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NEGOTIATING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Tanzanian Family Traditions and Christian Values in Conversation

Negocjowanie wolności religijnej Tradycje rodzinne w Tanzanii i wartości chrześcijańskie w rozmowie

Abstract: This article explores the key themes and insights from the groundbreaking conference “Marriage versus Religious Freedom: Cultural and Legal Aspects in Poland and Tanzania”, organized by the University Center for Religious Freedom Studies at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw on 23rd May 2025. The conference addressed critical gaps in understanding Tanzanian marriage customs and the rise of intercultural and interreligious unions in both Poland and Tanzania. The author combines pastoral theology with empirical observations to analyze marriage as a socio-religious institution in both cultural contexts.

The study employs a pastoral theological methodology, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between theory and practice, particularly in religious and multicultural settings. It examines the historical evolution of marriage from a social, economic, and religious contract to a modern civil institution, contrasting European Christian perspectives with African communal and ancestral traditions. Key differences include family structures (nuclear

O. JACEK GÓRKA – członek zakonu franciszkanów, dyrektor ds. kontaktów zewnętrznych i internacjonalizacji oraz wykładowca na Wydziale Teologii i Religioznawstwa Jordan University College w Tanzanii. Uzyskał doktorat na Papieskim Uniwersytecie Salezjańskim w Rzymie, specjalizując się w duszpasterstwie młodzieży i katechetyce. Od 2000 roku pracuje w Tanzanii na rzecz holistycznego rozwoju lokalnych społeczności i ich mieszkańców, kładąc szczególny nacisk na młodzież i jej prawa do zatrudnienia. Autor książek i artykułów: *Rediscovering the Role of Quantitative Research in Pastoral Ministry: Practical Dimension* oraz *A culture: catalyst or inhibitor of the overall social development: A short comparison of the case of Dr. J.K. Nyerere and Dr. J.P. Magufuli*.

vs.extended), child-rearing practices, rituals like male circumcision and female genital mutilation, and the spiritual significance of marriage in Tanzanian culture, where it serves as a bridge between ancestors and future generations.

Religious freedom emerges as a central concern, particularly in Tanzanian interfaith marriages, where tensions arise between state law, Christian doctrine, Islamic principles, and customary practices. The article advocates for pastoral strategies – such as intercultural counseling and community education – to navigate these complexities while respecting both cultural identity and religious integrity. Ultimately, the study underscores the necessity of more scientific dialogue and mutual understanding of the Tanzanian unification between custom, law and religion in regards to marriage.

Key words: Christianity, African traditional religions, Tanzanian Customary law, Marriage, Religious freedom.

Abstrakt: Artykuł przedstawia główne zagadnienia omówione podczas konferencji „Małżeństwo a wolność religijna: aspekty kulturowe i prawne w Polsce i Tanzanii”, zorganizowanej przez Uniwersyteckie Centrum Badań nad Wolnością Religijną Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego 23 maja 2025 r. Przeanalizowano różnice między europejskim a tanzańskim rozumieniem małżeństwa, ukazując, że w Tanzanii pozostaje ono instytucją silnie zakorzenioną w tradycjach wspólnotowych, prawie zwyczajowym oraz więzi z przodkami, podczas gdy w Europie ma przede wszystkim charakter cywilny i indywidualistyczny. Omówiono także typologię rodzin, rytuały inicjacyjne (m.in. obrzezanie), znaczenie licznych potomków, społeczną odpowiedzialność za wychowanie dziecka, a także różnice w strukturach rodzin nuklearnych i wielopokoleniowych.

W dalszej części artykułu ukazano napięcia, które pojawiają się na styku chrześcijaństwa, islamu i tradycyjnych religii afrykańskich, zwłaszcza w małżeństwach międzyreligijnych. Autor analizuje kwestie poligamii, ceny narzeczeńskiej (mahari), wychowania dzieci, sporów o dziedziczenie, a także problem społecznego i rodzinnego odrzucenia konwertytów. Wskazano na złożoność interpretacji wolności religijnej w Tanzanii, gdzie jej rozumienie bywa kształtowane przez harmonię wspólnotową, system klanowy i prawo zwyczajowe, a nie jedynie przez standardy zachodnie. W konkluzji podkreślono konieczność pogłębionego dialogu kulturowo-religijnego oraz wypracowania duszpasterskich strategii towarzyszenia małżeństwom międzykulturowym, które pozwoliłyby pogodzić integralność wiary z poszanowaniem lokalnych tradycji.

