has elaborated the role of the African woman in the Small Christian Communities (SCCs). In this context, women are considered the backbone in both traditional African communities as well as in SCCs. Their role in communities is supported by African theological and anthropological beliefs about the dignity of motherhood.

It is important to note that all these reflections on the dignity and vocation of women are supported by traditional African beliefs, African Bishops, and theologians that exalt the dignity of motherhood. However, because of the theological and anthropological differences in other cultures, the discussion has highlighted such differences as challenges to the role of women in the "Church-as-Family," namely, the understanding the ministerial priesthood of Christ and the feminist theological and anthropological understanding of patriarchy.

From the Christian theological perspective, the foundation of the motherhood of the Church is the Woman, the Blessed Mother Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ and the Church. John Paul II presents a theological and anthropological understanding of the dignity and vocation of women in the *Theology of the Body* and *Mulieris Dignitatem* which is consistent with the African understanding of women in the family. The following section will examine the Pope's key themes which are central to understanding the dignity and vocation of women and which can be applied to every woman in any culture.

SECOND SECTION

THE THEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF JOHN PAUL II'S REFLECTIONS IN *THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY* AND *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM* FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN AS MOTHERS AND WIVES

CHAPTER FIVE

JOHN PAUL II: THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN AS MOTHERS AND WIVES IN THE LIGHT OF *THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY* AND *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM*

1. Introduction

Critical theological and anthropological application of the teachings of John Paul II requires a proper understanding of the culture in which his teachings are to be applied. The first section of this dissertation has presented the African theological and anthropological understanding of the dignity and vocation of a woman as mother and wife within the African culture, specifically within the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya. The study has been based on the analyses of creation myths, oral stories, the African Synod of Bishops, and the works of theologians. The analyses of these sources offer an understanding of the dignity and vocation of women within the context of the African family. The teachings of John Paul II concerning the dignity and vocation of women will be applied to the role of women through the theology of inculturation in African culture.

This section will review the teachings of John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of women as mothers and wives in the light of the *Theology of the Body* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*. In both treatises, John Paul II discusses the dignity and vocation of women in light the following themes: the “beginning,” the “original solitude,” the “original unity,” the “dimension of the gift,” and the “spousal meaning of the body,” among others. Through these

five themes, he presents what is essential for understanding the dignity of a person. He calls these themes an “adequate anthropology,” by which he means the essential requirements for understanding the dignity of each person as a gift.¹

The teachings of John Paul II emphasize that the human body is a gift: given in God’s plan of creation as “male and female.”² The analysis of the human body reveals the body as man and woman and has a meaning. The meaning is revealed in ethics. There are two dimensions to the gift of the body: namely, the ethical dimension which requires personal responsibility and a theological dimension which points to the body’s relationship to the giver. The analysis of the ethical and theological dimensions of the body as a gift in reference to the giver forms the content of the *Theology of the Body*.

According to John Paul II, the ‘adequate anthropology,’ that contains the ‘essential requirements to understand man, implies a moral implication of the person in relationship to God and his plan of creation. The dignity and vocation of a person are gifts, given in God’s plan of creation. Because they are gifts, they can be accepted or rejected. The idea of the ‘gifts’ and in the Pope’s ‘adequate anthropology’ are relevant in this context because not everyone upholds his teachings. His works are not accepted by some feminist theologians. They reject the Pope’s teachings on the dignity and vocation of women as given in God’s plan of creation. Their views for the rejection of the Pope’s teachings will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 178.

² Ibid. See also Alfonso Card. López Trujillo, The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: guidelines for Education within the Family*, Vatican translation (Boston: Pauline Books & Media 1996), no. 9-15.

In his analyses, John Paul II uses “anthropology” to provide a context for his teaching on the dignity and the vocation of women.³ Conventional divisions of modern university studies see “anthropology” as a social science that studies early or ‘primitive’ people, but in *The Theology of the Body*, it is a study of humans in general.⁴ The Pope’s study seeks to understand and interpret man, what is essentially human. He calls what is essential in understanding human an “adequate anthropology.”⁵ John Paul II’s study comes from his reflections on Scripture, and in particular, the Book of Genesis.

The Theology of the Body is a compilation of talks given by the Pope at his general audience on Wednesdays in the first five years of his papacy. Originally, the title of these talks was *Man and Woman He Created Them*. The Pope emphasizes, among other things, that since God created man in his own image as male and female, then man and woman must each be complementary epiphanies or images of God, whose full image is found only in their nuptial union.⁶ He coined a special term for this reality, the “spousal meaning of the body.”⁷ John Paul II teaches that the “nuptial meaning” of the body is deepened and enriched by motherhood and fatherhood. The female’s body is a sign of a gift to the man and the man’s body is a sign of a gift to the woman from the beginning. Thus ontologically, in their physical being, they are created for a relationship with each other.

³John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 678.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. The etymology of ‘adequate anthropology’ is close to the Italian *anthropologia adeguata*. But unlike in the Italian language, the word ‘adequate’ in English may have negative implications, which may mean ‘just’ enough or ‘minimum’ requirement, but according to John Paul II’s theological and anthropological approaches, it means what is ‘essential’ for understanding and interpreting man in relation to the order of being (ontology) and in the order of morality (axiology).

⁶ Ibid., 180. See also John Paul II, *Familliaris Consortio*, no. 22.

⁷ John Paul, *Man and Woman*, 678, the term ‘nuptial’ is used to signify spousal, thus it reveals ‘nuptial meaning of the body.’ But Italian uses only the word, ‘nuziale,’ which translates as ‘wedding.’

The mutual spousal perception of the body as a gift affirms the gift as given in sexual difference and as received by the other. When the man, Adam, in his original state of solitude, beheld the first woman, Eve, his excitement confirmed his fulfillment (Gen 2: 23). The reciprocal exchange of “the gift of the body according to its masculinity and femininity as the gift of the person” shows the acceptance of each other as a gift in a unique and special way.⁸ The experience is the fulfillment of the receiver; the man exclaimed his joy when he received the woman: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh ...” (Gen. 2:23).

According to John Paul II, the dignity and vocation of the person is understood universally in reference to the meaning of the human body, which God created male and female. These sexual differences of the human body, being a man and being a woman, are accepted in many cultures as part of God’s plan of creation. Africans particularly recognize the dignity and vocation of women as given in God’s plan of creation in a manner which is consistent with the teachings of John Paul II. How a woman becomes a mother and a man becomes a father is naturally perceived by Africans through the unity between man and woman. For the Pope, such unity reveals the meaning of the body.

This chapter will present the key themes of the theological anthropology of John Paul II, namely: 1) the “beginning,” 2) the “original solitude,” 3) the “original unity,” 4) the “dimension of the Gift,” and 5) the “spousal meaning of the body,” to explain the dignity and vocation of women as a gift. However, some theologians, especially feminist theologians,

⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 131. According to John Paul II, the unique and special way of receiving the other as a gift is within the unity of the two bodies becoming one flesh in such a way that they are open to life.

hold different views on the dignity and vocation of women. The discussion will also highlight some of these opposing views.

2. The “Beginning” in Reference to the Dignity and Vocation of Women

John Paul II teaches that the “beginning” lays the foundation of the dignity and vocation of women. He reflects on the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees:

Some Pharisees came to him to test him and asked him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?” And he answered them, “Have you not read that from the ‘beginning’ *the Creator created them male and female* and said, ‘*For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and unite with his wife, and the two will be one flesh*’? So it is that they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, “what God has joined let man not separate?” They objected, “Why then did Moses order to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus answered, “Because of the hardness of your heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, *but from the beginning it was not so*” (Mt 19:3-8).⁹

This text about the permanence of marriage in God’s plan points to the dignity and vocation of women from the beginning. God reveals “the principle unity and indissolubility of

⁹ Ibid. 132, is the foundation of John Paul II’s theological anthropology; it marks the fundamental reason why God created male and female. In this difference there is ontological dignity of the person.

marriage as the very content of the most ancient revelation.”¹⁰ This is why the “beginning” is fundamental in understanding Christian anthropology in reference to the dignity and vocation of a person.

In John Paul II’s analysis of Christ’s reference to the “beginning,” goes beyond the expectations of the Pharisees. According to the Pope, the “beginning” points to the four fundamental dimensions of the dignity of a person, namely: 1) the ontological dimension of the beginning in God’s plan, 2) the biblical foundation of the dignity and vocation, 3) the unity and indissolubility of marriage, and 4) The Trinitarian dimension of love. Reflections on each of these dimensions will show how the dignity and vocation of women are from God himself. These reflections on the “biblical beginning” confirm the argument for indissolubility of marriage in God’s plan of creation as accepted in the Christian tradition.¹¹

2.1. The Ontological Dimension of the “Beginning”: The Dignity and Vocation of Women

The “beginning” points to the ontological dimension of God’s plan of creation. “God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). The creation as male and female proclaims a purpose. Man and woman are complementary to each other. This complementarity between a man and woman,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. In light of “let man not separate,” Christ establishes the principle of the unity and indissolubility of marriage based on of the word of God expressed in the most ancient revelation (Gen 2:24).

according to John Paul II, reveals the mystery of marriage.¹² “For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and unite with his wife, and the two will be one flesh” (Gen. 2: 24).

Sexual difference becomes the foundation of the unity in marriage between a man and a woman and that unity is the basis of the human family. This unity in marriage between a man and a woman constitute family relationships. These relationships are of theological and anthropological significance in nature. The woman becomes a wife and a mother, while the man becomes a husband and a father of a family, and God is their Creator. The foundation of the union of the body as husband and wife will be explained later in the ‘original unity’ and is the ‘spousal’ meaning of the body. It is important to point out that the ontological dimension of the “beginning” also has a biblical foundation.

2.2. The Biblical Foundation of the Dignity and Vocation of Women Seen from the “Beginning”

In both *Mulieris Dignitatem*, and *The Theology of the Body*, John Paul II analyzes the dignity and vocation of women as given in the biblical “beginning.” His reflections attribute the texts of the creation accounts to (Gen 1: 27-28; and Gen 2: 18-25) two different sources identified as the *Elohists* and *Yahwists* traditions.¹³ According to the Pope, modern scholars have found that these creation accounts were written at different times and by different

¹² Ibid. 133.

¹³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 134 – 140. Most scholars distinctively attribute Gen 1:1-4a to a Priestly source. Priestly and “*Elohists*” use “*Elohim*,” for the name of God.

authors.¹⁴ The “Elohists,” author of Genesis Chapter one, uses the term “Elohim,” for God in the so-called “Priestly”/ “Elohists” tradition.¹⁵ The second creation account, in Genesis 2 and 3, contains the word “Yahweh” for God. This second creation account is known as “Yahwist” tradition. However, in both creation accounts the word “Yahweh” is also used for God with the same frequency.¹⁶

From both creation accounts, John Paul II derives a unique interpretation of the creation of “man.” He explains that “man” becomes the “image of God” not only through his personal humanity, but in addition through the ‘communion of persons’ in which one man and one woman share a common life from the very “beginning.”¹⁷ God is imaged in the ideal communion between a man and a woman. The unique point here is that the ‘communion of persons’ as man and woman are both necessary for the image and likeness of God, both having equal dignity.¹⁸ Their union embodies the images God.

From the two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, John Paul II reflects deeply on the idea that the creation of man and woman has a particular theological character.¹⁹ According to him, the theological character contains elements of ‘being’ and ‘existing.’²⁰ These are powerful metaphysical realities of creation. ‘Being’ pertains to the mystery of creation, “in the image of God he created him.” This mystery of creation corresponds to the

¹⁴ Ibid., 134.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 134.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 686.

¹⁸ Ibid. See also *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 47.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 139.

²⁰ Ibid.

perspective of procreation, “be fruitful and multiply.”²¹ Man cooperates with God in creation. John Paul II sees mystery of creation of man and woman corresponding to the mystery of procreation as one reality.

For the Pope, being a man and a woman is “tied to the metaphysical situation of creation: of contingent being (“*contingens*”). “Precisely in the metaphysical context of the description of Genesis 1, one must understand the entity of the good, that is, the aspect of the value.”²² That is, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). The good and value of the ‘being’ becomes the basis of metaphysics, anthropology, and ethics which is a significant reflection of the *Theology of the Body*. The foundation of the biblical beginning shows that:

Genesis 1: 27 establishes that this essential truth about man refers to the male as much as the female: ‘God created man in his image ... male and female he created them.’ One must recognize that the first account is concise and free from any trace of subjectivism: it contains only the objective facts and defines the objective reality, both when it speaks about the creation of human being male and female, in the image of God, and when it adds a little later the words of the first blessing, “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and rule” (Gen. 1: 28).²³

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 136.

²³ Ibid.

Therefore, the creation of man and woman has a biblical foundation and are metaphysical in nature. The biblical aspect and metaphysical nature of man and woman reveal the mystery of creation which unfolds in the spousal union of the body between a man and a woman through which a woman becomes a mother and a man becomes the father of the family.

Finally, the first or Priestly/Elohish account of creation has an *objective* perspective, one that clearly affirms woman's equal dignity to man as being made in God's image and likeness. Both man and woman are giving life to new persons. Genesis 1: 1-2.4 gives an "objective" definition of man. And in Genesis 2: 5-25, the second creation account, the Pope affirms a "subjective" definition. He points out that:

*in formulating the truth about man, it strikes us with its typical depth, different from that of the first chapter of Genesis. One can say that this depth is above all subjective in nature and thus in some way psychological. Chapter 2 of Genesis constitutes in some way the oldest description and record of man's self-understanding and, together with chapter 3, it is the first witness of human consciousness.*²⁴

The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 are convincing sacred myths of the biblical foundation for the equal dignity of man and woman created in the "image and likeness of God."²⁵ These accounts spell out the biblical foundation for the dignity and vocation of persons, both male and female. In addition, these accounts proclaim that the relationship

²⁴ Ibid., 137. John Paul II emphasizes the metaphysical reality of the creation of man and woman, the depth of "being" and "existing." From the very beginning, man is conscious of being human.

²⁵ Ibid.

between man and woman surpasses man's relationship with all other creatures because subjectivity corresponds to objective reality as the "image of God."²⁶

In his reflections on Gen 2:18-23, John Paul II points out that the "Bible calls the first human being "'Man' (*adam*). Then with the creation of the first woman, the author calls him 'male' (*is*), in relation to *issah* ('woman,' because she is taken from the man=*adam*)."²⁷ This change is significant in understanding the equal dignity of man and woman in a relationship as a husband and wife. The Pope continues that:

With the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he formed a woman and brought her to the man. Then man said: 'This time she is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones. She will be called woman, because from man has she been taken' (Gen. 2: 22-23). 'For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and unite with his wife, and the two will be one flesh' (Gen 2:24).²⁸

Until verse 2:24, the relationship between man and woman is very good; each enjoys equal dignity in an equal nature and role. That is to say, there was integral innocence, each saw the other having equal dignity and in the image and likeness of God. The author expresses that, "Both were naked, the man and his wife, but they did not feel shame (Gen. 2:25).

²⁶ Ibid., 139.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 140. John Paul emphasizes here that the unity of the two, man and woman, becoming one 'flesh' is contained in the plan of creation, revealed in the union between the husband and wife. This union to become one flesh is possible only between man and woman because it presupposes a generation of human life.

Genesis 3 is also important for understanding the dignity and vocation of women. It contains the account of the fall. The fall is linked with the fruit of a mysterious tree, the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17). The fall creates a different relationship between man and God. Here, the tree of knowledge of good and evil is the line of demarcation between men’s created state and man’s fallen state of which the Book of Genesis speaks.²⁹ After the fall, the man emerges different than before the fall.

In the first situation of original innocence, both (male and female) are outside the sphere of the knowledge of good and evil. After they disobeyed the Creator’s command at the prompting of the evil spirit, (symbolized by the serpent), man and woman found themselves within the sphere of knowledge of good and evil.

In the situation of their disobedience, man is in the separation from the original plan of God. It is the state of human sinfulness, in contrast to the state of primitive innocence. *The Theology of the Body* examines these two states of human nature: the state of integral nature and the state of fallen nature.³⁰

The original state is what Christ recalls in responding to the question about the ‘unity and indissolubility’ of marriage. He points to the ontological dignity of man and woman based on God’s plan of creation. John Paul II holds that the dignity and vocation of women has a biblical and theological foundation from the “beginning.” Based on their biblical foundation a reciprocal metaphysical nature, Christ points to the unity and indissolubility of marriage in God’s plan of creation. Namely, “what God has joined together, no human being

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 142 – 146.

must separate” (Mt 19:6). This statement points to the unity and indissolubility of marriage in reference to the dignity and vocation of women. They are literally made for each other.

2.3. The “Beginning” Points to the Unity and Indissolubility of Marriage: The Dignity and Vocation of Women

John Paul II reflects deeply on the creation experience, both Adam’s solitude and the joyous original unity of man and woman at Eve’s creation in the beginning when he received her: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of ‘her man’ this one has been taken” (Gen 2:23). According to the Pope, this verse contains the fundamental theological and anthropological truth about the unity and indissolubility of marriage. In his dialogue with the Pharisees, Christ wants them to go “beyond the boundary running in Genesis between the state of original innocence and the state of sinfulness that began with the original fall.”³¹ This boundary links the interlocutors with the situation of original innocence and original sin. For the Pharisees, Moses had allowed divorce with a certificate, but Christ instead points to the unity and indissolubility of marriage in the beginning. Christ restores the dignity and vocation of women and of marriage according to God’s plan of creation.

