

## BOOK REVIEW

Michael C. Kirwen. African Widows. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979. 253 + viii pp.; tables and bibliography.

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The publication of African Widows comes at an opportune time, when issues of women's status and their social and economic relationships to men are a subject of substantial debate in Tanzania. This debate, which runs through most of the national newspapers, seminars, and learned journals, concerns greater social recognition of women's rights. Arguing that the economic subordination of women in Tanzanian society is at the root of the dilemma, some insist that more opportunities in education and in all sectors of the national economy should be provided to enable women to make a direct contribution to nation building. Through community action and government, the provision of child day-care centres at places of work and in the villages should release women from their present roles as housekeepers and make them available for new economic roles. The proponents of the status quo, on the other hand, argue that motherhood, child-care, agricultural work, and domestic duties are just as important to society as the economic undertakings of men. They see the existing division of labour as reasonable, convenient, and even natural, and view the complementarity of roles as an essential aspect of the smooth running of family life. It is within this continuing debate that one must locate Dr. Kirwen's African Widows, even though his concerns, as we shall see shortly, are somewhat different and stated in a more specific way.

African Widows first appeared as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Toronto, Canada, in 1974, entitled "The Christian Prohibition of the African Leviratic Custom." It is an empirical study of the problems of adapting Western Christian teachings on marriage to the leviratic custom for the care of widows among the Luo, Kuria, Kwaya, and Sukuma of Tanzania. The book is divided into three parts. The first, covering five chapters, states the problem and discusses the leviratic custom--the practice of cohabitation of a widow with her brother-in-law in which the latter relates to the former as a substitute for her deceased husband. The second part considers, in four chapters, the effects on rural Christian communities of the imposition of Christian marriage laws and the pastoral issues arising from this. In the final part, the author summarizes his argument and assesses the relationship between the leviratic custom and contemporary Christian teachings on marriage and family life. He argues that

African leviratic marriage practice is not contrary to fundamental Christian teaching and that its prohibition was largely an effect of narrow ethnocentrism and lack of sympathetic understanding of African traditional institutions on the part of most missionaries and theologians (pp. 199-200). The effect of the prohibition was that missionary work was impeded due to the resistance of would-be converts who were not prepared to relinquish their 'traditional' family practices in favour of the Western Christian model.

Kirwen's pastoral work since 1963 among the Luo people of Tarime district brought him into close proximity with the problems of conflict between Christianity and indigenous laws and practices. When he set out to do fieldwork between 1971 and 1972, the author was already fluent in the Luo language, which knowledge proved a valuable asset in his research. Dr. Kirwen's use of sociological and anthropological research methods and models for analysis of his data makes this study an interesting piece of scholarship, going beyond orthodox theological concerns. The author is concerned that Western Christian principles should be adapted to local conditions wherever possible, and he sets out to show the sociological and economic basis underlying a number of indigenous family practices.

African Widows could be commended for other reasons as well. It is a bold documentation of a crude missionary experiment externally planned and executed by theologians and missionaries whose basic training and social backgrounds were influenced by what Kirwen calls the "manualist" theology. This school of theological thought was a product of nineteenth century neoscholastic thinking, which "presented models of Christian marital and sexual behaviour that were regarded as [binding] for all Christian peoples no matter what their culture or their social situation" (p. 185). Two main principles of the manualist theology are that a Christian marriage is a monogamous union of a man and a woman, and that it is not dissoluble during the life of the parties (but automatically dissolves on the death of either of them). The author argues that these prescriptions conflict with the African understanding of marriage, which recognises both polygyny and leviratic unions. The latter also considers marriage relationships as going beyond the concerns of the immediate parties. In most African societies, the purpose of marriage, apart from the procreative function, is to establish wider social and economic ties within a given social group.

Secondly, Kirwen contends that the prohibition of leviratic unions and the corresponding encouragement of widow remarriage contradicts the Catholic Church's principle of indissolubility of marriage and has the effect of breaking up family units which

would otherwise remain undisturbed on the death of the husband. According to Dr. Kirwen, a leviratic union is not a new marriage between the widow and her brother-in-law but rather a marital adjustment in a continuing marriage in which a brother-in-law substitutes temporarily for a deceased legal husband.