Słowa kluczowe: chrześcijaństwo, tradycyjne religie afrykańskie, tanzańskie prawo zwyczajowe, małżeństwo, wolność religijna.

This article presents the groundbreaking conference organized by the University Center for Religious Freedom Studies at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw on 23rd May 2025, titled “Marriage versus Religious Freedom: Cultural and Legal Aspects in Poland and Tanzania”.

The rationale for addressing this topic was based on two significant observations made by the organizing committee: a general lack of knowledge regarding the custom and civil law of marriage in Tanzania (and other African countries) and the increasing number of intercultural and interreligious marriages (or unions) in Poland and, to some extent, in Tanzania.

To address these issues from an academic perspective, the organizers emphasized the importance of inviting presenters from diverse specializations, including Pastoral Theology, Civil Law in Tanzania, Missiology, Pedagogy, Canon Law, Dogmatic Theology, and other related disciplines.

The author of this article, drawing on 25 years of missionary service in Tanzania, aims to combine his grassroots experience with pastoral principles to offer practical and insightful guidance for individuals currently in, or considering, Polish Tanzanian family relationships.

1. Method

This article follows principles of the method used in Pastoral Theology which main goal is to ensure a constant renovation and updating of lines of action.

PT engages the complex interplay of theory and practice in a focal way. Theory and practice imply and shape each other. Practice gives rise to theory, while theory often has practical implications. Trying to understand and explain human action and thought requires complex theoretical frameworks. Theoretical frameworks, in turn, arise out of reflection upon actions and practices.

Methods in PT often bear witness to the complexity of the theory-practice relationship. Often practical theologians will use a spatial metaphor to describe this complexity.

Nevertheless, below we recall both material and formal objects of Pastoral Theology, where the first focuses on *Religious Practices performed within three major areas*: Within the Church; Outside the Church; and Christian faith in a multicultural and multi-religious world.

The *Formal object of PT* is understood as the perspective within which the material object is studied – has two levels: *first*, tension between the

current state of religious practice and how it should or could become; and *second*, research-driven practice to identify problems and tensions and to understand, explain and solve them.

2. Pre-state structure of marriage

Before marriage became a civil law institution, it was a socially and religiously sanctioned contract aimed at reproduction, inheritance, maintaining social order and strengthening ties between families. In practice, it had much more to do with the functioning of the community than with personal choice or romantic love.

Here we wish to focus briefly on marriage union back to royal and feudal times in Europe, when union of a man and a woman was primarily of social, economic, religious and political significance. Here are the main aspects of this institution:

a) Social union: securing inheritance and continuity of the lineage

In this understanding, marriage was the primary institution for perpetuating the lineage and passing on property. The purity of the children's lineage (i.e., the certainty of paternity) was crucial to inheritance and the preservation of power or lands.

b) Economic union

This factor within the union was a form of economic alliance, combining property, land and influence. In this reality, a woman often brought a dowry, and the man provided sustenance. It was often concluded to increase the social status of the family.

c) Political union

Especially in the upper strata, marriages were political alliances (e.g., dynastic or tribal). Often, it was arranged by families, without the will of the spouses themselves.

d) Religious and moral function

In Christianity, for example, it is considered a sacrament. It was meant to regulate sexual life, which outside of marriage is condemned by the Biblical teaching. A woman's chastity before marriage was linked to family honor and had a strong religious dimension.

Consequently, we may conclude that marriage was a tool for maintaining social order, also by assigning women to the role of wife and mother. Likewise, we should not forget that marriage rules (age, consent, kinship) were regulated by custom and religious law, especially by the Catholic Church and later various branches of the Protestant Churches.

3. The Christian foundation of marriage

The meaning of marriage in Poland¹ is based on the Christian worldview where the concept of family originates from the Biblical creation narrative, where Adam and Eve, as the first parents, were given the divine mandate to procreate (Genesis 1:27-28). Family is perceived as a sacred institution, where human beings reflect God's image, capable of love, truth, and moral discernment. The Second Vatican Council further emphasizes that humanity finds its true purpose in the revelation of Christ, the "New Adam"².

It is only in the mystery of the *word made flesh* that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to himself and brings to light Its very high calling. It is no wonder, then, that all the truths mentioned so far should find in him their source and their most perfect embodiment.

Since we are still in the area of the European context³, we would like to look briefly at some definitions and the types of families.