Christ’s words which appeal to the “‘beginning,’ *allow us to find an essential continuity in man and a link* between these two different states or dimensions of the human

³¹ Ibid., 143. According to John Paul II, man is seen in two states: The “prehistory” state has its roots buried deeply into his theological “prehistory” which is the state of original innocence.

being.”³² These states are the “historical man,” about whom we read in Matthew 19, and the actual man at all times of history.³³ Thus Christ brings to mind a reflection of anthropological and theological man and woman in the “prehistorical” state. When Christ appeals to the “beginning,” he wants his interlocutors to reflect on the law of marriage which they knew very well corresponds to the human state of “being,” male or female.³⁴ Christ links marriage to the state of unity between man and woman in the original state. The original state has the dimension of being created “in the image of God.”³⁵

The idea of both man and woman created in the “image of God” proclaims the unity and indissolubility of marriage. The union of the two, a man and a woman becoming ‘one flesh’ is a communion of persons in the ‘image of God.’³⁶ The “image of God” is in the communion of persons. As such, marriage has vertical and horizontal dimensions.³⁷ The vertical tends towards the source of life-God, and the horizontal tends towards the ‘other’ as a companion. There is a theological (vertical) and anthropological (horizontal) dimension to marriage between man and woman. The dignity and vocation of women is deeply rooted and fully vested in these relationships to God and man. The man and woman in their original innocence reveal the ‘image of God,’ that is the love in God for man and in man, as a spouse.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 143.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 162. The Union of the two, man and woman becoming one flesh, is a communion of persons in the “image of God” in the sense that man in his original solitude reaches personal consciousness in the process of “distinction” from all the living beings (*animalia*), and at the same time, in this solitude, he opens himself toward a being akin to himself, defined as “a helper similar to himself” (Gen 2:18, 20).

³⁷ Ibid., 160 -164. According to John Paul II, the two dimensions of marriage form one reality. Both horizontal and vertical are one reality.

The explanation John Paul II gives for man created in the “image and likeness of God” is that from the beginning creation has a foundation in love. The “image and likeness of God” presupposes communion of persons in love: love between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. John Paul II sees the permanent love in a marriage relationship in reference to the Trinitarian dimension of love which is permanent and indissoluble. In the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees, he went beyond their expected answer because for him such unity in marriage touches the love of God, which is a Trinitarian love: the foundation of the indissoluble love in marriage of the communion of persons.

2.4. The Trinitarian Dimension of Marriage Love: The Communion of Persons

John Paul II’s ‘Trinitarian dimension’ of love in marriage is analogous to the divine love as a communion of persons.³⁸ According to him, the communion of persons in divine love is Trinitarian, expressed in the image and likeness of God. The divine love in the communion persons is permanent and indissoluble. The foundation of spousal love is the communion of persons in the image of God. This communion of persons is analogous to the

³⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 163-164, does not use the term ‘Trinitarian dimension’ of love but what this refers to is the perfect communion of persons, image of God in the mystery of the perfect communion of persons in the Holy Trinity. The love of spouses, founded on the communion of persons, is analogous to the Trinitarian love which is permanent and indissoluble.

perfect divine communion of persons in the Holy Trinity. The Trinitarian communion of persons is permanent and indissoluble which is the foundation of spousal love as a communion of persons seen in the image of God.

The divine love in the Trinitarian communion of persons is the foundation of spousal love. This particular spousal love is rooted in self-giving in the communion of persons. Spousal love is open to life. This love has three dimensions, forming the content of marriage namely, institution, covenant, and communion.³⁹ Marriage love is an institution because of its established governing order in the community; it is covenantal because the spouses mutually give themselves to and accept each other by exchanging consent, and it is communion because of it is rooted in love between man and woman and open to the other.

In *communio personarum*, John Paul II highlights the importance of the interpersonal relationship in marriage.⁴⁰ For the Pope, the most important point in the Trinitarian dimension of love is the gift of self, which is the communion of persons in marriage, especially in conjugal intercourse.⁴¹ Conjugal intercourse is not just a union of bodies but a true union of persons in the form of man and woman open to the gift of fertility as given by God from the ‘beginning’ becoming “one flesh.”⁴²

The human body expresses a meaning: man or woman, personhood in both external and internal aspects. When a man and a woman become parents, they are both marked

³⁹ John Paul II, *Mama and Woman*, 162; *Gaudium et Spes* 48; and Mary Shivanandan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love: A New Vision of Marriage in the Light of John Paul II's Anthropology* (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 82.

⁴⁰ John Paul, *Man and Woman*, 164.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 167.

(defined) internally and externally. This mark adds a new dimension to their communion of persons.⁴³ One becomes a mother and the other a father. In their relationship, the man must be open to becoming a father and a woman to becoming a mother. The communion of persons through conjugal love is expressed through the self gift of the body – “and the two will be one-flesh.”⁴⁴ This form of communion of persons is analogous to the divine communion of persons in love.

The conjugal union has an ethical dimension expressed with a normative character, “You shall not commit adultery” (5:27:-28).⁴⁵ The ethical dimension of conjugal union helps one to enter into the depth of his interior perception of values which is to realize the very meaning of being a person and, at the same time, is an expression of conscience as an answer of one’s own personal “I.”⁴⁶ Christ connects both interior and exterior dispositions of moral values: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you: Whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”⁴⁷ Christ wants man to go beyond the external observation of the commandments and connects them to the interior disposition based on love.

In other words: The action of looking lustfully finds its expression in an “act of the body,” when both man and woman are contrary to the law. John Paul II connects the Trinitarian communion of persons in love to the teaching on fidelity/faithful love between a

⁴³ Ibid. ‘marked’ by the character of parenthood, they are defined; one is becoming a father and the other a mother in the communion of persons.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁷ Ibid. See Also Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5: 21.

husband and a wife in marriage. Such faithful love is also analogous to the love between Christ and the Church.

The Second Vatican Council confirms that Christ our Lord has abundantly blessed marriage love, which is rich in its various features and modeled on Christ's own union with the Church.⁴⁸ The Church considers the intimate partnership in marriage to be sacred. This sacredness of marriage is:

rooted in the contract of its partners, that is, in their irrevocable personal consent. It is an institution confirmed by the divine law and receiving its stability, even in the eyes of society, from the human act by which the partners mutually surrender themselves to each other; for the good of the partners, and of children, and of society this sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone. For God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various benefits and with various ends in view.⁴⁹

The Council does not directly address the Trinitarian dimension but the indissoluble union of marriage between a man and a woman as having a theological nature. The theological nature is derived from the love of God that is the Trinitarian love between the communion of persons, God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This love is permanent and indissoluble. Therefore, Trinitarian love is analogous theologically to the love between a husband and wife. So when Jesus pointed to the “beginning” in his dialogue with the

⁴⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* See also Hildebrand von Dietrich, *In Defense of Purity; An Analysis of the Catholic Ideals of Purity and Virginity*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005) 67-72. According to Dietrich, the unitary love given in marriage bears the ‘seal of the lover.’ For him, this seal is Trinitarian in nature.

Pharisees, he presupposed the dignity and the vocation of women with all its dimensions: the ontological, biblical, and theological. Theologically, Trinitarian love finds an analogy in married love, in the unity and indissolubility of marriage. All of these factors confirm the authentic ontological dignity and vocation of women.

According to John Paul II, the “beginning” still requires a deeper reflection which helps man to understand the meaning of being and being in relationship. In his dialogue with the Pharisees, Jesus answered them, “Have you not read from the beginning *the Creator created them male and female* and said, ‘*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will be one flesh?*’”⁵⁰ This statement leads to an understanding of what it means “to be” and “to be in relationship” from the beginning. The beginning presupposes being in solitude and being in a relationship. The following section examines the meaning of man’s ‘being in solitude,’ in reference to the dignity and the vocation of women.

3. The Meaning of the Original Solitude: The Dignity and Vocation of Women

According to John Paul II, ‘original solitude’ has a wide range of meanings based on the two creation accounts: That is “God created man in his own image; ... male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27), and the Lord said, “It is not good for the man to be alone, I will make him a suitable partner for him” (Gen 2:18). These two accounts considered together

⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 132. According to John Paul II, Jesus pointing to the “beginning” recalls the dignity and vocation of women to God’s plan of creation. Marriage between man and woman falls into the same design. Therefore, a man will leave his father and mother to unite with his wife as planned by God.

provide the meaning of original solitude. However, the precise meaning is expressed in the desire of the Creator: “It is not good that the ‘man’ (male) should be alone; I want to make him a helper similar to himself” (Gen 2: 18).⁵¹ This statement indicates the immediate meaning of the original solitude. Man is alone. He has no one like him with whom to share his life.

The text is from the second creation account, analyzed together with the first, “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them,” (Gen 1:27) give the full meaning of original solitude. It is a two-fold meaning: first, from man’s very nature, which both male and female share in equal dignity as human beings from his humanity in the second creation account, and secondly, the meaning of creating male and female which is revealed in the original unity between male and female.⁵²

John Paul II highlights that, “Man is the highpoint of the whole order of creation in the visible world; the human race, which takes its origin from the calling into existence of man and woman, crowns the whole work of creation.”⁵³ He emphasizes that both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree because both are created in God’s image and likeness.⁵⁴ The ‘image and likeness of God,’ is the essential element in the nature of man as a human being. This essential element of human nature is passed on by the man and woman, as spouses and parents, to their descendants. “I want to make him a helper similar to himself”

⁵¹ Ibid., 146, It is God -Yahweh who speaks these words in Gen 2:18.

⁵² Ibid. The problem of the ‘original solitude’ appears in the second creation account of man. The first account does not mention this problem. In the first account, man is created in a single act as “male and female,” (Gen 1: 27), while in the second, woman is created afterward from the “rib” of the male.

⁵³ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

seems to underscore the meaning of the original solitude, but in the wider context of motives and circumstances it reveals the meaning of the original unity.⁵⁵ God shares his creativity in natural love.

This second meaning seems to link man with the need to “cultivate the ground” (Gen 2: 5) which corresponds to the first account, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28). God entrusts dominion over earth to human beings as persons, to all men and women, who derive their dignity and vocation from the “beginning.”⁵⁶ God intended that man exist only as man and woman, not one alone, but two, who, precisely because of their bodily sexual differences, are able to become “one flesh” in a conjugal love, a communion of persons.

The two creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 reveal the truth and the meaning of creation of original solitude of man but also of the person in a relationship made possible in the unity as man and woman.⁵⁷ According to John Paul II, the meaning and the truth about the creation of man and woman is seen from the mythological and metaphorical language which seems to be familiar and common to that time. For John Paul II, there is no essential contradiction between these two texts; instead, they help us to understand even more profoundly the fundamental truth concerning man created as man and woman, as male and female.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 148.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 150. For John Paul II, “The fact that man is ‘alone’ contains within itself this ontological structure, and, at the same time, it indicates authentic understanding.”

In Genesis 2:18-25, the woman is created by God “from the rib” of the man and is placed at his side as another “I” – as the companion of the man, who is alone in the surrounding world of living creatures and who finds none of them to be a “helper” suitable for himself.⁵⁹ Therefore, John Paul II points out that:

Called into existence in this way, the woman is immediately recognized by the man as “flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones” (cf. Gen 2:23) and for this very reason she is called “woman.” In biblical language this name indicates her essential identity with regard to man-*’is-’issah-* something which unfortunately modern languages in general are unable to express: She shall be called woman (*’issah*) because she was taken out of man (*’is*).⁶⁰

This text recalls the ontological foundations for equal dignity of man and woman as individuals, while emphasizing the divine source of their relation to each other. From the very beginning, both man and woman are human persons, different from all other beings around them, “*the woman is another “I” in a common humanity.*”⁶¹

From the very beginning, man and woman appeared as a “unity of the two.”⁶² Through the original solitude, the woman comes not only to be for the man, but as a “helper fit for him” (Gen 2: 20) to “subdue the earth” (Gen 1:28). But she is also a life companion,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 6. Also John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 147-153. According to the Pope, the intrinsic meaning of the original solitude is contained in the experience the man has from the beginning in the visible world as a body among bodies and discovers the meaning of his own bodies.

⁶² Ibid., 152.

“with whom as a wife, the man can unite himself, becoming with her “one flesh” and for this reason leaving “his father and his mother” (Gen 2:24).⁶³

According to John Paul II, original solitude includes both “self-consciousness and self-determination,” that is knowledge and freedom.⁶⁴ The fact that man is aware from his surroundings that he is “alone” contains within itself an ontological structure, and, at the same time, it indicates authentic understanding of man and woman.⁶⁵ This authentic understanding considered from the biblical creation account confirms God’s institution of marriage as an indissoluble condition for the transmission of life to new generations. The transmission of life in marriage is by its nature ordered by God: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28). This command reveals the inner nature of marriage which has a structure of freedom and will. Because of its inner nature, marriage then, is an inner self-giving expressed in the physical conjugal union, the union between a man and woman expressing their freedom and will.

The analysis of original solitude further shows that the male’s body is a sign of the gift to the female person and the female’s body is a sign of the gift to the male person.⁶⁶ The statement, “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2: 23) reveals the excitement of the man for this gift. This excitement is significant in understanding the original unity which exists precisely to overcome the original solitude as a husband and wife.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 153.

The following section examines the meaning of the original unity in light of the dignity and vocation of women.

4. The Meaning of the Original Unity in Light of the Dignity and Vocation of Women

Based on scripture, the meaning of the “original unity” is the desire of the Creator that man should not exist “alone” (Gen 2: 18). From the very beginning, scripture shows that man exists fully in God’s design as a unity of the two sexes that are in spousal relation with each other.⁶⁷ It should be clear that the ‘original solitude’ refers to generic ‘man’ created as male and female from the beginning (Gen 1:27). The being, man, created in the image and likeness of God, inheres in human femininity and masculinity. These are the two ways of being human. It is in the difference between man and woman that the meaning of original unity appears. The desire of the Creator is fundamental to understanding the original unity. This is why “a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will be ‘one flesh’ (Mt 19: 5).”⁶⁸ Uniting and becoming ‘one flesh’ is of God and has a theological significance. The Creator’s intention is that the two become one in conjugal fidelity.

⁶⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

⁶⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 156.

According to John Paul II: “Uniting and becoming one flesh” goes deeper than just the union of bodies, and such can only be a union of bodies as male and female, man and woman.⁶⁹ The Pope notes that:

the human body carries within itself the signs of sex and is by its nature male or female, For this reason, the meaning of original solitude, which can be referred simply to “man,” is substantially prior to the meaning of original unity; the latter is based on masculinity and femininity, which are, as it were, two different “incarnations,” that is, two ways in which the same human being, created “in the image of God” (Gen 1: 27), “is a body.”⁷⁰

It is important to note that for John Paul II, the ‘original solitude’ in reality is the state of “man” as human being, either male or female, created in image and likeness of God. The ‘original unity’ is a unity of male and female, masculine and feminine, man as husband and woman as wife.⁷¹

The ‘unity of the two’ inheres in something at the core of human nature, as such. That is, the communion of persons. This unity of the two is “a question here of a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man being a person in the image and likeness of God. ‘Being in the image and likeness of God’ here means existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I.’”⁷² According to John Paul II, original unity, which is the union between a man and woman, has a theological implication based on its being in “image and

⁶⁹ Ibid., 157.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

likeness of God.” The theological implication is that both man and woman are called to live in a communion of love as husband and wife founded in the love of God in his image and likeness which they share in nature. The Pope explains that:

The fact that man “created as man and woman” is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a “unity of the two” in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love, that is in God, through which the three persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God through the unity of divinity, exist as persons through the inscrutable divine relationship. Only in this way can we understand the truth that God in himself is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:16).⁷³

John Paul II said that “*the image and likeness of God in man*, created as man and woman (in the analogy that can be presumed between Creator and creature), thus also expresses the ‘unity of the two’ in their common humanity.”⁷⁴ In this aspect of a relationship, every individual human is created in the image and likeness of God. But the “unity of the two,” man and woman reveal that the creature man is also marked by a certain likeness to the divine communion.⁷⁵ This divine communion is the love of God experienced in the union of the two. The divine communion therefore, is the foundation of the whole human “*ethos*”

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. For John Paul “image and likeness” emphasizes the communion in love which exists in the divine nature as good.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

which is rooted in the “image and likeness of God” which a human being bears within himself from the beginning.⁷⁶ That *ethos* “reaches its apex in the *commandment of love*,” expressed in the unity of the two.⁷⁷ Therefore, for John Paul II, *ethos* is expressed in the communion of love between the two as man and woman.

In the “unity of the two,” man and woman are called to exist not only “side by side” or “together,” but they are also called *to exist mutually* “one for the other.”⁷⁸ This existing side by side explains the meaning of the “help” reported: “I will make him *a helper fit for him*” (Gen 2: 18-25). The word “help” forms the fundamental essence of the communion of persons. The word ‘helper’ presupposes mutuality. Therefore, the term “help” is significant for man and woman to understand that, by their very being, each is called to be for the other. In other words, man and woman are called into being in “*interpersonal communion*.”⁷⁹ According to the Pope, “we can easily understand that – on this fundamental level – it is a question of ‘*help*’ on the part of both, and at the same time a mutual ‘*help*.’”⁸⁰ It is important to note that the unity of man and woman is a self-donation between man and woman within

⁷⁶ Ibid. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 694, *ethos* is a Greek word which means, attitude, mentality, spirituality, here it means the interior form, the soul, as it were, of human morality. It is an interior perception of values.

⁷⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

⁷⁸ Ibid. See also Shivanandan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love*, 87. For Shivanandan, the unity of man and woman can be viewed from two perspectives. First, they are contained in the dimension of being and in concrete action. That is, being in action, the communion of persons.