This rethinking of the Christian teaching in relation to marriage in Africa is part of a continuing discussion throughout the majority of Christian churches in Africa since the late 1960s. It has been necessitated by such factors as a decline in the number of church marriages, the concern that "in many places the Church is in a process of excommunicating itself" (Arden, in Kisémbó et al., 1977:xv) and the rise in the number of African church leaders. Thus, in February 1970, a conference of Anglican archbishops of East and Central Africa noted unanimously that there was a need for "a pastoral appreciation of the problems arising out of African marriage customs, both rural and urban, in relation to full membership in the Church" (Hastings, 1973:3). Following this recommendation, a Catholic priest and researcher, the Rev. Adrian Hastings, was appointed to conduct a study based on the above terms of reference. His report was submitted to the Conference of Anglican Archbishops in Africa which met in Kampala, Uganda, in 1972 and published a year later as Christian Marriage in Africa.

One of the major initiatives involving a large number of researchers from most Christian sects and covering the whole of sub-Saharan Africa is what came to be known as CROMIA, the Churches' Research on Marriage in Africa. Since its inception in 1970, CROMIA has undertaken a number of related research projects throughout Africa. By 1975 CROMIA had produced thirty-one papers. A report summarizing the findings of a five-year research project sponsored by CROMIA was published in 1977 under the title of African Christian Marriage (Kisémbó et al., 1977). Its authors emphasized in their introduction that the report was not intended to provide answers or to suggest any decisions for churches in Africa but to "present the facts and the current thinking in contemporary Africa" (Kisémbó et al., 1977:xviii). They nonetheless stressed the fact that the report represented a new effort to look at the relationship between African cultural systems and Christian teachings. This report makes it clear, as does Kirwen's African Widows, that early missionary work was often impeded by a lack of understanding of the underlying moral and socio-economic basis of African marriage.

Unlike the CROMIA report and that of Hastings, Kirwen's African Widows runs short of an important perspective in its conception of the churches' role in contemporary Africa. This may be termed the perspective of social change. Dr. Kirwen argues,

for instance, that the:

Catholic Church . . . has to . . . liberate itself and its members throughout the world from its narrow Western preoccupations and its ethnocentric pastoral position vis-a-vis non-Western cultures. Otherwise it will continue to distort, in the pastoral order, the rich and varied cultural systems, and institutions of the vast majority of mankind . . . (p. 215).

One can hardly argue with the above, yet more could be said. For if the Christian church is to be censured for having imposed its Western civilisation on indigenous people, what is its proper role in the continuing processes of social and economic change whose broad effects are now beginning to be studied? African Widows does not bring out this important dimension of contemporary society. Yet this perspective is necessary in order to demonstrate clearly that the correction of the earlier mistakes by the church will not amount to a return to life in Africa as it was at the beginning of this century.

African Widows indicates that the author found data which could have led him to include the perspective of change, but he did not pursue that line of inquiry. Two examples may be given here. In his Sukuma material, Dr. Kirwen found that 65 percent of the people interviewed were opposed to the levirate; this was in contrast to the Kuria and Luo data where the majority of people favoured it. When he analysed the Sukuma responses further, he found "that there [was] very little statistical difference between the responses of Christians and non-Christians." The author concluded therefore that "there is opposition in Sukuma society to the custom of the levirate independent of direct Christian influence" (p. 126). But he does not pursue this point any further.

Secondly, when he interviewed a sample of Sukuma respondents who had lived in an urban environment for at least a year after the age of ten, he found that "87% disapproved of the Church's prohibition" of the levirate custom. Dr. Kirwen concluded that this data supported the "hypothesis that wider experiences as well as education tend to make traditional rural Africans conservative and resistant to change" (p. 127; author's emphasis). He further notes that an explanation for this conservatism is that the maintenance of traditional relationships enables such "individuals to gain a certain amount of economic and social power in the traditional society" (p. 127). Yet it is questionable whether this "conservatism" is not merely an ideological survival. Changes in family relationships have occurred and are occurring in

contemporary Africa which cannot be easily halted, reversed, or even understood without some appreciation of the fact that ideological structures tend to lag behind real changes in family relations. The former are sometimes used to legitimate relationships which are no longer justifiable under changed social and economic conditions.

Adrian Hastings (1973:25) has noted that:

In the 1970s, when one faces the subject of marriage in Africa, it is clear that all the old questions remain very much with us . . . . . We see as much as ever how central all this is to the life and mission of the Church. Polygamy, bridewealth, the many intricacies of customary marriage, the complex obligations of the extended family, all these can be living realities today as they were a hundred years ago. Yet the tangle is now far more complicated, for besides all the old aspects there are many new ones.