¹ Cfr. Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2 April 1997, Artykuł 18 (Translation from Polish), According to Article 18 of the Polish Constitution, marriage as the union of a man and a woman, family, maternity and parenthood are under the protection and guardianship of the Republic of Poland. The duty to protect means first and foremost that public authorities take public authorities to take measures to prevent, among other things, threats to family, maternity and parenthood. The principle expressed in Article 18 of the Polish Constitution formulates the addressed to all organs of public authority the order to realize these values to the greatest possible and the prohibition on interfering with the freedoms and rights of those who make up marriage and the family. According to Article 8(2) of the Polish Constitution, a provision of the Constitution may also be directly applied by administrative authorities in the process of interpreting laws in accordance with the with the Constitution.

² Cfr. Second Vatican Council, The pastoral constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html [15.09.2025], n. 22.

³ Cfr. S. Koenig, *Sociology, An introduction to social sciences*, New York 1953, p. 129.

4. Key understanding of terms

Here we wish to ask a simple question, namely, what is a family? Or how to make sure that what someone defines as a family goes hand in hand with the so-called “western” and European understanding of a family as such. It is important because usually we might find some broader explanations that the typical European family is a *nucleus family*.

4.1. Western definition on family

Below we present selected definitions from different scientific disciplines like sociology, anthropology, theology.

- William Fielding Ogburn and Meyer Francis Nimkoff define family as a durable association of husband and wife with or without children⁴.
- William Graham Sumner and Albert Gallower Keller define family as a miniature social organization in which at least two generations exist and has a unique characteristic of a tied blood relationship⁵.
- Bronislaw Malinowski opined that a family is the institution within which the cultural traditions of a society are handed over a newer generation (limited to a particular society and its cultural factors)⁶.
- John Paul II viewed the family as the “basic cell of society” and the “domestic church” (rooted in the tradition and teaching of the Catholic Church)⁷.
- Pope Francis describes a family as a fundamental building block of society, a place of welcome and a vital cell in a fraternal community. He emphasizes the family’s role in promoting love, trust, cooperation, and reciprocity, and its importance in humanizing individuals.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church defines family as the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life⁸.

⁴ Cfr. W.F. Ogburn, M.F. Nimkoff, *Technology and the changing family*, London 1977.

⁵ Cfr. W.G. Sumner, A.G. Keller, *The science of society*, 1927, https://archive.org/details/scienceofsociety0000sumn_l8f0/page/n8/mode/1up [20.09.2025].

⁶ Cfr. B. Malinowski, *The Family among the Australian Aborigines: A sociological study*, 1913, <https://archive.org/details/familyamongaustr00mali> [20.09.2025].

⁷ Cfr. John Paul II, The post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 1981, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html [15.09.2025].

⁸ Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P7T.HTM [15.09.2025], n. 2207.

4.2. An African definition on family

At this point we wish to present a definition of family created by John Mbiti, a well-known anthropologist and philosopher of African culture and religion. First of all, he argued that the African family extends beyond immediate genetic ties. Such a statement made him highlight the importance of community and kinship in shaping individual identity and reinforcing social structures.

We may realize now that the African concept of family is deeply interwoven with the belief in the continuity of the living and the dead, with ancestors playing a significant role in guiding the living.

5. Some differences between an African and European family

Now we should try identifying differences that characterize presented above definitions and to present some characteristics of Tanzanian family that might have its own understanding, often going far from what is taken for granted in the current western culture.

5.1. Number of Children

Generally, in an African context, we may observe large number of children within the same family. First, all the children don't have to be the biological offspring of the parents. Also, it is very common to find few parents of children within the same household. Nevertheless, children are considered to guarantee the continuation of family lineage.

If we find that in Tanzania families have numerous offsprings, it is mostly on the base of strong stand where children are gift to the society and the family in a particular way. Therefore, there is no limit of the number of the children in African families and a person can give birth to any number of children as much as possible. Sometimes, we find other reasons, including economical, or an environment with contagious diseases that may lead to death of some of these children.

5.2. Typology of the Family

Sometimes a type of family might be determined by the number of members of the family. However, the modern western family is usually defined as a nucleus family.

Among the Africans, an extended family is a common phenomenon in many places. It is a family that consists of husband or father, wife or mother and children. This family is not limited within the parameter of its members but rather it adds relatives and even the diseased are in some tribes being counted. These are like uncles, aunts, relatives of the spouses, who live together in the same household. It is possible for all members of such typology of a family to live together since the family members support each other financially. Likewise, they help each other in production such as agriculture so that they can earn for their living⁹.

5.3. Male circumcision

The act of circumcision which consists of cutting of the foreskin is a ritual and religious practice. The blood during circumcision should drop on the ground binds that person mystically with ancestors. In most of the African tribes this ritual considered as the transition or a passage from childhood to adulthood.