⁷⁹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 686, communion comes as a shared life on the basis of the two principles of the life of persons on p. 161, the word “*help*” suggests the concept of complementarity which is similar to the concept in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24. Here, communion of persons means living reciprocally “for,” in a relation of reciprocal giving. Basically, it means living in mutual communion in a complementary manner.

⁸⁰ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

human nature. “Donation” here means giving the gift of each other in order to become a mother and a father. This natural giving reveals the full meaning of original unity.⁸¹

According to John Paul II, ‘original unity’ is also the foundation of the “communion of persons.”⁸² ‘Communion’ is an interior disposition to accept the other person. The other person must be desired for the love of God.⁸³ The communion of persons is a lived experience between man and woman in a historical concrete situation, “being for the other.”⁸⁴

In accord with God’s will, marriage is the integration of *what is “masculine” and what is “feminine.”*⁸⁵ From the “beginning,” the “communion of persons” helps the man and the woman discover the truth of their existence from their experience in the world.⁸⁶ Therefore, the communion of persons created in the image and likeness of God is fundamental in understanding marriage between a man and a woman. According to John Paul II, the communion of persons is essential in marriage as well as in the history of salvation.⁸⁷

The Second Vatican Council indicates that man is “the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake,” and that, “man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself.”⁸⁸ The sincere self-giving presupposes a receiver, a receiver proper to the giver, which is only possible between a man and a woman in conjugal union.

⁸¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 161- 163.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸³ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* ‘Communion’ arises from a shared life on the basis of the two principles of life as husband and wife.

⁸⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

⁸⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

John Paul II links the theology of the body, from the beginning to the creation of man in the image and likeness of God. The theology of the body is a theology of sex, or of sexual difference, masculinity and femininity.⁸⁹ Within this framework of sex differences, special qualities proper to each sex identify the truth of the dignity and vocation of women, men as well as spouses and parents.⁹⁰

John Paul II explains that, in accordance with God's plan, original unity through the body ("and the two will be one flesh") possesses two dimensions.⁹¹ These dimensions are, namely, an ethical dimension as shown by Christ's response to the Pharisee (Mt 19: 3-6; Mk 10:2-9) and a sacramental dimension, as is confirmed by St. Paul (Eph 5: 29-32) in the tradition of the prophets Hosea, Isaiah and Ezekiel, among others.⁹²

4. 1. The Ethical Dimension of the Original Unity

The meaning of the body as perceived in the original unity is expressed in the Bible as masculine and feminine. Sexual unity is the only way that the two can unite to become one flesh.⁹³ Becoming one flesh requires being open to fruitful free choice in conjugal union. The idea of freedom of choice in the unity of the two is the ethical dimension of the original

⁸⁹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 165.

⁹⁰ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

⁹¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 165.

⁹² Ibid. "No one, in fact, ever hates his own flesh, but he nourishes and cares for it, as Christ does with the Church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; I say this with reference to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5:29-32).

⁹³ Ibid., 167.

unity. Freedom of choice in selection of a marriage partner gives full meaning to the union of the two as man and woman in the “communion of persons.”⁹⁴

The ethical dimension of original unity is rooted in the meaning of the body, created as “male and female” from the beginning (Gen 2:23). In reality, the coexistence of sexual difference, in the feminine body and the masculine body proclaims the divine purpose of their differences.⁹⁵ The difference provided by the Creator makes possible the unity of man and woman. Becoming ‘one flesh’ constitutes the full meaning of original unity.

The two reciprocal ways of “being a body” and at the same time “being human” is proclaimed within the body.⁹⁶ Man is aware of this. Thus, there is a self-knowledge and a self-determination which arises from the body. The human in search of identity emerges through sexuality, either masculine or feminine. This search requires a choice and responsibility.

According to John Paul II, man and woman have been created for unity; it is “precisely this *unity, through which they become “one flesh,” has from the beginning the character of union that derives from a choice.*”⁹⁷ The choice is within the nature of man, using self-consciousness and self-determination to decide his destiny. That is why: “‘a man will leave his father and his mother and unite with his wife.’ While man in his generation is

⁹⁴ Ibid. See also William E. May, “Natural Law Methodology and Sexuality,” in *Sexuality: Theological Voices*, by Kevin Thomas McMahon (Braintree, Massachusetts: The Pope John XXIII Center, 1987), 71- 73, here May emphasizes a twofold way of being human which is rooted in man’s nature, that is the being and the dignity of being human. That is, the natural law of order. John Paul summarizes that the twofold ways being human are proclaimed within the human body.

⁹⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 167. See also John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 18;

⁹⁶ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 166. Here, John Paul II emphasizes that in sexual differences as male and female here meaning revealed in original unity.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 165.

ordered ‘by nature’ with his father and mother, yet ‘he unites,’ with his wife by free choice.’⁹⁸

John Paul II defines Genesis 2:24 as a union with the character of “conjugal bond” in reference to Adam and Eve as Christ referred to it in his dialogue with the Pharisees.⁹⁹ That is from the beginning, *the Creator created them male and female* and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and joined to his wife, and the two will be one flesh’ (Eph. 5:31).¹⁰⁰ For Jesus, the statement about the indissoluble unity between husband and wife is relevant through all generations. This union of a man and a woman becoming one flesh is sacramental in nature because of the communion of love seen in the “image and likeness of God.”

4. 2. The Sacramental Dimension of the Original Unity

The Sacramental dimension of original unity is based on the character of the conjugal bond between man and woman in the communion of love, becoming one flesh, as a visible ‘image and likeness of God’ in reference to the beginning.¹⁰¹ A sacrament is a visible sign given by Christ and the Church which reveals God’s deeper relationship with His people. As persons, both man and woman bear the dignity of the image of God. The original union becomes an authentic reference to union between man and woman as husband and wife.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 166, the character of the conjugal bond, for John Paul II is the capacity to love and to establish love.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 167-168.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 168.

That is, ‘one flesh’ remains the model of union for all couples who at any period unite in marriage.¹⁰² The unity in ‘one flesh’ constitutes being a wife and a husband. Christ has proclaimed that a husband and a wife together form a conjugal covenant that is indissoluble: “What God has joined together, no human being must separate” (Mt 19:6).¹⁰³ They are expected by God to marry and have children and show God’s love. Therefore, the conjugal union between man and woman corresponds to the desire of the Creator from the beginning. This original desire is sacramental by nature, the visible sign of God’s love.

Since the human body has meaning, the conjugal union presupposes a mature consciousness of the person. Within the conjugal union, there is “*a particular awareness of the meaning of that body in reciprocal self-gift of the person.*”¹⁰⁴ That awareness of the self gives fulfillment to the person as one giving the gift of oneself. Such self-gift is reciprocal.

John Paul II maintains that the sacramental dimension of original unity has an anthropological as well as a theological meaning. This anthropological meaning arises from the person’s knowledge of the body modulated by the person’s masculinity or femininity. This gender-driven awareness from the beginning, reminds each one of his/her ontological reciprocity.¹⁰⁵ The woman is “flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones.”¹⁰⁶ The anthropological meaning is inherent in the reality of the “body.” The theological meaning is

¹⁰² John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 1132. See also *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

¹⁰³ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48, the intimate community of conjugal life and love, established by the Creator and structured by its own laws, is established by the conjugal covenant, that is to say, by irrevocable personal consent. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 168.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 166. Masculinity and femininity are the two ways of “being a body” at the same time as being human, complementary dimensions in the eyes of God and being in the world.

¹⁰⁶ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 164.

revealed in the words uttered in matrimony which carry the vitality of sexual experience: That is, when man and woman are united with each other in the conjugal act to become “one flesh” they discover in a special way the mystery of creation, back to the union in humanity, “flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bones.”¹⁰⁷

Both the anthropological and theological meanings of the body are also ethical and cultural. The ethical meaning of the body is precisely because of the function of sex. That is, being male or female is “constitutive for the person’ not only ‘an attribute of the person,’” but also “shows how deeply man, with all his spiritual solitude with the uniqueness and unrepeatability proper to the person, is constituted by the body as ‘she’ or ‘he.’”¹⁰⁸ When a human matures, the body becomes sensitive to its opposite as male or female and is controlled by an ethic, namely, that which is good according to the dignity of the human. Ethically, there are several values, religious, cultural and moral, regulated by freedom to choose and act with respect to the dignity of the human.

From the general experience, human culture and customs determine and regulate the sexual behavior of human beings as male and female, woman and man. In this sense, culture influences ethical values. Also, culture regulates and controls reverence for a person. For example, in some cultures in Africa, when a woman’s body shows signs of maturity, she gets special recognition and the respect given to women as mothers of human life. Such respect is

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 167-168.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 169.

given because this young woman in her conjugal union with a man will be “a new discovery of the unitive meaning of the body in its masculinity and femininity.”¹⁰⁹

According to John Paul II, through the union of two becoming ‘one flesh,’ the woman as a “wife” becomes the mother of life, or in the biblical language, she is the mother of all the living (Gen 3:20). In this sense, the mystery of procreation is linked to marriage from the beginning.¹¹⁰

To sum up, the gift of motherhood has an ontological character as given by the Creator. Motherhood is a gift given in the body of a woman experienced through the conjugal union in marriage. Through the conjugal union, the body of a man and a woman realize the meaning of the gift expressed in human love. This love is rooted in the natural order of creation, which allows man and woman to discover themselves through the sincere gift of self.¹¹¹ The natural order of creation recognizes woman as a mother and man as a father through the process of procreation. In this process of procreation, both man and woman are seen in the dimension of the gift. The dimension of the gift reflects the dignity of motherhood.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, no 24.

5. The Dimension of the “Gift” in Reference to the Dignity and Vocation of Women

The dimension of the gift is experienced within the conjugal union of the bodies of the man and woman. The conjugal union of the bodies of the man and woman is characterized by the distinction of the gift. Such a union is ontological, inhering in the nature of man and woman created as male and female.¹¹² The man and woman “express love in which the human person becomes a gift and through this gift realizes the meaning of his being.”¹¹³

The dimension of the gift is fundamental to understanding the depth of the original solitude and original unity from the beginning. The original solitude brought forth the desire of man for the original unity, but in the dimension of mutual giving. The gift reveals the ontological meaning of the body as male and female in the theological mystery of creation. This mystery is revealed in the unity of man and woman through their bodies becoming one flesh. The dimension of the ‘gift’ has its significance in that the bodies mutually given and received presuppose love. The love, which is expressed in the communion of persons, goes beyond the conjugal union of man and woman, which expresses the dignity of the human person.

The author of Genesis does not use the word love in the creation account, but often repeats “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31).¹¹⁴

This “good” reveals the intention of the Creator. According to John Paul II, only love gives

¹¹² John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 682.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* See also John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 25. Here, the Pope emphasizes what authentic love brings to the relationship between husband and wife, the reciprocity and affirmation of being for the other.

¹¹⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 180.

rise to the good and God is well-pleased with the good.¹¹⁵ Therefore, every creature bears within itself the sign of the original and fundamental gift (love), but it is only man whom God willed for his own sake, who can fully participate in this mystery of creation through the gift of self.¹¹⁶

The dimension of the gift indicates a relationship. That is, when a gift is given and received, there is an interaction between the persons. This interaction establishes a relationship in giving and receiving which the man was not able to establish from the beginning without the woman. In the mind of the author of Genesis, it is clear that man alone (Adam) could not realize the essence of creation (Gen 2:18).¹¹⁷

The dimension of the gift is realized precisely in the two words, “alone” and “helper.”¹¹⁸ These two words point at how fundamental and constitutive the relationship and the communion of persons is for man.¹¹⁹ This relationship overcomes man’s original solitude. His fulfillment requires Eve. They complete each other, male and female. For John Paul II, the female’s body expresses “femininity ‘for’ masculinity and, vice versa, the male’s body expresses masculinity ‘for’ femininity, each manifesting the reciprocity in the communion of persons.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Ibid. See also 1 Cor 13.

¹¹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

¹¹⁷ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 182.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. The communion of persons here means living in a reciprocal “for,” in a relationship of reciprocal giving.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 183.

The human body is: a witness to creation as a fundamental gift which fulfills the very meaning of being and existence.¹²¹ The awareness of masculinity and femininity by man and woman is the original sign of the body as a gift. It is through the awareness of this dimension of the gift that the body enters into the theology of the body, that is, the human body having a theological and anthropological meaning. This reciprocity John Paul II calls the “spousal” meaning of the body.¹²² The spousal meaning of the body is the experience of a man and a woman in the form of a gift of self, with a character of love. The gift signifies the blessed virginity and at the same time signifies the gift of motherhood. And there are two dimensions of the gift. That is, marriage and in virginity.

5. 1. The Dimensions of the Gift: Marriage and Virginity

According to John Paul II, there are two dimensions of motherhood seen as “the fulfillment of female personality.”¹²³ These are: the dimension of the gift in marriage and that in virginity. In his mind, these two dimensions are so connected that one does not exclude the other; rather, each is complementary to the other.¹²⁴ At the Annunciation, the question the Virgin of Nazareth asked, confirmed the link between marriage and virginity: “How can this be since I have no husband” (Lk 1:31, 34)? The Angel confirmed to the Virgin Mary that

¹²¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 186.

¹²² John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 17. ‘Revelation’ here means the extraordinary sense of the human body in the dimension of the gift and communion whereby the body becomes a witness of life and love. In this context of life and love the female body fulfills its ontological dignity as the mother of human life. At this level of revelation, life, and love, the theology of the body enters into the dignity of motherhood.

¹²³ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 17.

¹²⁴ Ibid. See also David S. Crawford’s mind, *Marriage and the Sequela Christi: A Study of Marriage as a “State of Perfection” in the Light of Henri de Lubec’s Theology of Nature and Grace* (Rome Italy: Lateran University Press, 2004), 82 -96. In Crawford, marriage and virginity exist as states of life.

“‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you’ – your motherhood will be not of the consequence of matrimonial ‘knowledge’” (Lk 1:34).¹²⁵ This revelation confirms that Mary’s virginity co-exists with motherhood in the form of a gift. Therefore her motherhood is “not as a consequence of the matrimonial ‘knowledge,’ but ... the work of the Holy Spirit; the power of the Most High will ‘overshadow,’” her.¹²⁶ Here, the Virgin Mother, the “woman” of Nazareth, is revealed as the model of both vocations.

Mary’s motherhood co-existed with virginity as a gift. Her motherhood exemplifies the creative dimension of virginity in the life of a woman. John Paul II wants to show that “*virginity and motherhood co-exist in her.*”¹²⁷ Indeed, both exist in every woman as a value and do not exclude or undermine the other. Rather, each adds a meaning to the other. A woman can choose to live the dignity of womanhood in either way as a form of the gift. In fact, Mary’s confirmation that she had preserved her virginity is an indication that virginity is of great significance of motherhood. Virginity and motherhood co-existed in Mary and indeed in every woman as a value of the dignity of womanhood.

Mary, as a Virgin and as the Mother of God, becomes the model of both self-gift in marriage and self-gift in consecrated life - spiritual motherhood. These two dimensions of the gift “acquire their full meaning and value in Mary ... Mother of the Son of God.”¹²⁸ Marriage and virginity offer two dimensions in which the vocation and the dignity of women

¹²⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 17. ‘Knowledge’ here means that there is freedom and love in accepting motherhood through the conjugal union between a man and a woman known as ‘biblical knowledge.’

¹²⁶ John Paul, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 17.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* According to John Paul II, virginity and motherhood do not exclude each other or place limits on each other. The Blessed Virgin Mary is an example and helps one to appreciate the co-existence of both elements in the dignity of womanhood.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

may be realized in love from the biblical “beginning.” Virginity, however, is a supernatural gift, based on the image of God, and seen in the life to come, the eschatological state.

Women who accept their vocation as a gift, choose the married life or virginity as a way of motherhood. By accepting one form of the gift, they choose marriage or the consecrated life. Through this dimension of the gift, motherhood and virginity become meaningful, something of great value and beauty, lived and offered for the intimate love of the Creator: the giver of life.

5. 2. The Gift of Motherhood in Marriage

In the “usual order of things motherhood is a result of a mutual ‘knowledge’ between a man and woman in the marriage.”¹²⁹ This kind of mutual knowledge leads to the understanding between husband and wife in a relationship open to the full meaning of woman’s motherhood as a gift. This relationship leads to the exchange of the gift of the body; the mutual union between man and woman expresses and reveals a sincere gift of self. Such “union brings about on the woman’s part a special ‘gift of self,’ as an expression of the spousal love whereby the two become ‘one flesh.’”¹³⁰ According to John Paul II, in the natural order of creation, motherhood is the fruit of a marriage union between a man and woman, which corresponds to the biblical “knowledge”: becoming one flesh.¹³¹ The idea of the gift opens up a new dimension in life: that is, a new human being who is also in the

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., no. 18.

likeness of his/her parents.¹³² For the Pope, the idea of the gift is fundamental in the marriage relationship without which it loses its authentic value.

For him, motherhood implies “from the beginning a special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman’s ‘part.’”¹³³ That is:

In this openness, in receiving and giving birth to a child, the woman “discovers herself through a sincere gift of self.” The gift of interior readiness to accept the child and bring it into the world is linked to the marriage union, which- as mentioned earlier-should constitute a special moment in the mutual self-giving both the woman and the man.¹³⁴

John Paul II presents the dimension of motherhood in marriage as having four fundamental characteristics, namely: i) the ‘self-gift,’ ii) the ‘covenantal,’ element of the ‘gift,’ iii) the ‘sacredness’ of motherhood, and iv) the hierarchical aspect of motherhood. The following sections examine these characteristics of motherhood in marriage.