These new aspects continue to be crucial in the 1980s and require more detailed research and understanding. I noted above that African Widows comes at a time when the debate on women's rights in Tanzania is raging and when a solution has yet to be found. Those who wish to be "conservative" and to regulate their marital relations in a traditional way may be deeply disturbed to find that the relationships they support have either been completely transformed or are rapidly changing and no longer correspond to the ideal types. This debate is made more complex because the majority of those who benefit from maintaining the ideology of "tradition" are the men whose voices are usually heard first. When they argue for the maintenance of tradition, they are in fact arguing for dominance of the men who are in control of household production and distribution of the product of joint labour. These men are increasingly being challenged by those under them (especially women) to give up some of this control. Although this struggle is not peculiar to this era, its intensity has been deepened by rapid changes in the economies of most African societies. The change from a subsistence economy to an economy where production is both for consumption and for the market has resulted in a number of tensions and strains and made the maintenance of previous norms and institutions both oppressive and inequitable.

Let us take the example of polygyny in contemporary Africa. Although this form of marriage may be considered similar to that practiced a century ago, closer examination shows that relations between spouses has changed substantially in the last one hundred

years. In pre-colonial Tanzania, for example, the main duty of wives was to grow sufficient food for feeding the family. Today, in addition to this function, wives grow coffee, tea, cotton, tobacco, and other cash crops. They are engaged with their husbands in commercial undertakings and other 'non-traditional' economic activities commonly associated with the money economy. During my field research in Tarime district (1979-80) I came across several cases in which wives were employed by their husbands as shop assistants, restaurant operators, bartenders, etc. Research conducted by Philip Raikes (1978) among commercial wheat farmers in Mbulu district shows that some women worked as farm assistants on their husband's wheat farms. Njelu Kasaka (1972) found in Tabora area of Tanzania that the wages paid to each working member of the family in the tobacco farms of Matwiga ujamaa village induced husbands "to marry more than one wife." He also found that a man with many wives was allocated a larger family plot (Kisembo et al., 1977:68-69). Similar findings were recorded by Francis Lubowa (1974) during his research at ujamaa villages in Iringa region of Tanzania. In other cash crop growing areas, wives are engaged in producing for the market. In all these areas men appeared to approve the practice of polygyny. The more wives a man has, the more income he expects from the sale of cash crops or from his commercial activities. Yet the men will not put it in these terms. Most will say that polygyny is their tradition and their culture. But is it part of their culture to grow tobacco or coffee for sale in a world market or to receive and invest the proceeds of these sales in yet more wives?

In recent years Tanzanian courts have considered a series of disputes between husbands and wives over the distribution of assets within the household and its division on divorce. Where a wife is earning her own income she has demanded full control of how the income should be spent. In all these cases where wives are participating in a "non-traditional" economic sector, there is mounting pressure on husbands to give wives greater control and voice in the running of the household and family investments. Such changes in marital relations demand a completely new outlook on social issues. We surely cannot obtain a great deal of guidance from the so-called traditional culture of our ancestors. This is not to deny that it had meaning. Indeed it was very appropriate for the conditions of life in those times. But in the 1980s, appeal to tradition and culture can be sometimes exploitative and oppressive.

It should be emphasised that these social changes have not affected all aspects of "culture" in the same way. Thus within a single social group, some aspects of culture have been transformed more rapidly than others. Moreover, in a large political

entity such as Tanzania, a variety of responses may be given in respect of one single question about a given custom (compare responses of the Sukuma sample concerning the levirate custom). Finally, those social institutions which have been transformed have not come to resemble Western models. This has led to the tendency to suppose that as these institutions or relationships are not similar to those found in the West, then they must be 'traditional' and African. The truth, however, is that they are probably African but are very unlikely to be traditional. They are a product of the responses of African societies to a variety of changes and strains since the era of colonisation and capitalist penetration.

Under these circumstances, there may be widows who consider the levirate to be an acceptable means of support for them and their young children. Others may reject it as an oppressive institution which in the 1980s helps to perpetuate their exploitation. They might prefer to manage their late husband's estate without interference from their brothers-in-law. If no substantial property has been left by the husband and there are grown-up children of the marriage, the widow may choose to return to her natal home. One cannot predict in advance what will happen to the levirate (where it still exists), but we need to study these societies in their specific environment in order to see how they respond to change. African Widows has the special merit of bringing these questions to the fore.

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