Consequently, an individual is ready to assume the roles of husband and wife in the family or society at large. Though it is practiced in African, but it should be clear that not all the tribes do practice it. As an example, we may list the Luo tribe in East Africa. But we shouldn't come to conclusion that the example of Luo or other tribes doesn't practice any ritual of initiation. Here we only state that the circumcision is not practicing among Luo and other few tribes as a form of initiation.

5.4. Female genital mutilation

In Tanzania and in Africa at large, there are existing practices of female genital mutilation. Formerly it was practiced to the adults, in their initiation ceremonies but in the modern era it has changed. It has been observed that today the practice of it is done to infants and children. This is done secretly because officially there are Government of Tanzania, Christian Churches and Non-government organizations (NGOs) that take action against the practice. Therefore, it is often done within the family members to avoid the publicity of ceremonies which used to take place.

⁹ Cfr. K. Neubbeck, D.S. Glasberg, *Sociology, Diversity and Change in the twenty first century*, Dubuque 2014, p. 471.

In this sense it becomes difficult to uproot it, since the victim cannot defend herself and cannot escape the practice. She will come to learn it later that she has been mutilated.

5.5. Protection of the Children

In an African family a child should be protected by all the members of the extended family. Generally, people in Tanzania understand that a child not only belongs to the family but to the society (clan), hence, the whole society should secure the security of all children. A good example is when a child is not seen in the family, the whole community or society gathers and starts looking for the child all over the entire place and the surrounding till the child is found. This protection goes hand in hand with the teaching of moral behaviors. Nevertheless, in the introduction of the new laws, including the Safeguarding of minors and vulnerable adults, unfolded several forms of child abuse that often are taken for granted¹⁰. Unfortunately, in some circumstances a child is deprived of its rights within a society until the time of initiation which for a male should take place in the period of puberty or adolescence. This standard passes through social transformation of African societies, especially in towns.

Within the modern western culture, on the contrary, it has been noticed that the protection of a child is only based on the family level. This might be found in some extent in the evangelical narration dedicated to the time, when Jesus was thought to be lost while he was in the temple teaching. "They thought that he was with the group, so they travelled a whole day and then started looking for Him among their relatives and friends. They did not find him, so they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. On the third day they found him in the temple, sitting with Jewish teachers, listening to them and asking questions" (Lk 2:44). Therefore, we can imagine how solicitously Mary and Joseph went searching for Jesus among their relatives and friends when the caravan halted for the night. Only his parents were looking for him but not his relatives; nor even the whole society as it is in an African family.

There is no integration of the family with the rest of the society members regarding the protection of the child. Today, in the western society, the individual responsibility might be explained, mostly because it is the state

¹⁰ Cfr. J.S. Mbiti, *African religions and Philosophy*, Gaborone 2008.

that creates a love that should control a child's safety, also while a child is found within its natural family.

5.6. Formation of a child

In a Tanzanian family, the contribution of the parents in forming their children is well observed. Especially, Parents have their unique way of forming their children. At night the parents are with their immediate children in the same house; they discuss private affairs of their household, and the parents educate the children in matters pertaining to domestic relationships¹¹. In other words children are educated on how they can behave well in the society so that they become acceptable in the entire society, Consequently they grow with the same wisdom they acquired from their parents and later they will come to share them with their children in their future.

Moreover, every person in society is responsible for the wellbeing of the child. In villages, usually, elders are eager to correct a misbehaving child or a youth. Therefore, society has the duty and responsibility of ensuring that children are formed according to a particular tribal custom. These customs, in fact, are meant to control the moral conduct of a young member of the tribe. Any person found in the society, who has seen a child misbehaving, has a right to punish a child without the consent of his or her parents.

This aspect changed completely when we observe children and youth in large cosmopolitan cities in Tanzania, like e.g. Dar es Salaam, Arusha, or Mwanza. It has been noticed that a primary reason for youth moving from villages to town is, surprisingly, not an economical one but the anonymity that has not existed in their small societies.

5.7. Types of African Families

African family structures vary but generally include:

- Nuclear Family: comprising parents and children and introduced by colonial administrations, Christian teaching.
- Extended Family: Multi-generational households forming a single social and economic unit.
- Compound Family: Blended families formed through remarriage or polygamy.

¹¹ Cfr. *ibidem*.

- Single-Parent Family: Often a result of divorce, death, or abandonment.
- Divorced Family: Where children live with one parent, often leading to socio-economic challenges.