5. 2. 1. The “Self-Gift” of Motherhood in Marriage

According to John Paul II, motherhood as ‘self-gift’ in marriage is based on the ‘adequate anthropology’ which seeks to understand the value and the respect in the meaning

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

of the body as a gift. He emphasizes the theological meaning of the body as gift is in the relationship to the giver. For him, a woman is uniquely privileged in the mystery of creation.¹³⁵ That is, “in the mystery of creation the woman is the one who is ‘given’ to the man, while the man receives her as a gift,” and there is an exchange of the gift, where each one enriches the other.¹³⁶ In a marriage relationship, the emphasis is on the “self-gift” to the other. This is not just a theoretical or abstract definition of personhood but essentially gives the meaning of being human and being in relation, which is precisely the communion of persons. In other words, being human and being in relation mean being in a communion of love. In a sense, motherhood is the practical and fundamental path of self-giving in the communion of persons. For John Paul II, “Motherhood is the fruit of the marriage union of man and woman, of the biblical ‘knowledge,’ which corresponds to the ‘union of the two in one flesh.’”¹³⁷

Motherhood depends upon the “gift of interior readiness to accept the child and bring it into the world” in the marriage relationship.¹³⁸ From the beginning, her body has profound structural realities which enable conjugal union and childbearing. According to John Paul II, motherhood is an internal structure given in the body from the beginning. The idea of the ‘self-gift’ in marriage gives a biblical theological significance to motherhood. Every conception and birth of a child is a reminder of Eve’s words: “I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord” (Gen 4:1). For John Paul II the “exclamation of Eve, the

¹³⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 197.

¹³⁶ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 197.

¹³⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 196-198.

¹³⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18.

‘Mother of all the living’ is repeated every time a human being comes into the world.”¹³⁹

This exclamation expresses the woman’s joy at giving birth to a new life, but it also reveals awareness that she shares in the great mystery of generation.

In a special way, women share in the mystery of generation. Indeed this is a great mystery which became the core of the dignity and vocation of women in the teaching of John Paul II. Men can only share in it when women allow them through the ‘self-gift.’ But even though they share, men cannot participate at the same level of pain and joy as being a mother of a child. According to John Paul II, *motherhood constitutes a special ‘part’ in this shared parenthood and the most demanding part.*¹⁴⁰ In this dimension of ‘the self-gift,’ it is clear that human parenthood is shared by both man and woman, even if the woman, out of the love for her husband says: “I have given you a child,” her words mean “this is our child.”¹⁴¹

Finally, *motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and the personal dimension of the gift.*¹⁴² The child is granted to the woman (her womb) by the Creator and it is linked to her in a special way with “a sincere gift of self.”¹⁴³ The Pope acknowledges that:

It is the woman who “pays” directly for this shared generation, which literally absorbs the energies of her body and soul. It is therefore necessary that *the man* be fully aware that in their shared parenthood he owes *a special debt to*

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

the woman. No program of “equal rights” between women and men is valid unless it takes this fact fully into account.¹⁴⁴

In reality, sometimes, bringing the idea of equal rights into a family can distort the fundamental dimension of the gift of self in marriage and family. This occurs, for example, when the rights of parents are perceived only as legal rights, when rights regarding the parenting of a child are based solely on legal definitions and not on the self-gift or love for those involved. A clear example is how in the family where there is no ‘gift of self’ in marriage, parenthood fails. Then what follows is divorce or separation. The father and the mother then start demanding the legal right to ‘parenthood,’ (child custody). Such demands are based on external legal rights and not on the dimension of ‘self-gift’ which is internal. According to the teachings of John Paul II, parenthood is internally structured on love and is expressed in the “self-gift.” Therefore any claim for “equal rights” or “human rights” to parenthood in such a case distorts the nature of motherhood in marriage and family. Self-gift presupposes a sincere gift of self and the consequence of its failure cannot be fully repaired.

The motherhood of the Blessed Mother Mary is understood in the light of the Gospel: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked!” (Lk 11: 27-28). The idea of ‘self-gift’ is the deepest expression of the dignity of motherhood. The idea of the ‘self-gift’ includes both the spiritual and the physical and reveals the theological and anthropological meaning of the body. That is, motherhood in reference to the body and in the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

order of the spirit.¹⁴⁵ Both the spiritual and the physiological dimensions make possible the covenantal aspect of motherhood. Motherhood is an internal reality in the spiritual order of a covenantal character and disposition.

5. 2. 2. The Covenantal Character of Motherhood

John Paul II sees the covenantal dimension of motherhood as an internal disposition to accept the gift of life. Covenantal motherhood is understood in the light of the Gospel and expresses a “profound *listening to the word of the living God*” and a readiness to accept the will of God.¹⁴⁶ Mary’s response at the Annunciation, “Let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:31) confirms the reality of motherhood in the spirit. Her words signify a sincere readiness to accept a new life with love. This covenant, Mary’s maternal “fiat,” marks the prelude to God’s *New Covenant with humanity*.¹⁴⁷ This covenant is built on an internal disposition to accept the will of God. Through the idea of the covenantal spiritual motherhood, the idea makes it possible to understand the covenant that God made with humanity through Christ. The eternal and definitive covenant is in Christ, “in his body and

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., no. 19.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. John Paul II emphasizes the interior disposition which is significant in the “listening to the inner voice. See also John S. Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University Press, 2003), 29 – 48, Grabowski elaborates the idea of covenant; it binds a relationship between the parties, it is a legal contract, agreement, it is a pledge of one’s property, a disposal of oneself in truth and beliefs. In Mary’s case, it is an inner disposition, openness, and readiness to accept the gift. In marriage: it is that readiness and openness to accept before the actual celebration of the sacrament of marriage, or the actual exchange of vows.

¹⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 19.

blood, in his Cross and Resurrection.”¹⁴⁸ Christ will be the eternal covenant in his blood, but Mary begins the new covenant in her motherhood.¹⁴⁹

The biblical covenant finds its exemplar in the ‘woman’ culminating in the motherhood of the Mother of God.¹⁵⁰ Mary’s covenantal motherhood is understood by her openness to the will of God; it is a spiritual readiness to the will of God. This covenant is repeated every time a woman accepts the will of God and becomes a mother. Our first parents rejected the covenant through original sin, but Mary the Mother of God renewed it through obedience. The words of Jesus: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Lk 11:27-28), indicate a deeper meaning of the spiritual motherhood through the covenant.

John Paul II explains the deeper meaning of motherhood in the order of the spirit that is understood in the light of the Gospel. According to him, it is “precisely those born of earthly mothers, the sons and daughters of the human race, who receive from the Son of God the power to become ‘children of God’” (Jn 1:12).¹⁵¹ The history of every human being passes through the threshold of a woman’s motherhood; crossing it conditions “the revelation of the children of God” (cf. Rom 8:19).¹⁵²

The concept of covenantal motherhood is relevant in understanding the marriage covenant, because a covenant demands love and fidelity. First, the marriage covenant is built

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

on the mutual consent of husband and wife in their inner disposition, readiness, and willingness to bring a new life into the world. The content of this covenant is acknowledged by a woman long before the actual union as husband and wife. In the African tradition as explained previously, the idea of internal covenant is marked by the external stages of marriage preparation. That is, when a young African woman accepts a proposal of marriage, it is as if she has said, “Yes, let it be done to me according to the plan of God.”

In the Gospel, the covenant is expressed through Mary’s maternal ‘fiat,’ while in the Christian marriage the content of the covenant is expressed during the period of the engagement and is later ratified and affirmed through the exchange of consent and conjugal union. Christian marriage is a process. The most important aspect of motherhood is the readiness and willingness on the part of a woman to bring forth human life, both spiritual and physical life. Since it is the woman who has a special connection to the generation of human life, her motherhood is ‘hierarchical’ in nature.¹⁵³

5. 2. 3. The Hierarchical Aspect of Motherhood

The Second Vatican Council, in *Lumen Gentium* no. 18, teaches that there is a hierarchical aspect in the Church. This hierarchy is the governing body. In this type of leadership, the Church shepherds her flock through the Pope, Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. These people participate in the ministerial priesthood of Christ in hierarchical order. But as

¹⁵³ Ibid., no. 27.

the people of God, “*all the baptized share the one priesthood of Christ,*” in which everyone offers his or her life as a gift in light to the priestly, prophetic and kingly mission of Christ.¹⁵⁴

The hierarchical order of the Church refers to the Church as a governing body, however, the hierarchical structure of the Church is also “totally ordered to the holiness of Christ’s members. The ‘holiness’ is measured according to the ‘great mystery’ in which the “Bride responds with the gift of love to the Bridegroom.”¹⁵⁵ According to John Paul II, the ministerial priesthood of Christ, the Bridegroom is characterized by service. In this service, members are called to respond to the ‘great mystery’ of Christ and the Church, that is, as the bride for whom Christ offered his life.¹⁵⁶

The ‘hierarchy’ of the Church is charged with providing the means to ‘holiness’ for its members.¹⁵⁷ Holiness is the essential responsibility of the Church’s hierarchy. The Second Vatican Council, relying on the tradition of the Church, proclaims that the ‘woman,’ Mary of Nazareth, precedes everyone in this path to holiness.¹⁵⁸ The Blessed Virgin Mary of Nazareth responded to God in accepting the gift of the Son of God, and she became the first in the order of service to human life.

Every woman who accepts the gift of human life through spousal love participates in the natural ‘hierarchical’ order given to women in service to human life. That is, looking at human life as a gift is the ‘great mystery’ in which the Bride returns the gift of love to the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. According to John Paul II, the participation in the hierarchical priesthood of Christ is on the order of holiness. See also 1 Pt 3:15; Rev 5:10; and 1 Pt 2:9.

¹⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 65. See also no. 63 and John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

Bridegroom. Considering human life as a gift, every woman shares in this hierarchy in the order of service to human life. In this sense, motherhood is hierarchical in this order of service to human life and in holiness. The service and the spirit of life that a woman gives to humankind are connected to the mystery of procreation. Therefore, the image of motherhood in the theology of the body is sacred. Thus motherhood is a ‘sacred gift.’

5. 2. 4. Motherhood Seen as a “Sacred Gift”

According to John Paul II, motherhood is a sacred gift experienced through the mystery of generation. After the conception of a child, a woman experiences, the child developing in her womb. She feels wonder at the mystery of life and knows by unique intuition what is happening inside her womb.¹⁵⁹ This experience gives women a special character and sensitivity to their own child and to other children as well.¹⁶⁰ This unique gift is a sacred God-given gift of life given to a woman as the mother of human life.

The mystery of generation is linked to God himself and is manifested in a woman’s motherhood in a special way. It is part of her being a woman. A man only learns about his fatherhood from her.¹⁶¹ A greater maternal contribution to this great mystery is the upbringing of a child. Motherhood is part of being a woman, while for a man, his parenthood as protector “always remains ‘outside’ his being.”¹⁶² At the birth of a child, both men and women feel excited, however, they experience parenthood in different ways. The woman

¹⁵⁹ John Paul, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no 19.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

feels motherhood within herself while the man becomes a father through his wife.¹⁶³ It is only when a woman accepts the responsibility of becoming a mother that the man participates responsibly by providing protection and love to both the mother and the child in the family.

In the process of generation, through the dimension of the gift, the woman is assured of love and protection from her husband, and, for her part, receives and accepts the human life growing in her womb: the first home of human life. Therefore, the woman is the sacred shrine of human life. And because life is a gift from God, a woman enjoys the dignity of motherhood and a special participation in the mystery of generation. Her openness to receiving and nurturing human life is rooted in her very being as a woman, given in the “spousal” meaning of the body. The following section explains the “spousal” meaning of the body, one of the special themes in understanding the dignity and vocation of a woman as a mother and wife.

6. The “Spousal” Meaning of the Body: The Dignity of Motherhood

The “spousal” meaning of the body is the capacity to give and sustain human life. This meaning is experienced through the conjugal union of the bodies of a man and a woman

¹⁶³ Ibid.

in an expression of love.¹⁶⁴ In this process of conjugal union, there is a giving and receiving of the gift of the body. Here both the man and the woman discover the meaning of their being spouses in the revelation of their conjugal love. So there is both discovery of the “spousal” meaning of the body and a revelation which is “love.”¹⁶⁵ Therefore, one can conclude that the human body is marked from the beginning with masculinity and femininity in order to end in spousal union.¹⁶⁶

From the “beginning,” the man and woman appeared in their original state of innocent, with an “interior freedom.”¹⁶⁷ This is the state before the fall which reveals the plan of God in creating man and woman. The fact that they were naked and not ashamed reveals the ‘spousal character’ of the body in their original innocence. They discovered the spousal meaning of the body as a gift. This gift of the body recalls man’s original happiness in their relationship to each other as husband and wife. This is the spousal relationship, marked by ‘interior freedom,’ or an interior disposition which reveals love.

This interior freedom is not just “sexual instinct” which stimulates fruitfulness and procreation, common in all living animals as female and male.¹⁶⁸ John Paul II notes that the human body (in its sex) is a mystery of creation. It is not only:

a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order, but contains “from the beginning” the “spousal” attribute, that is, *the power to*

¹⁶⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 185.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 184 - 185. See also Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man who became Pope John Paul II*, translated by Paolo Guetti and Francesca Murphy (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 94-106.

¹⁶⁶ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 187.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 189. See also Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue*, 128 -132.

¹⁶⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 184.

express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift
 and - through the gift – fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence. ...
 man is the only creature in the visible world that God willed “for its own
 sake,” ... man cannot “fully find himself except through a sincere gift of
 self.”¹⁶⁹

Note that from the very beginning, man and woman were naked and were not
 ashamed. Nakedness is integral to man and woman.

Being male and female is the truth about the mystery of creation of man and woman.
 This sexual difference is the value of the gift; one longs to be given only what one does not
 have. The idea of “shame” comes to existence in the absence of the “gift.” The idea of shame
 enters into man and woman’s relationship precisely when one feels the threat of selfish use,
 the lack of sincerity in self-giving of the body. In this context, there is no real dimension of
 the gift; no spousal meaning of the body; thus, there is no respect for the dignity of
 motherhood. That is, when there is no sincere self-giving, there is a sense of *self-mastery*
 (self-dominion) in the relationship between man and woman as husband and wife.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., See also *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24; and Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, translated by H. T. Willetts (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 1993), 57, Wojtyła, write the “principles of sex and sexual urge are not solely and exclusively a specific part of the psycho-physical make-up of man. The sexual urge owes its objective importance to its connection with the divine work of creation.” In this work of creation, a woman has a special role that gives meaning to her dignity and vocation.

¹⁷⁰ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 186. ‘*Self-mastery*’ is an interior hindrance for the self-gift in the conjugal union of the body. It is an inner power to dominate or use the other person not according to the will of the Creator.

The idea of the ‘spousal meaning’ of the body in the marriage relationship helps in understanding the fulfillment of the woman as a person from the beginning.¹⁷¹ The question which Jesus asks the Pharisees, “Have you not read from the beginning the Creator created them male and female?” (Mt 19:4) is an indication that man can act contrary to the expectation of the original plan of the Creator. Whenever man goes against the plan of God, he acts contrary to his own personal dignity and his own vocation.¹⁷²

In the mind of God, both “Man and woman were created for marriage.”¹⁷³ This goes back to the very beginning, as we saw from the original unity and the spousal meaning of the body: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). Therefore, marriage between a man and a woman is the natural order in God’s plan of creation. Any deviation from this idea of marriage in connection with self-gift in the mystery of procreation is against the plan of God. The rejection of God’s plan comes only with the “historical” man after the fall.

Hence, it is not possible to talk about the historical man without referring to man from the beginning or to speak of original innocence without referring to the situation which separated man from God.¹⁷⁴ The most important point here, according to John Paul II, is that even though man committed sin, he is still able to approach the mystery of God and attempt to understand original innocence. The theology of the body tries to bring man back to the point of his departure, the original experience of shame.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 199.

¹⁷² Ibid., 200. See also May, “Natural Law Methodology,” 71-72.

¹⁷³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 200.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 192.

Original innocence “*excludes the shame of the body* in the relation between man and woman ...eliminates *the necessity of this shame in man*, in his *heart* or his *consciousness*.”¹⁷⁵

The shame prevents the revelation and discovery of the human moral conscience: the knowledge of good and evil. Even after the fall, man is still capable of knowing the meaning of the body, the spousal meaning of the body as feminine and masculine. Man’s awareness of the spousal meaning of the body confirms motherhood as a gift from God. The awareness of such precious gift is the source of strength and authority of women.

6. 1. Gift of Motherhood: The Source of Strength and Authority

In both *The Theology of the Body* and especially *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope, details the “Dimension of the Gift,” and the “Spousal Meaning of the Body.” In this context, John Paul II links the “personal structure of the woman and the personal dimension of the gift” into one reality in the dignity and vocation of women.¹⁷⁶ According to him, the ontological dimension of the gift of motherhood “also indicates the ethical dimension of a person’s vocation,” which confers on a woman her unique dignity.¹⁷⁷ For John Paul II, the ontological and ethical dimensions are one reality in the gift of motherhood.

If that is the case: “Are all women aware of their motherhood as a gift?” The truth about this question can be found from reflection in Second Vatican Council: “Man, who is the only creature on earth that God willed for its own sake, cannot fully find himself except

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 193.

¹⁷⁶ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., no. 30.

through a sincere gift of self.”¹⁷⁸ According to the Pope, “a woman’s dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return.”¹⁷⁹ Women are aware of their gift of motherhood.

The gift of motherhood is the source of the woman’s dignity and the reason for the love she receives and the love which she gives in return.¹⁸⁰ “Moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God *entrusts the human being to her in a special way.*”¹⁸¹ To fully realize her dignity, a woman must be aware of the love that the gift of her body brings to herself, her family, and society.