In African traditions, polygamy is culturally embedded, seen as practical for agricultural and economic reasons, while monogamy is often attributed to Christian influence. Marriage itself is not merely considered as a personal contract but a communal event, fostering social cohesion and stability.

Unlike the Polish family structure, in Tanzania there might be few or more types of families under a roof of one household. The togetherness, in reality is superior to ties created through marriage.

In the following point we are going to discuss the meaning of marriage in Tanzania that should give as a general view of the issue from the African culture point of view.

6. Marriage meaning in Tanzania

In this point we would like to give a closer look at the meaning a Tanzanian has regarding the reason for getting a marriage union. Information obtained through the following short analysis should lead us to cope with the topic of study.

We wouldn't be wrong saying that for a Tanzanian (and probably to an inhabitant in Sub-Saharan Africa) a marriage means a sacred bridge between Ancestors and children that are going to be born within the marriage union. This is why in traditional African thought, marriage is far more than a union between two individuals, rather it is a cosmic event that binds the living, the ancestors, and the unborn.

Unlike Western models that emphasize nuclear model, romantic love or legal contracts, African marriage is a spiritual, communal, and generational covenant ensuring the continuity of life itself. In the same tune, in African spirituality, marriage is a religious obligation. Without it, the ancestors remain restless, and the unborn are left in limbo. It is a cycle that must not be interrupted¹². It is common to hear and learn that in African traditional life, marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate.

¹² Cfr. L. Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, New York 1997, p. 83–93.

Otherwise, he or she is not a complete person. Consequently, marriage is the meeting point for the three layers of human life: the departed, the living, and those yet to be born.

Let us now give a simple breakdown of the information written above.

6.1. Marriage as a link to the Ancestors

In African cosmology, the ancestors are not dead but remain active in the lives of their descendants. Marriage is seen as a duty to the ancestors, who expect their lineage to continue¹³.

On the basis of that, we may provide here some key aspects that include:

- Ancestral Approval: Before a marriage is finalized, rituals (like libations or consultations with elders) seek the blessings of the ancestors.
- Bride Price as a Sacred Exchange: The payment of dowry (mahari) is not merely economic, but it is a symbolic offering to the ancestors, acknowledging their role in uniting the families.

This also resounded in studies by Amadiume who argued that the bride wealth is not about commodifying women but about ritually binding two lineages. It is an offering to the ancestors, ensuring that the marriage is recognized in the spiritual realm¹⁴.

- Failure to marry is normally related to Ancestral Displeasure¹⁵: Hence a person who refuses marriage risks angering the ancestors, potentially inviting misfortune. The ancestors are the guardians of the moral order, and they watch to see whether the living are fulfilling their obligations – especially in marriage and procreation. This is why B. Bujo insisted that to refuse marriage is to cut oneself off from the ancestors and to betray the unborn. Consequently, the African family is a chain that must never be broken¹⁶.

¹³ Cfr. G. Baloyi, *Marriage and culture within the context of African indigenous societies: A need for African cultural hermeneutics*, „*Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*”, 48(2022), no. 1, p. 1–12.

¹⁴ Cfr. I. Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture*, London 1997, p. 144–158.

¹⁵ Cfr. Mbiti, *African religions and Philosophy*.

¹⁶ Cfr. B. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African model and the dialog between north and south*, Nairobi 1998. Similar opinion has been given by other African writers. For example, in Akan tradition, marriage is not complete until children are born. The ancestors demand descendants, and a childless marriage is considered a tragedy, namely, an unfulfilled destiny. Cfr. G. Kwame, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, Accra 1996.

6.2. Marriage as a promise to the unborn

In this aspect, an African marriage carries a meaning as a contract with the future. Children are not just considered as a personal choice but as a sacred obligation to those yet to be born. Similarly, the unborn are not an abstract concept in African thought, rather they are waiting souls, depending on the living to bring them into the world. Marriage is the sacred passage that allows them to arrive¹⁷.

This might be explained and understood as the following:

- The Stigma of Childlessness: A childless couple is seen as breaking the chain between past and future generations.
- Polygamy as Insurance for Lineage: In some cultures, if a wife cannot bear children, a man may take another wife to fulfill the ancestral mandate of procreation.
- Naming Ceremonies as Ancestral Return: Newborns are often believed to be reincarnated ancestors, reinforcing the bond between.

6.3. Contrast with the Christian View of Marriage

While Christianity also values generational continuity (e.g., be fruitful and multiply), key differences arise when we state that Marriage is an ancestral duty and lineage preservation against sacramental union and personal holiness. The bride price consists of a sacred ritual honoring the ancestor. In consequence, it goes against an optional, namely not theologically driven requirement.

Moreover, childlessness is always seen as a curse and normally leads towards divorce and/or polygamy against a gesture of compassion that might lead to adoption. Also, here the community plays its role as a clan affair, and not just an individual against the couple's covenant before God.

The discussed above scholarly founded characteristics of an African marriage strengthens the argument that African marriage is a holistic, spiritual, and intergenerational institution and its go far beyond Western interpretations. Perhaps we could come out with a conclusion that the African marriage has a unique triadic nature, namely, 1) a sacred duty to the ancestors; 2) A communal covenant, not just an individual choice; and 3) A bridge to the unborn, ensuring generational continuity.

¹⁷ Cfr. D. Mulaisho, *The Tongue of the Dumb*, London 1971.

7. Negotiating some tensions in Modern Tanzania

In the current time, especially in towns, Tanzanian Christians grapple with how to honor ancestral traditions while adhering to biblical teachings. Some emerging solutions that might include:

- Reinterpreting bride price by framing dowry (mahari) not just as a purchase of the bride but as a symbol of gratitude to the bride's family.
- Christian Ancestral Memorials are often translated into praying for ancestors without worshiping them and in consequence blending respect with Christian doctrine.
- Emphasizing Adoption by promoting adoption to fulfill the African value of children while aligning with Christian ethics¹⁸. Of course, it wouldn't be just to state that there is no adoption in Tanzania. It is there, but only within one clan because of the tribal customs, beliefs and traditions.

For example, Bénézet Bujo argued that an African marriage is not merely a contract between two individuals, but a covenant between two clans, linking the living, the dead, and future descendants. The bride price is not a purchase, but a ritual seal that ensures the ancestors' blessings¹⁹.

The information gathered above highlights already clear dissimilarities in what marriage as such might mean for a couple built on a Polish and a Tanzanian. We may only imagine that if the two parties are not informed about the differences, the union, most likely, will have to pass through disagreements that, if not healed, might lead to separation²⁰. It is obvious that it is impossible to put as an equal mark between the marriage as a bridge between ancestors and unborn children on one side and the singular nucleus family format where children are welcomed but are not define a validity of a marriage union.

For Tanzania – and much of Africa – the challenge is integrating this wisdom with Christian values without losing the spiritual depth of either tradition. By recognizing marriage as both a sacred duty and a divine gift, a richer, more inclusive theology of family can emerge – one that truly honors the past, nurtures the present, and secures the future.

In the following point we wish to discuss some aspects of religious freedom within marriage unions in Tanzania.

¹⁸ Cfr. Mbiti, *African religions and Philosophy*.

¹⁹ Cfr. B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, New York 2001.

²⁰ Cfr. *ibidem*.

8. Concept of religious freedom

Before we enter deeper into the current part of our study, we should present some chosen definitions of religious freedom to guide us into the better understanding of the phenomenon.

8.1. Catechism of the Catholic Church

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, true freedom is found in seeking and adhering to God's truth. It affirms that every person has the right to worship freely without coercion. The CCC in numbers 2104–2109 defines religious freedom as the right of every person to seek the truth in matters of religion, to adhere to that truth once known, and to live publicly in accordance with it – free from coercion by individuals, social groups, or the state²¹. The Church affirms that nobody may be forced to act against his convictions, nor be prevented from acting according to his conscience in religious matters, privately or publicly²². This principle of the teaching of the Catholic Church has been strengthened as well in the Decree *Ad Gentes* from where we learn that the Church strictly forbids that anyone should be forced to accept the faith, or be induced or enticed by unworthy devices; as it likewise strongly defends the principle that no one should be frightened away from the faith by unjust harassment. Similarly, the document reminds that according to the very ancient practice of the Church, the motives for conversion should be examined and, if necessary, purified²³.

The Church has a long and undeniable experience not only in formulating definitions but in protecting the religious freedom of its believes and in advocating the same in other denominations. We wish to point out what was expressed in *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Vatican II declaration on religious liberty.

The Catholic Church argued in the document that religious freedom is an immunity from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether

²¹ Cfr. CCC, n. 2104–2109, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P7D.HTM [15.09.2025].

²² Cfr. *ibidem*, n. 2106.

²³ Cfr. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the mission of the Church *Ad Gentes*, December 7, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html [15.09.2025], n. 13.

alone or in association with others, within due limits. Likewise, the document formulated during the Second Vatican Council claimed that the state is not an all-powerful institution that can force people to act against their consciences, thereby limiting the power of the state. Finally, the Declaration grounds this right in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. Hence, religious freedom is considered a fundamental human right rooted in the inherent dignity of the human person, one that is inherent and unalienable, not granted by government, nor capable of being legitimately revoked by it²⁴.