As the Second Vatican Council taught, man is the only creature on earth that God willed for its own sake, and he cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.¹⁸² This is true of every human being, as a person created in the image and likeness of God, whether man or woman.¹⁸³ From the very beginning, both men and women were created and “placed” by God in the order of love.¹⁸⁴ In other words, in giving and receiving the body reveals the love in the plan of the Creator. Women’s dignity is the central focus of this love.

According to John Paul II:

¹⁷⁸ *Gaudium, et Spes*, no. 24.

¹⁷⁹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30.

¹⁸⁰ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30. See also Miller, *Sexuality and Authority*, 170-182.

¹⁸¹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30.

¹⁸² *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24. See also John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30.

¹⁸³ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The dignity of woman witnesses to the love which she receives in order to love in return, the biblical “exemplar” of the woman also seems to reveal *the true order of love which constitutes woman’s own vocation*. Vocation is meant here in its fundamental, and one may say universal significance, a significance which is then actualized and expressed in women’s many different “vocations” in the Church and the world.¹⁸⁵

Generally, women are aware of their gift, and it is the source of their strength and authority as mothers of the human family. The awareness of the ontological significance of motherhood adds both moral and spiritual strength in a woman’s life.

According to the Pope, the woman’s moral and spiritual strength come from the fact that “God *entrusts the human being to her in a special way*. ... this concerns women in a special way - precisely by reason of their femininity. This in a particular way determines their vocation.”¹⁸⁶ This great gift gives women confidence to overcome difficulties throughout their lives.

Modern social science may not focus on such spiritual factors as the ontological structure of motherhood, the dimension of the gift, and the spiritual and moral strength of women, but it rather pays more attention to material issues which may push women to the margins and lead them to a “*gradual loss of sensitivity to ... what is essentially human*.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. John Paul II emphasizes that what is essentially human is contrary to what modern sciences consider essential. For example, ‘material well-being’ puts more emphasis on the external structures of women in society, such as their careers and material achievements rather than their ontological dignity and vocation.

Secular society and the church should work together to ensure that a woman's sensitivity and awareness of her gift of motherhood is protected in every circumstance because she is the foundation of the human community.¹⁸⁸

In summary, the dignity and the vocation of women is a gift given in God's plan of creation. A gift given may be accepted or rejected by each woman. Some feminist theologians do not accept the theological anthropology of John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of women. These theologians pose a challenge to the teachings of John Paul II and also undermine women in their most basic vocation.

6. 2. The Opposing Views and Challenges on the Dignity and Vocation of Women

The theological anthropology of John Paul II presents the dignity and vocation of women as a gift. This gift implies two dimensions of motherhood, namely marriage and virginity. Some theologians are of the opinion that considering women in such dimensions in reference to the dignity and vocation is limiting the role of women in society. Sandra M. Schneiders is opposed to such views as a "romantic reduction of women's identity and role to motherhood."¹⁸⁹ According to her, it is a form of discrimination against women which is a common practice of the patriarchal leadership of the Church throughout the years. Schneiders claims that the theological anthropology of John Paul II constricts women's self-

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Schneiders, *Beyond Patching*, 33.

image, makes women feel guilty in public spheres, legitimizes patriarchal economic discrimination, and finally forces women to depend on men.¹⁹⁰

Schneiders, focusing on the public shares and women's self-image in secular society, fails to connect the dimension of the gift of motherhood which is rooted in love with the role of woman in society. According to the teachings of John Paul II, there should be no limitation in the women's public spheres unless that particular activity undermines the dignity of motherhood. Insisting on the women's participation in the public sphere, Schneider ignores the spousal meaning of the body of both man and woman; she sees no internal structure of a woman which is fundamental to the dignity of a person.¹⁹¹

The dignity and vocation of women is given in God's plan of creation, and they do not depend on the 'public spheres.'¹⁹² God created man and woman, as male and female. One cannot be the other but can only complement the other. Schneiders' view confers no special dignity on women. Her objections are based on the political and economic activities that both man and woman can perform society, expressed in terms such as "limitation of women in the public spheres."¹⁹³

Similarly, Regina N. Coll opposes John Paul II's theological anthropology on the basis that it limits the opportunities for women, consigning them to a lower position than men in the society. She asserts that, *Mulieris Dignitatem* "reinforces women's secondary role and

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 188 – 200.

¹⁹² Schneiders, *Beyond Patching*, 33.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

her call to a different sanctity than that of man.”¹⁹⁴ According to Coll, a call to the different ‘sanctity’ is seen in the analogy in Ephesians whereby Christ is ‘the bridegroom’ and the church is ‘the bride’ (cf Eph 5: 22-29). In her view, this analogy confirms the truth about woman as bride. “The bridegroom is the one who loves. The bride is loved: It is she who receives love in order to love in return.”¹⁹⁵ Here, Coll fails to see that the love of which Ephesians speaks is the love which is internally structured and revealed in the spousal dimension of the gift of motherhood. This is the love which John Paul II traces from the beginning.

Reading Genesis in light of the spousal symbol helps to explain the ontological innate, immutable nature of love which is a requirement in marital relationship.¹⁹⁶ The spousal dimension between husband and wife is analogous to the Trinitarian communion of love in which God communicates himself to his creatures. Coll fails to see the ontological and ethical requirement of spousal love as essentially in the order of justice and charity with no implication of lesser dignity for women.

Like Schneiders, Coll’s idea of love emphasizes the public, economic, and political roles of women in society but fails to connect with the ontological gift of motherhood. In these aspects, she misinterprets Eph 5:22-24 as a confirmation of the patriarchal culture in which the ‘sanctity’ is measured. According to her:

¹⁹⁴ Regina A. Coll, *Christianity & Feminism in Conversation* (Mystic, Connecticut: A Division of Bayard, 201), 114.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. Here, Coll refers to *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29, “The Dignity of Women and the Order of Love.”

¹⁹⁶ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29.

Sanctity is measured by services to one's husband and family. Important as that is, when it is the only consideration, women are excluded from all the public facets of life. Paul tells women to regard their husband as they regard the Lord, submitting to him as the church does to the Lord.¹⁹⁷

The service which Paul talks about in the Letter to the Ephesians is love rooted in the dimensions of the gifts that are given and received. These include ethical, covenantal, sacramental, and cultural dimensions of mutual love as explained earlier in the text.

The public and political services which Coll talks about must take into account the ontological structure of woman as a mother. Her idea of love does not consider this ontological structure. That is, according to John Paul II, "women, [are] called from the very "beginning" to be loved and to love."¹⁹⁸ This love between husband and wife is reciprocal and it is seen in the love of Christ who loved until the end of his life through the total gift of self. The starting point of the analogy of love is the "gift of self." "A woman is married either through the sacrament of marriage or spiritually through marriage to Christ."¹⁹⁹ In both cases, love signifies a sincere gift of the person.

Ironically, Elizabeth Johnson, a feminist theologian says that the genuine desire of John Paul II to promote the dignity of women is "subverted by the unrelenting dualism of his thought."²⁰⁰ She says that the Pope's attempts to promote the dignity of women go too high SO that women are seen to be too good to be involved in the "messiness of the public

¹⁹⁷ Coll, *Christianity & Feminism in Conversation*, 114.

¹⁹⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 20.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 21.

²⁰⁰ Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 64.

realm.”²⁰¹ In her mind, the teachings of John Paul II would deny women the right to serve in the public realm. Johnson claims that many women respond to the teachings on the “*Dignity and Vocation of Women*” as a “romantic papal feminism.”²⁰² According to Johnson, young women of this century do not want to be highly exalted, instead, they prefer to be equal.²⁰³

Johnson makes what she thinks are two distinct points regarding how the theological anthropology of John Paul II is not fair to women. These are: the denial of public services (or public job opportunities) and the denial of equal rights. But, in fact these points are related; one presupposes the other. Apparently, these points have nothing to do with the dignity and vocation of women because public services she refers to careers, not on vocation. The Church encourages women to take part in both public and Church services without any discriminations based on gender of any form. However, there is a danger in emphasizing public service and equal rights without considering the gift of motherhood.

Motherhood is given by God. According to Magesa, over-emphasizing equal rights may promote the tendency to “reject the feminine in woman, turning woman into merely a mirror image of man.”²⁰⁴ Both man and woman have equal human dignity but neither can a man be a woman nor can a woman be a man. Their sexual differences presuppose different roles in both family and society. Moreover, some of the roles are deeply rooted in the gift of fatherhood and motherhood. They are not mere roles based on the public services of the individual person. Therefore, Johnson’s claim for public service and equal rights of women

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Magesa, “The Challenge of African Woman,” 100.

fails to consider all the dimensions of the gift and the spousal meaning of the body as rooted in the communion of love.

From these feminist theological views, there is evident opposition which expresses a fundamental concern for the equality of women with men in political, economic, and social structures. Such opposing views are not in accordance with the teachings of John Paul II and the African theological anthropology concerning the dignity of motherhood. This is because this study argues that in the culture of the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya, womanhood and motherhood are inseparable as a singular gift of God, that motherhood is integral to the dignity and vocation of woman, and further argues that this African understanding is in accord with John Paul II's teaching that the dignity of motherhood is for all women, therefore applicable to every woman in any culture; it is an ontological reality.²⁰⁵

The highlights of the feminist theological views above are important for pastoral consideration and it is important to understand that such secular and narrow views exist. Women are victims of discrimination in human societies, not because of John Paul II's theology of the body but because of the failure to recognize and respect the dignity of motherhood.

The Pope remarks that it is “unfortunate that the Christian message about the dignity of women is contradicted by the persistent mentality which considers the human being not as a person but as a thing, as an object of trade, at the service of selfish interest and mere

²⁰⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29. See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 161.

pleasures; the first victims of this mentality are women.”²⁰⁶ Such a mentality leads to slavery, oppression of the weak, abortion, pornography, organized prostitution, and divorce.²⁰⁷

7. Conclusion

According to John Paul II, the question on the dignity and vocation of women lies in the order of primacy.²⁰⁸ That is:

When we say that the woman is the one who receives love in order to love in return, this refers not only or above all to the specific spousal relationship of marriage. It means something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships which, in the most varied ways, shape society and structure the interaction between persons - men and women. ... This concerns each and every woman, independently of the cultural context in which she lives and independently of her spiritual, psychological and physical characteristic, as for example, age, education, health, work, and whether she is married or single.²⁰⁹

Therefore, the dignity and vocation of women is ontological and universal. It basically refers to the primacy of being a woman, and every woman is aware of the gift of motherhood.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 24. See also Wojtyła *Love and Responsibility*, 21 – 45.

²⁰⁷ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 24.

²⁰⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

Motherhood is the practical and fundamental path of self-giving for women. Motherhood also implies from the beginning a “special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman’s ‘part.’”²¹¹ John Paul II says that by being open to conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman “discovers herself through a sincere gift of the self.”²¹² That is, within the concept of the theology of the “gift” both those in the religious life and consecrated virgins can participate in the dignity of motherhood of which the Blessed Virgin Mary is the model. While religious women and consecrated virgins experience the “gift” of motherhood in a supernatural way, other women experience the “gift” in a natural way, that is, through the unity between man and women as husband and wife in conjugal union.

The Holy Father presents his teachings on the dignity and vocation of women through a careful reflection on the biblical creation accounts from the book of Genesis. The teaching is based on Christian anthropology and revelation. Through his analysis, it is clear that women, as mothers of human life, are real and ever-relevant in all generations. This gift of motherhood has “unlimited foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday and today, yes, and forever.”²¹³ This leads to a deeper theological reflection and consideration. “If the human being is entrusted by God to women in a particular way, does not this mean that *Christ looks to them for the accomplishment of the ‘royal priesthood’* (1 Pt 2:9), which is the treasure he has given to every individual?”²¹⁴

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid. no. 30.

²¹⁴ Ibid, no. 30.

According to John Paul II, the response to the question on the dignity and vocation of women is based on Christ himself, how he looks at women from the beginning and the nature of motherhood as it is given as a gift. St Paul said, “Christ, as the supreme and the only priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, and as the Bridegroom of the Church, does not cease to submit this same inheritance to the Father through the Spirit, so that God may be ‘everything to everyone’ (1 Cor 15:28).”²¹⁵ Christ himself set a standard for dignity and vocation of women from the beginning. The foundation of the the dignity and the vocation of women is inherited from Christ, the founder of the Church, and the founder of the ministerial priesthood as a service to human life. This priesthood pertains to women through the motherhood of Mary and the *royal priesthood* of men inherited from Christ himself through his will that men alone take part in his ministry by Holy Order as kept through the sacred tradition in the Catholic Church.²¹⁶

St. Paul says of virtues in his First Letter to the Corinthians that “the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). The dignity and vocation of women has definitive fulfillment in love and is rooted in the eternal spousal covenant. According to the teachings of John Paul II and of the Catholic tradition, the claim by some feminist theologians that gender is constructed by society undermines the dignity and vocation of women as a gift from God from the beginning. Such claims superficially are based on bias against the patriarchal systems in society.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid. See also 1 Pt 2:9.

Patriarchy is a form of social organization which recognizes the male as the head of the family, or tribe.²¹⁷ Such organizations are based on cultural values which sometimes include both religious and moral values. Patriarchy as a culture-based tradition considers distinctive roles of both man and woman in the family or tribe whereby man and woman complement each other in the family and society. African culture, in particular recognizes the distinctive gift of motherhood and the complementary role women play in the family and community. Women are recognized as mothers of human life. The distinctive role of women as mothers cannot be replaced by men, neither can the distinctive role of men as fathers be replaced by women. John Paul II's teachings align with the African traditional culture that womanhood and motherhood are inseparable as singular gifts of God, that motherhood is integral to the dignity and vocation of women.

It is clear that there are some challenges from the feminist theologians to both the teachings of Pope and the African culture, including other cultures that might oppress women based on gender. However, the claim that patriarchal societies are oppressive and dominating toward women is not necessarily and essentially because of men's leadership. In the Bantu and Nilotic communities, the injustices against women have always been discussed by the council of elders, prevented by the 'taboos,' and sometimes punished severely. Such are indications that patriarchy is not oppressive to women.

According to John Paul II, to dominate or to oppress women in society is a reminder of a human tendency to go against the original moral order which took place in the Garden of

²¹⁷ *Webster's Universal New World College Dictionary*, 4 ed., "Patriarchy," (Cleveland, Ohio: Wiley Publishing, Inc, 2004).

Eden (Gen 3:1-7).²¹⁸ That is, when man and woman in the family or society decide to go against the will and the plan of God, they become threatened by the presence of each other, the loss of the original innocence. Man and woman must always be aware of the presence of evil in society and must repent and be pardoned by God and neighbor in case they go against God's plan of creation.

In spite of all these challenges, the dignity and vocation of women as mothers and wives remain paramount. Therefore:

the Church gives thanks for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by great social responsibility; for 'perfect' women and for 'weak' women – for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love; as, together with men they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal 'homeland' of all people and is transformed sometimes into a 'valley of tears;' as they assume, together with men, *a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity* according to daily necessities and according to that

²¹⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 210.

definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself, in the bosom of the ineffable Trinity.²¹⁹

As the Church recognizes universally the ontological dignity and vocation of woman, it is the responsibility of theologians to apply the theological and anthropological teachings of the Pope to every culture. Therefore, the hope of John Paul II that African theologians would “work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church” can be a reality.²²⁰ This is possible through the theology of inculturation. So far, both the first and the second sections of this dissertation have presented the understanding of the dignity and vocation of women as a mother and wife in the traditional African family context. The third section will now apply teachings of John Paul II concerning in understanding the dignity and vocation of traditional African women and the theology of inculturation.

²¹⁹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 31.

²²⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63.

THIRD SECTION

INCULTURATION: COMPARISON AND APPLICATION OF THE TEACHING OF JOHN PAUL II WITH AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF WOMAN AS MOTHER AND WIFE WITHIN THE BANTU AND NILOTIC PEOPLE OF KENYA

CHAPTER SIX

INCULTURATION: THE COMPARISON AND APPLICATION OF THE TEACHINGS OF JOHN PAUL II WITH THE AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY REGARDING THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMAN AS MOTHER AND WIFE

1. Introduction

The dignity and vocation of woman is “something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships, which, in the most varied ways, shapes society and structure the interaction between all persons.”¹ This assertion is a fundamental statement in the teachings of John Paul II. The teaching of the Pope “concerns each and every woman, independent of the cultural context in which she lives and independently of her spiritual, psychological and physical characteristics, as for example, age, education, health, work, and whether she is married or single.”²

If the teaching of John Paul II concerns every woman, is therefore ontological, then the only way it can be applied to every woman, married or single, at any time, age, profession and culture is through the theology of inculturation. Inculturation is “the process by which catechesis ‘takes flesh’ in the various cultures.”³ The process of inculturation has

¹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29.

² Ibid.

³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 59.

two dimensions: namely, “the ultimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity” and the “the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.”⁴

The process of inculturation requires a thorough knowledge or in deep study of a given culture or situation, with a clear understanding of the subject before its application. In this context, it requires both knowledge of the traditional African theological anthropology and the teaching of John Paul II concerning the dignity and vocation of women. The first section of this thesis has presented the African theology and anthropology regarding the dignity and vocation of women in the context of the traditional African family. The second section discussed the teachings of John Paul II concerning the same subject. The third section is the comparison and application of the teachings of John Paul II into the traditional African context of the family through the theology of inculturation.