Consequently, the Magisterium emphasizes that freedom is perfected when directed toward God, and that no one should be forced to act against their conscience in religious matters²⁵.

8.2. Open Doors

On the other side we have the Open Doors organization advocating for persecuted Christians, which defines religious freedom as the right to practice one's faith without fear of persecution or discrimination. Together with that, the OD wish to present to the public whether all religions within a particular country enjoy equality before the law and that no state promotes favoritism of one religion. This activity is very insightful while analyzing the situation in Tanzania where converts from Islam to Christianity often face familial and/or social ostracization. Information of the same tune might be found the *Africa Munus*, from there we learn that in some countries, good relations exist between Christians and Muslims; in others, the local Christians are merely second-class citizens, and Catholics from abroad, religious and lay, have difficulty obtaining visas and residence permits; in some, there is insufficient distinction between the religious and political spheres, while in others, finally, there is a climate of hostility. The Pope continued by asking the whole Church, through patient dialogue with Muslims, to seek juridical and practical recognition of religious freedom, so that every citizen in Africa may enjoy not only the right to choose his religion freely and to engage in

²⁴ Cfr. Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis Humanae*, December 7, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html [15.09.2025], n. 1–2.

²⁵ Cfr. CCC, n. 2106, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P7D.HTM [15.09.2025]; https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_one/chapter_one/article_3/i_freedom_and_responsibility.html.

worship, but also the right to freedom of conscience. Religious freedom is the road to peace²⁶.

Data presented by Open Doors is reliable and helpful in highlighting countries where Christians face severe restrictions and advocating that wherever the fundamental human right is suppress it leads to broader human rights violations²⁷.

8.3. African Philosophical Perspectives

The religious freedom has also its African understanding and often is tied to community harmony and ancestral traditions. Unlike the European thought, African philosophy sees religion as deeply interwoven with social identity. Many African traditions emphasize spiritual plurality, where different belief systems coexist within a shared cultural framework. Religious freedom, in this sense, is not just about personal choice but about maintaining communal balance and respect for diverse spiritual expressions²⁸. We may notice already that religious freedom is a complex concept interpreted differently across theological, philosophical and cultural traditions. Hence, in Tanzania and in Africa at large, scholars emphasize communal harmony over individual choice. Religion then, has not a private but a communal bond that means a community's right to uphold ancestral traditions without foreign imposition. Because of its communal character of the African society, the religious freedom might be understood in relation to other religions, introduced along the history to people living at the African continent.

Also, Tanzania's Constitution in Articles 18 and 19 guarantees that every person has the freedom of opinion and expression of his ideas (Articles 18). Similarly, the Constitution underlines that every Tanzanian has the right to the freedom of conscience, faith and choice in matters of religion, including the freedom to change his religion or faith (Articles 19)²⁹. Probably we

²⁶ Cfr. Benedict XVI, The post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Africa Munus*, 2011, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.html [15.09.2025], n. 94.

²⁷ Cfr. Open Door, <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/open-doors-2025-event/> [28.10.2025].

²⁸ Cfr. *Encyclopedia of African Religion and Philosophy*, <https://link.springer.com/referencework/10.1007/978-94-024-2068-5> [28.10.2025].

²⁹ The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, https://www.nao.go.tz/uploads/Constitution_of_the_United_Republic_of_Tanzania_en.pdf [20.09.2025].

wouldn't be wrong affirming that the quoted articles echoing words said by the Father of Tanzanian Nations, Julius Kambarage Nyerere on July 30, 1970 in Tabora, during a seminar organized and opened for religious leaders to attend. Among the many issues presented by the President, it was stressed that Tanzania was formed as *a secular state*³⁰.

"[...] Our country it is a secular state. We do not have an official religion in Tanzania, a religion which is stipulated and accepted by the Constitution of the country like in England, where Anglicanism is a state religion; other denominations are accepted also; not forbidden. We are neither a Christian state, nor an Islamic state; not even a Judaic state, our country is just Tanzania. People themselves are having religion, everybody has his own, everyone knows his or her religion; we do not question them. Any denomination is not forbidden by the country's law. Regardless they don't bring conflict and chaos among citizens. Also, for our Party, every person has his or her religion: me, Kawawa, Karume [...]"³¹.