Therefore, inculturation links the teachings of John Paul II with the African’s regarding the dignity and vocation of the African woman.⁵ For him, inculturation is “an organic and constitutive link existing between Christianity and culture,” and that “the synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith.”⁶ John Paul II insists that inculturation is fundamental in the evangelization process because, “A

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cecill McGarry, S.J. “Preface,” *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*, eds. J. M. Waliggo, A. Roest, T. Nkeramihigo and J. Mutiso-Mbinda (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul Publications Africa, 1996), 7 quotes John Paul II in his letter to Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, Secretary of the State, May 20th, 1982, in *L’Osseervatore Romano*, June 28, 1982, pp. 7-8. See also Justin S. Ukpong, “A Critical Review of the *Lineamenta*,” in *African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, edited by Maura Browne, SND (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 33. See also B. Hatshwayo, CSSR, “The Sacrament of Marriage” in *Inculturation in the South African Context* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 98; and Shorter, *The African Synod*, 52.

⁶ McGarry, “Preface,” 7.

faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.”⁷ Hence, the process of inculturation is an open dialogue between the cultures with an aim of finding an authentic marriage between the two. The dialogue implies a two-way process, or conversation between the Christian culture and the local cultures.

The two dimensions in the process of inculturation, the “ultimate transformation of the authentic cultural values” and “the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures” can be realized simultaneously.⁸ The genuine inculturation is a complete evangelization when the Christian culture takes root in the local Christian communities and within family life.

The Synod of African Bishops considered inculturation as an urgent and primary requirement in evangelization for the “Church-as-Family.”⁹ Thus, during the Synod, inculturation became the main topic, its implementation and its spirit for evangelization.¹⁰ This chapter highlights the theological meaning of inculturation, compares and applies the teachings of John Paul II with African theological anthropology regarding the dignity of woman as a mother and wife.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Paul, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 59. See also John Paul II, “Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, Vatican translations (October 16, 1979), no 53: AAS 71 (1979): 278-1340.

⁹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 59.

¹⁰ Shorter, *The African Synod*, 64-65.

1. 1. Theological Meaning of Inculturation

Inculturation theology has its roots in the history of Christian evangelization. Its history can be traced through the usage of various terminologies through the history of evangelization such, as adaptation, indigenization, incarnation and contextualization.¹¹ These terminologies express a need for the integral dialogue between the Gospel message and cultures. The dialogue implies a two-way process, or conversation. This is a conversation between the Christian culture and the local cultures.

Before the Second Vatican Council, the term *adaptation* was used for the purpose of integral dialogue, an understanding between the Gospel message and the local cultures. The concept of *adaptation* implied: the observation and selection of certain ritual rites and customs and inserting them into Christian rituals.¹² For example, certain African vessels, songs, dances and other traditional decorations were selected and inserted into the Christian liturgical celebrations of the Eucharist or Christian marriage ceremonies. Such practices were done but without a serious consideration of their theological and anthropological implications. The practice emphasized more of the external use of the local cultural items without the theological meaning. As a result, *adaptation* did not go far enough to express the reality of the Christian integral evangelization; it failed the reality of Christian integral evangelization.

¹¹ Gaggawala, *Fully Christian*, 9-14. See also Adam K. arap Chepkwony, "African Religion, the Root Paradigm for Inculturation Theology," in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections of the 21st Century*, eds. Nahashon W. Ndung'u & Philomena N. Mwaura (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 45-46.

¹² John Mary Waliggo, "Making a Church that is Truly African," in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency* (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul Publications Africa, 1986), 11. See also Gaggawala, *Fully Christian*, 10.

In the process of evangelization, the term *indigenization* was coined by the missionaries from the word *indigenous*.¹³ The concept expresses a similar meaning to *adaptation*, with the emphasis on promoting the local pastoral ministers.¹⁴ The method of *indigenization* was practiced by several missionary congregations who evangelized Africa and other parts of the world. Like the other attempts, it also failed. The attempt was good but did not fully realize the integral mission of evangelization; the Gospel message did not fully reach the heart of the African people. The process of *indigenization* lacked theological and anthropological values of the people. Therefore, the process remained on the surface of the culture without roots.

Later in 1972, the term *contextualization* was introduced by the World Council of Churches with an aim to make the gospel message integral in the life and the cultures of the people. The word is coined from ‘contextual.’¹⁵ The concept expresses a particular awareness of some local cultural values and aims at a serious consideration of these values in order to create friendly cultural context for the Gospel message to thrive.¹⁶ This awareness is a positive step towards inculturation, but like *indigenization*, it lacks a deeper theological and anthropological interpretation of the cultural values.

Also, the term *accommodation* was used as an attempt to actualize the integral evangelization, but this too did not work. The concept expressed in *accommodation* was to

¹³ Gaggawala, *Fully Christian*, 11. See also Anscar J. Chupungo, *Liturgical Inculturation, Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 14.

¹⁴ Ibid. See also P. N. Wachege, *African Women Liberation, A Man's Perspective* (Nairobi, Kenya: Industrial Printing Works Ltd., 1992), 27.

¹⁵ Gaggawala, *Fully Christian*, 14.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also Peter Schineller, *Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 19; and *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 58

bring into Christianity traditional cultural practices.¹⁷ The idea was to accommodate local customs into Christianity, but it was without theological and anthropological assessments. There were several attempts prior to the Council by missionaries to employ different terminologies in various ways. All of them missed the integral mission of evangelization.¹⁸ All these attempts show a positive direction and the need for the integral dialogue between the Gospel message and cultures.

According to Shorter, sometimes the words *acculturation* and *inculturation* are perceived as synonyms, but they are not interchangeable.¹⁹ Acculturation is an “encounter between one culture and another, or encounter between cultures.”²⁰ It is a process within inculturation, and it is a distinct concept in sociology. Therefore, they are not interchangeable terms in a theological context.

Soon after the Second Vatican Council, the term *inculturation* came into general use.²¹ The theological meaning of “inculturation” was perceived from its definition, “the process by which catechesis ‘takes flesh’ in the various cultures.”²² The meaning comes from the mystery of incarnation, the Word, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who by the

¹⁷ Aylward Shorter, *Toward A Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1988), 10-11. See also Aylward Shorter, *The African Synod: A Personal Response to the Document* (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul Publications Africa, 1991), 53.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. See also Ary Roest Crolius, “Inculturation: Newness and Ongoing Process,” in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*, eds. J. M. Waliggo, A. Roest Crolius, T. Nkeramihigo and J. Mutiso-Mbanda (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul Publication Africa, 1996), 34 – 35. ‘Enculturation’ as a technical in cultural anthropology for indicating the learning experience by which an individual is initiated and grows into his culture, while reserving the term ‘inculturation to denote the process by which the Church becomes inserted in a given culture.

²⁰ Shorter, *Toward A Theology* 7. See also Hlatshwayo, “The Sacrament of Marriage, 101.

²¹ *Ad Gentes*, no. 22. See also Shorter, *Toward A Theology*, 13 -15; and Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, 6-7.

²² John Paul II, *Catechesis Tradendae*, no. 53. See also *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 59.

power of the Holy Spirit became incarnate from the Virgin Mary.²³ Here, “Christ himself chose to become man in order to save humanity” through Christianity.”²⁴ Therefore, the “Christianity has no alternative but to do the same in every culture and time in order to continue the salvation brought by Christ.”²⁵ Inculturation expresses the idea of incarnation while emphasizing the importance of cultures as instruments and means of realizing the reality of the salvation of Christ. The concept of the reality of inculturation in culture requires an open attitude, an open spirit from both partners in the evangelization process that will allow a genuine transformation of their innermost being.²⁶

The partners in the evangelization process are the messengers of the Gospel message: both lay and ordained ministers and the African Christian communities who are the recipients of the Gospel message. Therefore, evangelization like inculturation is a two-way process:

On one hand, the Gospel message cannot be purely and simply isolated from the culture in which it was first inserted ... without serious loss, from the cultures in which it has already been expressed down the centuries; it does not spring spontaneously from any cultural soil; it has always been transmitted by means of an apostolic dialogue which inevitably becomes part of a certain dialogue of cultures.

²³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 60.

²⁴ Waliggo, “Making a Church that is Truly African,” 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ McGarry, “Preface,” 9.

On the other hand, the power of the Gospel everywhere transforms and regenerates. When that power enters into a culture, it is no surprise that it rectifies many of its elements.²⁷

Therefore, the inculturation process is an “ongoing dialogue between the Gospel and culture.”²⁸ In a genuine inculturation process, there is a rectification of cultural elements with the power of the Gospel message. Inculturation animates, directs, unifies, and transforms the local cultures into a new culture of Christianity.²⁹ Thus, the authentic local cultural values and the Gospel values are assimilated into the life of the individual and the Christian community. The assimilated life then becomes a new life, and new culture of the individual and the African Christian community.

The inculturation process aims at the mutual enrichment of cultures realized in the dynamic life of an individual and Christian community. According to Waliggo, inculturation means:

the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his message of salvation evermore understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time. It means the reformulation of Christian life and doctrine into every thought-pattern of each people. It is the conviction that Christ and Good News are even dynamic

²⁷ John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 53. See also Shorter, *The African Synod*, 54.

²⁸ Shorter, *The African Synod*, 54. See also Gaggawala, *Fully Christian*, 20; Waliggo, *Inculturation*, 19.

²⁹ Gaggawala, *Fully Christian*, 20. See also John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, “The Church in Africa Today: Reflections on the African Synod,” in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections Perspectives*, edited by Maura Browne, SND (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 216.

and challenging to all times and cultures as they become better understood and lived by each people.³⁰

However, when the Gospel message comes into contact with other cultures, for example, the African culture, and does not enter into a genuine dialogue, no inculturation can take place. Or, when the Christian culture takes in whole cultural elements without a serious theological and anthropological assessment, it is like committing suicide; such would result in failure to evangelize. St. Paul considers such an attempt as "emptying the cross of Christ of its power" (1 Cor 1:17).

Therefore, theological and anthropological consideration of an inculturation process is significant and necessary means for a fruitful evangelization. It is significant because inculturation allows local people to make Christian ideas part of their own thinking. The Christian vision of life fulfills their own needs, and a Christian world view becomes part of truly African aspirations.³¹ Considering this process as a mutual dynamic, there is no better place to implement inculturation theology in Africa than within the family where a woman is recognized as having a special gift for orienting the family and the clan in one reality of love.³²

The theological meaning of the inculturation process extends to the life of a Christian holistically. In this case, the Christian life is drawn by Christ himself, and by the very nature

³⁰ Waliggo, "Making a Church that is Truly African," 12.

³¹ Ibid.

³² John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29. "In God's eternal plan, woman is the one in whom the order of love in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root."

of the Church: in sending people out to preach the Gospel message.³³ The Gospel message must be presented in language, concepts and theology that are well understood by Christians of every culture under the guidance of the tradition of the Universal Church.³⁴ In this view of sending people out to preach the Gospel message for the salvation, faithfulness to the sacred tradition of the Universal Church is essential for the genuine and fruitful inculturation process.

The emphasis on the theological meaning of inculturation theology is fundamental. Understanding the meaning of inculturation helps to eliminate “a common but rather limited view ... in the ordinary circles of the Church that inculturation means simply the liturgical rites and ceremonies which have been adapted to local cultures.”³⁵ Such a view is limited to church music melodies, Christian art inspired by local conceptions and sense of beauty, the use of local vestments and instruments for the celebrations of Mass, and sacraments and sacramentals and similar visible or tangible elements among others.

Finally, it is important to note that the word *inculturation* is sometimes spelled *enculturation* in sociological context, and analogously used by some theologians for a theological notion.³⁶ But in a strict sense, there is a difference between sociological and theological use of these words. ‘Enculturation’ “refers to the cultural learning process of the individual, the process by which a person is inserted into his or her culture.”³⁷ And ‘inculturation’ is the “insertion of the Christian faith into a culture where Christians were not

³³ Ibid. See also Gaggawa, *Fully Christian*, 20.

³⁴ Waliggo, “Making a Church that is Truly African,” 19.

³⁵ Ibid., 18.

³⁶ Ibid. 5.

³⁷ Ibid.

previously present.”³⁸ There are similarities in both terms, but the analogy does not cover the whole theological concept of inculturation.

Inculturation theology aims to make Christianity the people’s religion, the religion of the community and the religion of the family. In Africa, life is family-centered, and the role of woman is substantial. Therefore, the understanding African theological anthropology is important in evangelization. For a fruitful and a genuine evangelization, the theology of inculturation and the role of woman as the mother is indispensable as an agent of evangelization especially in the African families and the in the Small Christian Communities (SCCs).

1.2. The Methods of Doing African Inculturation Theology

There are two approaches to inculturation theology in Africa, namely, that which attempts to construct the African theology by starting from the biblical ecclesial teachings and find from them what is relevant in the traditional African values, and the one which takes the African cultural background as the point of departure.³⁹ So far in this presentation, has employed the first one with the emphasis on their theological and anthropological values. From African perspectives, motherhood is seen as a gift from God, inseparable from womanhood and integral to the dignity and vocation of woman in the Bantu and Nilotic

³⁸ Ibid., 6.

³⁹ Charles Nyamiti, “African Christologies Today,” in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, eds. J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1989), 17. See also “African Christologies Today,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, Robert J. Schreiter, ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 3.

tribes of Kenya in accord to the teachings John Paul II concerning the dignity of motherhood. The analysis of the theological and anthropological values can start either from the biblical teachings or from the African traditional customs.

During this process of inculturation, theologians must keep in mind the hope of John Paul II that, “theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in the concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church.”⁴⁰ The riches of African culture are contained in the “family.”⁴¹ The important concept of the family was confirmed in the Synod agenda that “the bishops of Africa cannot talk about inculturation without talking about the family, since ‘African traditional culture is centered on the family.’”⁴² The correct understanding of the theological and anthropological African family values is open to a dialogue with the Gospel values. Therefore, the relevant values in both Christianity and the traditional African culture can be inculturated within the African Christian family. But those customs which are irrelevant in traditional African culture, or those which undermine the dignity and vocation of women should be discouraged and discarded.

Traditional African values have been discussed in chapters three and four. What is significant in these chapters is “African traditional culture is centered in the family.”⁴³ Therefore, one cannot talk about “inculturation without talking about the family.”⁴⁴ The challenge which John Paul II gave to the African theologians still remains. The challenge

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63.

⁴¹ Bujo, “On the Road Toward an African Ecclesiology, 140.

⁴² Browne, “Our Bishops Want Family on the Synod Agenda, 46.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

was to find out the “riches contained” in the concept of the family and to develop a coherent theology of inculturation.⁴⁵ But the question of what “riches contained in the concept of the family” is still remained to be solved.

Already several attempts have been made by African theologians to develop African inculturation theology that upholds the family as significant in the traditional African culture. But there must be one common concept which unifies all the African values within the ‘family.’ In an attempt to discover one common concept, the theme of ‘ancestors,’ and the African sense of ‘community’ appear to be the most popular concepts that some theologians have believed to express more universal African values of the family.

These theologians present their views within the context of ‘inculturation theology’ in the fields of liturgy, systematic, pastoral or moral theology. In any of these fields, the theologians discuss “the African concept of ancestor” and “the African sense of community” as common values that can express the riches contained in the family. But a careful examination of each of them will show that none of them can express the riches contained in African family comparable to the dignity of motherhood, the most unifying concept in the African culture.⁴⁶ In Africa, especially among the Bantu and the Nilotic of Kenya, the dignity of motherhood is perceived to express the riches of the traditional concept of family to a greater degree than any other concepts of in the traditional cultures. However, some African theologians would argue that the concept of ancestorship expresses the riches in the African family.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63.

⁴⁶ Charles Nyamiti, “African Christologies Today,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter S. PP. S. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 3.

1.3. The African Concept of the Ancestorship: The Riches of African Family

There are some facts raised by some African theologians that the concept of ancestors can express the ‘riches’ in African family. Bujo, Nyamiti and Pobee among other theologians believe that ancestors are the main pillars in the African family. According to Bujo, an “ancestor constitutes the unity of the community and presents the pivotal point from which all the members of the clan take their dynamic and legitimacy.”⁴⁷ A genuine African ecclesiology would rely more on a correct understanding of the role of ancestor in family, clan and community. Bujo traces Jesus Christ in the African concept as “Proto-Ancestor” in such way that the vitality of the community of believers will be visible in spiritual, social and economical life.⁴⁸ He believes depend upon that the common ancestor is the nucleus of the clan and proto-source of life.⁴⁹

Nyamiti shares a similar understanding of ancestorship, and he develops a deeper theological understanding of ‘ancestors’ from a different approach.⁵⁰ His argument is based on the “beliefs and practices found among African societies.”⁵¹ In his opinion, ancestors are “the source of life and the highest model” in African communities.⁵² From his understanding, the idea of ancestors within the families bind the relationship between the living, and the departed members of the family, also brings in the concept the ancestors as the mediators

⁴⁷ Bujo, “On the Road Toward an African Ecclesiology,” 140.

⁴⁸ Ibid. See also Tlhagale, “Saints and Ancestors, 27. The African veneration of ancestors stems from the belief that while the human body discomposes after death, the spirit becomes separated from the body. The spirit ends up in the world of the spirits believed to be somewhere invisible.

⁴⁹ Bujo, “On the Road Toward an African Ecclesiology,” 140.

⁵⁰ Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 16-18.

⁵¹ Nyamiti, “African Christologies Today,” 11.

⁵² Ibid.

between the community on earth and the Supreme Being, which brings the Creator close to the realities of African life.⁵³ Therefore, there are dynamic religious activities connected to social, religious, economic and political life to such an extent that in African life, religion is inseparable from daily life. Mbiti confirms that “Africans are notoriously religious... Religion permeates into all the departments of life so that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.”⁵⁴ Such belief is possible because of the close link they have with ancestors within the families.

For Nyamiti, the belief in ancestors is a positive element in African culture that confirms values such as hospitality, family-centered spirit, and respect for parents among others. According to him, a close examination of the ancestral relationship makes it possible to discover the inner life of God, the Trinity: an ancestral kingship among the divine persons.⁵⁵ That is the “Father is the Ancestor of the Son, the Son is the Descendant of the Father. These two persons live their ancestral kinship through the Spirit whom they mutually communicate to as their ancestral Oblation and Eucharist.”⁵⁶ Nyamiti looks at Jesus Christ as “Our Brother-Ancestor *per excellence*” because his ancestorship brings salvation in an African understanding of the role of ancestors in the families.⁵⁷

John S. Pobee shares similar idea. He proposes the concept of “religious ontology.” He says that concept of ancestor is of “religious ontology in our relationship with

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 1.

⁵⁵ Nyamiti, “African Christologies Today,” 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

ancestors.”⁵⁸ Religious ontology is the attitude of dynamic faith that holds mutual interaction between the members of the family and ancestors. This dynamic faith, one can easily mistake for the idea that ancestors are worshiped in Africa. They believe that ancestors are:

part of the clans who have completed their course here on earth and are gone ahead to the other world to be elder brothers of the living at the house of God. Not all the dead are ancestors. To qualify to be an ancestor one must have lived to a ripe old age and in an exemplary manner and done much to enhance the standing and prestige of the family, clan or tribe. ... They give children to the living; they give good harvest; they provide the sanctions for moral life of the nation and accordingly punish, exonerate, or reward the living as the case may be.⁵⁹

African belief in ancestors is positive and is valid for inculturation theology. The concept is applicable to Jesus Christ from the Christological and ecclesiastical point of views. Jesus Christ can be looked upon as the model of Ancestors in the traditional African family. The application can have a rich theological meaning. But still the concept of ancestors does not reflect the “riches contained in the family.” Children, family members and clan members all come to know and respect ancestors through their mothers. Ancestors are sons and daughters who were born, brought up and taught the values of the family by their parents, a

⁵⁸ John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Parthenon Press, 1979), 45.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

mother being the first teacher of the family.⁶⁰ Therefore, the dignity of motherhood expresses the riches of the African family and culture better than the concept of ancestor.

In the traditional African culture, ancestorship is a state of being, which is assumed only after a well-lived life on earth. It is a state of being like the state of sainthood in Christianity.⁶¹ Saints are sons and daughters, who are born and brought up by the parents, and woman is the mother of the family; therefore the concept of the dignity and vocation of women is richer when compared with ancestorship in the traditional African family. Women are the mothers who gave birth and, with the help of their husbands, raise up their sons and daughters who later become ancestors for the traditional African believers or saints for the Christians. The argument that ancestors are the founders of the clans is true, but one must also consider that the clan names and the spirit of the clans are derived from females, usually the mothers. The founders of the clans are ancestors, but women are the mothers of the clans. Therefore, the concept of motherhood expresses the riches of the African family better than any concept in the traditional culture. However, some theologians will still argue that the African sense of community expresses the riches in African family. Their argument is also based on sound traditional African communities.

⁶⁰ Tlhagale, "Saints and Ancestors" 27. African ancestors are not chosen like Christian saints, or patron saints, they are family, kinsmen of the living, they are one's blood, blood relationship constitute the basis of intimacy, of a mutual bond and mutual obligations. On the other hand, for Christians, saints are chosen by the individual, family or community. For example, baptismal names of a saints, patron Saint of the Church, for Small Christian Communities, Nations among others.

⁶¹ Ibid., 29. Saints are personal, invisible and intimate friends. Believers turn to them for ordinary and special favors. They are inspiration because they had already lived their lives on earth successfully.

1.4. The African Sense of Community: The Riches of African Family

There is a strong sense of community, in the traditional African culture which forms a fundamental concept that “the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately.”⁶² The African sense of community is not just a social richness as it may be perceived by outsiders, it has also a religious implication. Mbiti notes that:

Just as God made the first man, as God’s man, so now man himself makes the individual who becomes the corporate or social man. ... Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and other people.⁶³

Mbiti, the anthropologist summarizes African sense of community in the following philosophical principle: “I am, because we are; and since we are; therefore I am.”⁶⁴ From this philosophical principle, one understands that ‘community’ is a ‘being.’ Community is such a high value that one longs to be in the community, for the community and with the community.

Eduard Archermann points out that in Africa, at first glance, one may conclude that the “community counts for almost everything, the individual life for nothing. ... The relationship between the two is somewhat like that in a living organism: the single persons are like the limbs a living body.”⁶⁵ Therefore, some theologians are right that the traditional

⁶² Mbiti, *African Religions*. 108.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵ Eduard Achermann, *Cry Beloved Africa! A Continent Needs Help* (Munich, Germany: African University Studies Munich-Kinshasa, 1994), 43.

African sense of community can be considered to a certain extent, containing 'riches' of the family. But still the concept of 'community' cannot express the 'riches' of the family better than it is perceived in the dignity of motherhood. It is the central role of women as mothers that holds the African sense of community as value to be what it is in the society.

The African sense of community is a positive value of the family. Generally, Africans believe that it is the mother who is the teacher of good moral values to the children; therefore, she is a mother of the community. Every member of the community is connected to all the others, and the connection is traced through the woman as a mother, depending on marriage and blood relatives.⁶⁶ As Achermann observes in most of African communities, the family and community bond "ties together three to four generations: grandparents, parents with children, uncles and aunts with cousins of various degrees."⁶⁷ Through all the generations, each family, clan and community is usually bears a female name, belonging to the mother. She is the bond that ties the communities together.

In summary, the African theological meaning of inculturation must be relevant within the method of doing theology that must seek to find the riches contained in the family. The riches of the African family are perceived within the particular concepts of ancestors and community which are typical in traditional African cultures. These concepts express positive elements in the traditional African culture, but the dignity and vocation of woman still expresses the riches contained in the African family better than any of the mentioned concepts. African sense of community is important, but still woman is the mother of

⁶⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

community. Similarly, ancestors have a important role in the family, clan and community but they are the sons and daughters of women. Therefore, the dignity of motherhood still expresses the riches of the family better than any other concept in the traditional culture. The role and the dignity of motherhood must be clear in the meaning of inculturation so that women be included in the process of evangelization and inculturation. Because of the hierarchy of motherhood in the African communities, the identity and the role of women in the process of evangelization and doing inculturation theology is very important. This role becomes clearer in the comparison of the teachings of John Paul II with African theological anthropology.

2. The Comparison: John Paul II's Teachings in Evangelization and Inculturation Theological Process

A general rule for evangelization requires that a Gospel messenger should know the message and have faith in the message he presents. A number of years are spent in the formation of the Gospel messengers. For a fruitful realization of the Gospel message, the messenger has to know the culture of his audience so as to pattern the Gospel message relevant to the people. Théoneste Nkéramihigo said that “Christianity is not a universal abstraction which must be concretized in every culture; it is a specific concreteness which must be universalized by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people.”⁶⁸ The only

⁶⁸ Théoneste Nkéramihigo, “Inculturation and the Specificity of Christian Faith,” in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*, eds. J. M. Waliggo – A. Roest Crolius S. J. T. Nkéramihigo S. J. – J. Mutiso-Mbinda (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul Publications – Africa, 1986), 70.

way the proclamation can be universal is by evangelization through a process of theological inculturation. The ideas of evangelization and the process of theological inculturation are helpful for comparing the teachings of John Paul II with African theological anthropology.

The theology of inculturation in evangelization “seeks to dispose African people to receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner. It touches them on the personal, cultural, economic and political levels so as they can live a holy life in the total union with God the Father, through the action of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁹ Thus, the comparison of the teachings of John Paul II with African theological anthropology concerning the dignity and vocation of women consists of similarities and differences.

The first section in this dissertation already set forth the general background. It explained the traditional African theological and anthropological understanding of the dignity and vocation of women, the understanding of marriage and procreation, and reflections of the African Synod of Bishops on how the “Church-as-Family” reflects the dignity and vocation of women. The second section presented the teachings of John Paul II concerning the dignity and vocation of women. These two sections provide adequate knowledge for inculturation theology. The third section will now compare and apply John II’s teaching with the African theological anthropology concerning the dignity and vocation of women. The main sources of this third section will be drawn mostly from what has been discussed in the first and second sections.

⁶⁹ Browne, *Proposition*, no. 32. See also John Paul, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 62.

2. 1. The Similarities: Points of Departure

The Pope starts his teachings from the Bible, the book of Genesis, which is the foundation of the Christian theological anthropology. He analyzes the two creation accounts presented in Genesis 1 and 2, in reference to the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees (Mt 19 and Mk 10). In these analyses, John Paul II presents the whole teaching concerning the dignity and the vocation of women.

The Pope upholds that human life is a sacred gift, given by God from the “beginning.” “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying to them: ‘Be fertile and multiply; ...’” (Gen 1:27- 28). Here, both man and woman share equal human dignity. However, created as man and woman, also presupposes that sexual difference has a meaning, the body has a meaning. This meaning is revealed through the conjugal union of bodies as a husband and wife, the two becoming one flesh. The conjugal union of the two as a husband and a wife reveals the nuptial meaning of the body. This union has ethical, sacramental and cultural dimensions which uphold the dignity and vocation of woman as a mother of human life. For John Paul II, the nuptial union is the foundation of the communion of persons. The inner principle of this act of communion of persons is its permanent power and final end in love.⁷⁰

The Pope insists that without love, the “family cannot live, grow and perfect itself as a community of persons.”⁷¹ For John Paul II:

⁷⁰ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately.

Therefore, it is in the community that the human person can grow, mature and reach fulfillment in God's plan.

The African theological anthropology has different sources and points of departure from that of John Paul II, but they have similarities and share common values. As already explained, traditional African teachings are drawn from myths, oral tradition and the analysis of certain key concepts, namely, life, family, clan, community, marriage and procreation which have been discussed in the text. The analysis of these key concepts shows that the meaning of human life is perceived by the African as a gift, given by God, enshrined in the dignity of motherhood. As Bujo says, "African religions recognized God as the source of all life, especially human life."⁷² It is common in all traditional African traditional religion that God is the source and the life giver. A woman is recognized and respected from the very beginning of her maturity as a mother of human life.⁷³ She is also the center of unity in the family, and the clan. Therefore, every woman enjoys all the privileges of motherhood from the community even if she has not born a child of her own.

⁷² Bujo, *African Theology*, 17.

⁷³ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 6. The term "mother" is considered as an honorable title, When a woman reaches the stage of motherhood she is highly respected, even if she has not given birth. Her name becomes sacred and she is respected by the whole community.

Both John Paul II's teaching and Africans hold that human life is a sacred gift, given by the Creator, God. Africans believe that the Creator, who created man and woman, commanded them to pass on life through marriage and procreation. Thus, for Africans, marriage and procreation are regarded as one reality.

The traditional African culture shares several values which the teachings of the Pope regarding the dignity and vocation of women: namely, the sanctity of marriage: indissolubility, permanence, covenantal character of marriage and the dimension of the communion of persons in marriage, among others. In general, there are many similarities and differences. Therefore, inculturation is the proper tool to make these similarities and differences compatible so that Christianity can be accepted in the African culture. With the help of the inculturation theology, one can take any element of the similarities and differences and form an authentic meaningful African Christian family life analog with the Gospel values.

All the similarities and differences cannot be discussed here in detail, but with the proper understanding of the meaning of theological inculturation, a dialogue will open up between the traditional African culture and the teachings of John Paul II for fruitful evangelization in African families. The dialogue helps to develop riches contained in the African family that promote the dignity and vocation of woman. This mutual interaction is possible because of the shared common values regarding the dignity of motherhood as the center of the communion of persons and of the community.

2. 2. Common Values: The Dignity of Motherhood

The concept of the dignity of motherhood is common in the African theological anthropology and in the teachings of John Paul II. According to the Pope, motherhood is a gift from God, inseparable from womanhood and integral to the dignity and vocation of woman. This corresponds to the view in the traditional African of the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya, that motherhood is seen as a gift from God. This gift implies not only the dignity and vocation of women as such, but it is also the source of the strength and the authority of women.⁷⁴ The vocation is meant here in “its fundamental, and one may say universal significance, a significance which is then actualized and expressed in woman’s many different “vocations” in the Church and in the world.”⁷⁵ While the moral strength and authority is drawn from her “awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way.*”⁷⁶ For the Africans, this assertion is based on a religious ontology.⁷⁷

According to John Paul II, motherhood is an internal structure which is linked with the interior readiness to accept the child and nurture it in a marriage relationship.⁷⁸ This interior disposition and readiness is in the “order of love” and is a gift directly from the Creator himself.⁷⁹ For example, when Eve exclaimed, “I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord,” (Gen 4.1). The proclamation of joy which Eve expressed is a

⁷⁴ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Pobe, *Toward an African Theology*, 44. See also Amba Mercy Oduyoye, “Acting as Woman,” in *African Theology Today*, vol. 1, Emmanuel Katongolo, ed. (Scranton, PA: Scranton University Press, 2002), 172.

⁷⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

confirmation that she is aware of her part in the mystery of generation. Therefore, she was able to proclaim, that “I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord.”

In John Paul II’s writings, the dignity and vocation of women is linked to this great mystery of generation. According to him, the mystery of generation is not only a physiological structure in a woman but is deeply rooted in her internal, spiritual dimension, a religious ontology.

The internal and spiritual dimensions in the concept of motherhood help one to understand the spiritual motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the spiritual motherhood in religious and consecrated life.⁸⁰ Thus, motherhood is the mark of an ontological gift and value in the dignity and vocation of women. This religious ontology makes it possible to recognize every woman as a mother of human life and allows for the respect and honor they deserve in all cultures.

Similarly, the traditional African concept of motherhood is not limited to giving physical birth to a child. Motherhood is linked to an internal covenant and openness to accept the gift of human life. In Africa, it is the assumed stature for every woman who has reached the age of bearing a child. The state of motherhood presupposes that the responsibility for human life is unique. That is, for here to bring forth human life is in God’s plan of creation. Therefore, every woman is affirmed, respected and honored by the community as a mother of human life. Such respect and recognition is evident in the marriage ceremony, where the woman is affirmed as a mother of the community, and the clan. Therefore, for an African, “Woman” is a title of honor.

⁸⁰ Ibid., no. 21.

The dignity of motherhood is common in other cultures as well. For example, the Jewish people have the same concept, when “Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said ‘Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’” (Lk 1:41-42). This proclaimed greeting reflects a deep respect and honor to Mary. She is the woman who becomes the mother of all human beings, the new Eve through obedience. It is through openness and obedience that Mary is recognized as “Blessed.” Eve lost this honor by disobedience; Mary restored it through obedience.

At the foot of the Cross, Jesus addressed his mother, “Woman, behold, your son” (Lk 19:27). This reveals the highest respect and love that Jesus has for his mother and hands his mother over to be the mother of his friends. This statement confirms that motherhood is an internal structure in the spirit, an openness to the will of God.

Paul Evdokimov acknowledges that:

The question of knowing whether the woman will be a wife or mother, or bride of Christ (*sponsa Christi*) is only secondary. Her charism of interiorized and universal "maternity" carries every woman toward the hungry and the needy and admirably defines the feminine essence: virgin or spouse, every woman is a mother for all eternity (*in aeternum*). The structure of her soul predisposes her "to protect" all that crosses her path, to discover in the strongest and most virile being a weak, defenseless child."⁸¹

⁸¹ Paul Edvokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, Translated by Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 33. See also *Woman and the Salvation: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 185, “Woman has her vocation not in terms of society but in terms of humanity; her field of action is not civilization, but human ‘culture.’”

Generally, the ontological concept of motherhood gives every woman all privileges of womanhood beyond their own families, clans, tribes and nations. Women are the backbone of the African communities and the core of the communion of persons.

2. 3. Woman, the Backbone of the African Communities and Core of the Communion of Persons

In an ordinary English-speaking language, the notion of “community” is understood to as a group of people, clan, tribe, or nation. In the teaching of John Paul II, communion, (*communio*) is the ‘structure of person’ as well as ‘human community.’⁸² The structure of the person is what makes the human person, involving all human faculties, and defines a person as the moral being.

Kenneth L. Schmitz observes that the questions at the heart of human person: “Why be moral? Why should I do what I should, rather than what I would? Why ought I do what is right? are indispensable to moral education.”⁸³ These questions derived from and concern the intellect and will. Intellect and will power are proper to the person, the ‘self.’ An individual self needs human community to develop because, according to Schmitz “the actions that transform a person are for the most part taken together with others.”⁸⁴ That is the human community.

The human community here refers to the individual persons *participating* together with others in the building up of a human community. But human community may also mean

⁸² John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 162. See also *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7 and 23.

⁸³ Kenneth L. Schmitz, *At The Center of The Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John II* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 193), 33.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

just individuals acting together, not necessarily getting involved at a personal level and or in the deeper life of the individual. For example, a community may simply act together at the material level, for material purposes. This might include providing material needs or just attending events like funerals, weddings but having no direct spiritual or moral influence on these events. That is *acting communally*. Such type of community is secular in nature and aims mostly at profit making like a relationship established in a business.

According to the teachings of John Paul II, the concept of the *acting community* is different from the *participating community*.⁸⁵ The former focuses on the human person, while the latter focuses more on material and profit-making. It is the profit versus the dignity of the human person in the community, for the community and with the community.⁸⁶ Both the Pope and the traditional African have a common focal point that is, the dignity of the persons in the community.

John Paul II expresses the idea of the dignity of human persons in the difference between acting and participating in the community. Participating is opposed to acting with others. Through participation, the individual builds up a communion of persons. Participation is inclusive, and does not alienate other human beings. This is the core of the Pope's theological ethics. For him, the foundation of the communion of persons is the "unity of the two," man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist 'side by side or 'together,' but they are also called *to exist mutually 'one for the other.'*"⁸⁷ This kind of unity

⁸⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 175, participation here means with the help of the other. The other means, the way the man recognizes and finds his own humanity "with the help" (Gen 2:25). Woman becomes fundamental in the ethical life of the man and the community.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 163. Here, the communion of persons refers to man and woman that form the "image of God," not only through his own humanity, but also in communion with the other.

⁸⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

creates a moral obligation, like in the African culture. There, a woman is the center of this community of human persons, in families, in clans and in communities.

The Pope expressed that life and love in this communion of persons is given between the husband and the wife so as to develop the community of persons: “Of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives. Its task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons.”⁸⁸ Like in Africa, the family is the model of the communion of persons and the heart of life where all normative values are planted and nurtured.

According to John Paul II, the concept of the communion of persons is based on the subjectivity and the love between a man and a woman. That is the foundation of the communion of persons which is open to the other, and to God. It is this concept that the traditional African culture has in common with the teachings of the Pope. Here, the concept of the communion of persons implies looking towards the growth of each human person within the community.

In the traditional African culture, the family is the foundation of the communion of persons, and the woman as mother is center of the community. African community (clan name) is given from female’s (woman), which is fundamental in the identity of the community and communion in the community. African family is not limited to the father, mother and children, it includes the entire extended family members of spouses, the unborn, the living and the dead.⁸⁹ The mother being the core center of reference, or the central person from whom everyone can trace his or her origin. Whether through “marriage or blood

⁸⁸ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 18.

⁸⁹ Achermann, *Cry Beloved Africa*, 44.

relatives,” woman is the center of the communion of persons.⁹⁰ As a mother, she is the one who binds all in the communion of love.

John Paul II’s concept of community of persons in reference to the structure of the human person is covenantal because it requires the human faculties, intellect and will.⁹¹ Human intellect and will are essential requirement for a covenant. The realization of what a human person, man and woman are called to be is fulfilled in the covenant of marriage. The openness of a woman to accept a man in conjugal union is the first experience in the communion of persons. This experience builds up the community. But is not limited to the physiological reality, it is the readiness and openness interiorly. The experience of this gift from God brings about the community in communion. Although such experience need both man and woman to bring forth a community, woman plays special part in her role as a provider of the first home for human life, her womb, as well as her spirit.

Furthermore, the concept of the communion of persons in the teachings of the Pope is analogous to the concept of ‘community’ in the African spirit. In the traditional African culture, the communion of persons is expressed in the community, “I am, because we are; and since we are; therefore I am.”⁹² It is in communion of persons in the community that helps one (African) to discover and appreciate what one is called to be. African women, and women in general, are aware of their ontological motherhood, and it is the strength and the source of their dignity and vocation. For the communities which acknowledge, support and

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman* 162. The covenantal is a particular way of becoming husband and wife, which takes way through a reciprocal choice. The choice that establishes the conjugal covenant between the two persons, becoming “one flesh.”

⁹² Mbiti, *African Religions*, 108.

respect the dignity of motherhood, the impact is great. But like any other human culture, African culture is not exceptional, there are common positive values as well as differences which are unacceptable in the light of the teachings of John Paul II. Some of the dissimilarities are challenges to the theology of inculturation and Pope's theological anthropology. The following section analyzes the differences and challenges.

3. Differences and Challenges of John Paul II's Teachings and Inculturation Theology

Critical observers from outside the culture, reading some values that have been discussed on the concept of traditional African culture can easily think that this is an attempt to engage in a "romantic" idealization of the culture.⁹³ These refer to the traditional practices which are accepted as parts of the traditional customs but have negative implications in the lives of women. These include the traditional rites of initiation, particularly female circumcision and polygamy, among others. These practices cannot be without their dark aspects relative to the dignity to woman.⁹⁴ In reality, the theology of inculturation must address this concern and must be able to identify positive and negative elements. Some of the negatives are challenges of inculturation theology especially if they claim some ideal in the traditional cultures while in reality they undermine the dignity and vocation of women.

⁹³ Bujo, *Foundation of An African Ethic*, 162.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

3. 1. The Traditional Initiation: Female Circumcision

The intention to emphasize the common positive value elements in the traditional African culture may appear as a canonization of the African culture. That is because in any cultural practices there are differences between the *ideal* and its *realization*.⁹⁵ Sometimes the ideal overlooks the realization of certain practices. However, the ideals form the content of ethics and religion. It is exactly the knowledge of the ideals that recall one's failure to live according to the required ethics. Sometimes a culture may fail to live the ideals of its tradition or may seek justify its failures. Therefore, the knowledge of the ideal makes one recognize sin, or at least reminds the society not to lose sight of the ideal.⁹⁶

Female circumcision is interpreted in the context of cultural and religious value within the Bantu and Nilotic communities as an ideal. The practice has its traditional place in the initiation rite. For Africans, circumcision aims "to integrate both boys and girls into the groups as the high point of this initiation."⁹⁷ But this practice for girls has a negative implication. As Bujo points out, "female circumcision is a mutilation that carries to the point of absurdity, viz., the preparation for sexual life and also sexual pleasure."⁹⁸ Many women are rightfully against this well-established brutal tradition. Bujo is correct to say that "despite its somewhat well-meaning intentions it must in the final analysis be described as torture and consequently unjust."⁹⁹ It is true that:

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 163.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

In the traditional context, circumcision of both boys and girls was seen as one of several physically demanding and intellectual-spiritual exercises intended to teach young people that life consists not only of joy but also of suffering. The human person always lives in the tension between life and death. In circumcision, the conclusion and high point of the initiation rite, they were to learn to bear pain, so that they would be able to endure life's dark hours.¹⁰⁰

It is only on this background that Jomo Kenyatta was able to defend circumcision practices of the Kikuyu people and in most Africans who practice the ritual when missionaries clearly condemned it.

Kenyatta had argued that the missionaries rejected female circumcision as barbaric only because they did not know the anthropological and theological justification practiced among the Africans.¹⁰¹ According to him, the missionaries who rejected circumcision reduced its entire significance to the biological and medical level. They were to be told that ignoring the ritual would destroy the entire life of Kikuyu society.

The *irua* (circumcision) marks the commencement of participation *in* the various governing groups in the tribal administration, because the real age-groups begin from of the physical operation. The history and legends of the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. See also Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 75.

¹⁰¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 75.

people are explained and remembered according to the names given to various age-groups at the time of initiation ceremony.¹⁰²

The lifelong suffering and above all the risk of losing life of many young women who are potential mothers should prompt an alternative symbolic practice which does not undermine the dignity of women and does not destroy the very core of the African culture. The only alternative is through the inculturation process that provides a better education and gradually introduced a replacement for the female initiation ritual that respect and promote the dignity and vocation of women. So far, many young women have rejected the old brutal rite of initiation and have gone through several weeks of education at the end of which, the girls are given certificate to show that they have been taught the values of marriage, family life, and their ancestral history. Such kind of education is now being encouraged among many communities can be seen as a success as a mature realization of the inculturation theology.

Another major difference in the traditional African cultural practices is polygamy as an accepted form of marriage. In spite of many reasons for justifications of this practice, it is totally unacceptable in the theological anthropology of John Paul II, and it undermines the dignity of motherhood.

¹⁰² Ibid.

3. 2. Traditional African “Polygamy”

Although polygamy is acceptable and practiced in some communities in Africa, it is not an authentic traditional form of marriage. In accordance to the traditional African marriage, polygamy cannot be qualified as an authentic form of traditional African marriage.¹⁰³ This form of marriage fails the qualification of the full traditional marriage rites. African marriage has several stages, rituals and ceremonies. Some of these rituals, rites and ceremonies can be performed only once in one’s life. In the traditional African marriage, only the first wife has the right and privilege of the full rites of marriage and ceremonies.

However, out of necessity, or as a lesser evil, polygamy is practiced by some African tribes and elsewhere in the world.¹⁰⁴ Some theologians claim that polygamy is a “form of marriage” practiced in Africa as a traditional marriage. Many African tribes recognize and accept polygamous marriage. For example, “The Gikuyu customary law of marriage provides that a man may have a many wives as he can support, and the larger one’s family the better it is for the tribe.”¹⁰⁵ Kenyatta describes how among the Gikuyu people, the first wife pleads with the husband to marry a second, third, fourth ... wife.¹⁰⁶

Those who claim polygamy as a form of traditional African marriage may base their argument on the ideal which may not be considered automatically unjust and derogatory to human dignity, since in their own concept, the ideal is perceived to preserve and promote

¹⁰³ Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage*, 50.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 94. See also Kisembo, Magesa and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage*, 85-116.

¹⁰⁶ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 94.

woman's dignity.¹⁰⁷ Such perception is based on the fact that the second and subsequent wives were always married by the request from the first wife. Or some claim that decision to enter into a polygamous marriage was a consultative and the second, third ... woman was always loved and protected by family and the community since they form the part of cultural decision making.

But even if the traditional culture claimed to recognize polygamy as a form of marriage, it is a negative element in the African culture.¹⁰⁸ It is also important to note that the form of the traditional polygamy that the Africans claimed is very different from the modern polygamy. The traditional claimed polygamy is always done by the request from the first wife, for the need of children in the family or out of necessity whereby a young woman conceived out of marriage and it is not easy for her to construct a monogamous marriage.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the traditional community could talk about polygamy as a form of traditional marriage. But these days, even this form of polygamy is far gone. Bujo observes that Africans are no longer interested in ancestral polygamy whereby the first wife was so powerful in demanding for the second wife.¹¹⁰

The new type of polygamy does not deserve a term "African polygamy," because it ignores the consent of the first wife, it does not involve the family and the interest of the community. Instead, it "destroys both the nuclear family and the extended family."¹¹¹ Therefore, people who claim polygamy is a form of African marriage base this claim on a

¹⁰⁷ Bujo, *Foundations of An African Ethic*, 164.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 165.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

hollow pretext. But the point here is, even if some African communities who do observe the “ideal traditional form of polygamy” it must be asked if it is compatible with the Gospel message, and the dignity of women as it is given in the African theological anthropology. Any form of polygamy undermines the dignity of motherhood as a gift from God and it is a negative element in marriage according to the teachings of John Paul II and traditional Africans, such as the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya. Therefore, the Gospel values must give light to this cultural practice through the theology of inculturation.

Finally, considering that the teachings of John Paul II are based on the fact that in the ontological structure of woman there is, “something more universal based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships” it remains just an ideal if it is not properly applied to other cultures.¹¹² Therefore, for these teachings to be realized in the traditional African culture, they require the proper application and implementation.

4. Application and Implementation: The Teachings of John Paul II Concerning the Dignity and Vocation of Women in the Traditional African Culture

Applying the teachings of John Paul II requires a proper understanding of his theological anthropology, faith and an adequate knowledge about the culture to which it is applied. It also requires well-trained and committed agents for the mission, which includes both the clergy and the laity. These agents must identify the areas that require inculturation, namely sacraments/catecheses, liturgy, canonical and ethics and moral values among

¹¹² John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29.

others.¹¹³ Once the area is identified, the agents must have a platform/venue for their implementation. For example, most modern education is carried out through the media (electronics and written materials), schools, Churches and through some forms of social events. All these mentioned among others are unavoidable avenues for communications in contemporary culture.

However, in Africa, the most suitable places for implementations of inculturation theology are: the family, the family has to be a “domestic Church,” and the Small Christian Communities, which are already replacing the traditional African communities.¹¹⁴ The most available and active agent members in the areas mentioned above, in the family, Small Christian Communities (SCCs), and parishes are women. Mwaura confirms that:

Women in Africa are the evangelizers of their families. As mothers they pass on life to their children and bring them up. They are teachers, councilors, and spiritual directors. In the “miniature church,” they provide trust without which they cannot develop properly, acquire personal identity and self-esteem. This enables them to relate with others outside the home. ... women teach their children their roles in society, respect for others, and social responsibility.¹¹⁵

The vision of the “Church-as-Family” of God has a profound implication for all members of God’s family. Therefore, women need empowerment, education and support as proper agents in the implementation process of inculturation. As Mwaura mentions, Africans

¹¹³ Dabulo Mpako, “The African Synod,” in the *Inculturation in the South African Context*, various authors (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 59.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Mwaura, “Women and Evangelization” 119.

recognize that “women have a key function in this process.”¹¹⁶ The purpose of applying the teaching of John Paul II into African culture is to build up African Church as “family” imbued with warmth of human relationships, mutual acceptance, dialogue and trust which exist in the traditional African family circles.¹¹⁷ The platform or the avenues for the implementations of these teachings are the Small Christian Communities. Most of the African cultural values are transmitted by their mothers, in the family, and in the community above all during the traditional initiation.

Therefore, the application of John Paul II’s teachings should be part of the program through initiation so that it forms the part of the African catechesis of initiation. The catechism of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist) must also consider the value of motherhood and impart through a meaningful theological inculturation that matches the African values without compromising the gospel values. The marriage preparation programs must include dignity of parenthood focusing on the motherhood as the center of the unity and human life and the family. In Africa, the best and available avenues of implementations are the families, Small Christian Communities (ACCs) and the period of initiation. Human life must be seen as a gift, given by God through the woman as a mother and wife. Motherhood is a gift from God, inseparable from womanhood and integral to the dignity and vocation of woman, according to the teachings of John Paul II and the traditional African of the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 123.

5. Synthesis and Conclusion

This study has examined both the African theological and anthropological views and the teachings of John Paul II concerning the dignity and vocation of women. The research shows that both share a common value regarding the ontological dignity of motherhood. Motherhood is a gift from God, inseparable from womanhood and integral to the dignity and vocation of woman in the African theological anthropology of the Bantu and Nilotic tribes of Kenya, and in the teachings of John Paul II concerning the dignity of motherhood. With the help of inculturation theology, one can understand the depths of the Pope's teachings and the value of the African theological anthropology as well, so that preaching of the Gospel message can be accepted and lived in the families, SCCs, particularly among the Bantu and the Nilotic people of Kenya.

The teachings of John Paul II concerning the dignity of motherhood are enlightenment to traditional African cultures. In the typical African rural areas, the places where urban life-style has not affected families, people live in their traditional ideals. Their ideals are based on their traditional cultural and ethical values. In such cases, traditional cultural practices assume certain ideals which are acceptable, or tolerated in the culture such that they overlook the negative effects in the lives of the people under the guise of 'traditional customs.' These are traditional practices such as polygamy, certain initiation rites, especially female circumcision among others. This study has shown that such practices undermine the dignity of motherhood and can be changed in the light of theological anthropology of John Paul II.

The research has shown that, in both African theological anthropology and in John Paul II's teachings, the concept of life is a sacred gift given by God. This sacred gift is linked to the gift of motherhood in the traditional African culture and is relevant in the teachings John Paul II's idea that man is created in the image and likeness of God. The image and likeness of God and sacred life becomes meaningful and a reality through the spousal meaning of the body as revealed in the conjugal union between man and woman. The conjugal union between a husband and wife is the foundation of communion of persons. Such communion of persons has a theological character of love.

The application of the teachings of John Paul II to African culture is an enlightenment to the culture in the sense that the dignity and vocation of motherhood is confirmed as an ontological gift. The dignity and vocation of women are taken from Christian theological anthropology. In reference to the dialogue between Jesus Christ and the Pharisees, marriage is has biblical, and ontological foundation from the beginning. And because of Christ, marriage between a man and woman is given sacramental values. Therefore, polygamy in spite of all its cultural support is discouraged and disregarded. This research has shown that African polygamy was not in the original traditional marriage, but was only allowed in difficult circumstances which later claimed recognition in the marriage tradition. Therefore, this study gives a clear reason for the rejection of polygamy.

John Paul II's teachings restore the dignity and the vocation of women to its original place, with love and respect to all women as mothers of human life. He empowers women with the truth about their femininity in reference to God from the beginning. The teachings of

John Paul II call for all women to “recognize, within, the ‘gift of God,’ what he, as Creator and Redeemer, entrusts to women, to every woman.”¹¹⁸ Therefore, it is important for all women to discover the entire meaning of their femininity so that they can be disposed to making a “sincere gift of self” to others.”¹¹⁹ Above all, it is meant to empower women with the knowledge, wisdom, confidence, faith, and gratitude to God for his mysterious gift of human life entrusted to them.

Finally, the teaching of John Paul II within the context of the traditional African family culture promotes the dignity and vocation of women. According to the Pope, the need for promotion of the dignity and vocation of women is for all human cultures universally. No matter what culture one comes from, a woman is a mother of human life; therefore, women should be looked upon with great respect, honor and love as the mothers of the individual person and the whole human community. Thus, the Holy Father proclaims with great respect, honor and love, and with the whole Church gives thanks:

for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human person in family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by great social responsibility; for “*perfect*” women and for “*weak*” women—for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by eternal

¹¹⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 31.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

love; as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal “homeland” of all people and is transformed sometimes into a “valley of tears;” as they assume, together with men, *a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity* according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself, in the bosom of the ineffable Trinity.¹²⁰

This exaltation summarizes the great respect, honor and admiration John Paul II has for every woman and what the Church holds for the dignity and vocation of women. It is an invitation and calls for a moral responsibility for every human being born out of a womb to emulate the teachings of the Pope, support and promote women as the mothers of human life. Therefore, in their love and support for the dignity and vocation of women as a mother and wife, the Bantu and Nilotic people of Kenya have a theological anthropological foundation for the dignity of motherhood. St. Joseph stands as a model for respect for all women through the support and care he offered for the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Mother and Mother of Jesus Christ our Savior.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

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