Unfortunately, there is a noticeable scarcity of current studies in this matter produced by Tanzanian scholars. Perhaps this is the biggest problem of African scientific research usually built on studies based on findings from western literature that on one side has good methodological background but often lacks both cultural and customary background that in normal circumstances cannot be obtained through simply literature review without grassroot experience.

9. Religious freedom in Tanzanian marriages

Because of the pastoral character of our study we are going to remind the Catholic teaching on the topic by calling it as an inalienable gift rooted in human dignity.

9.1. Tanzanian Multireligious society

Tanzania's diverse religious landscape – comprising Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and African Traditional Religions (ATR) – creates complex dynam-

³⁰ Cfr. J.A. Gorka, *Youth ministry in the face of unemployment*, Morogoro 2016, p. 418–419.

³¹ Discours divers: Address by President Nyerere the seminar about Ujamaa, 30 July, 1970, pp. 1–2, in: AWFR, Fonds Schildknecht, vol. Z11, n. 4.

ics in marriage customs. While the constitution guarantees religious freedom, tensions arise when state laws, Christian doctrines, Islamic teachings, and African traditions intersect. Out of our observation we might identify some clashes based on Religious Laws and State Legislation. In general, the government of Tanzania recognizes three marriage systems: Civil marriages (under the Marriage Act, 1971)³²; Christian marriages (under laws and customs of particular churches); and. Islamic marriages (under the Kadhi's Courts based on principles of Islam).

The tension points lay also on Polygamy and Bride price. The first one is permitted under Islamic and customary law but forbidden in Christian marriages. The second one (mahari) is expected in African/Islamic unions but is being criticized by some churches as commodifying women.

In terms of polygamy, we should also see it from the traditional point of view, where marriage is a communal affair, not just between two people. Quoted already J. Mbiti stated that When Christianity rejects polygamy or bride wealth, it risks alienating converts from their cultural roots³³.

Moreover, a Christian-Muslim couples face pressure when a religious practice of baptism meets rejection from the Islamis side. From the other side there is a strong pressure of raising children as Muslims. Similarly, one should not underestimate the legal ambiguity, especially in the Tanzanian reality that lacks clear laws on interfaith inheritance and child custody. Often in Africa marriage is not just a union of two people but of two worlds. When religions clash, the couple must negotiate between divine law and cultural belonging³⁴. Additionally, the customary law gives precedence to the father within a family, by obliging all children to follow his religion.

The Christian Muslim conflicts in marriage life might also be mingled with the African Traditional Religion, especially in terms of its culturally rooted rituals. Such syncretism often leads to conflicts especially in areas such as Female Genital Mutilation and Ancestral blessing in wedding. The FGM is strictly opposed by Christian Churches since the arrival of the first missionaries as going against Biblical teaching and human rights. Currently there are also some NGOs that joined the Christian voices. The Ancestral

³² Cfr. Law of Marriage Act (1971), (r.e. 2019), <https://tanzlii.org/en/akn/tz/act/1971/5/eng@2023-12-31> [6.04.2022].

³³ Mbiti, *African religions and Philosophy*.

³⁴ Cfr. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*.

blessing in weddings is often opposed or condemned by some Christian Churches because of libation rituals.

Some African Christian scholars protect the existence of these rituals claiming that African religion and culture see marriage as a covenant with the ancestors. Christians often wanted to uproot them quickly creating a spiritual void³⁵.

This multireligious and multicultural Tanzanian society must deal legally with customary, religious and civil marriages. Such reality calls for interfaith and interreligious dialogue that could create a platform for flexible marriage policies. To face it, some research borrows principles of theological inculturation that invite Christianity in Africa to dialog with traditional religions from the Black Continent. This should guarantee possibility and later success of a marriage that on one hand honors ancestors, and on the other affirming Christ³⁶.

A similar statement might be found in Mbiti's writing where he argued that if Churchianity and Islam ignore African traditions, they will remain foreign religions on African soil³⁷. Nevertheless, such deep theological dialog has not yet taken place for different reasons whereas one of the main ones lays in the fact that the African Traditional Religion has many variations and definitely there is no representant that speaks on behalf of all.

9.2. Protective Tanzanian Law

Another influential example might be quoted from the Tanzanian Law of Marriage where we might find regulations unknown to the Polish Constitution. We would like to present one area where the Law doesn't interfere in the way a family is going to manage finances within a family, however, it intends that a man has the responsibility to guide his family for the best maintenance.

In number 63 of the Tanzanian Law of Marriage Act (revised edition 2019) we read about the duty to maintain a spouse.

"Except where the parties are separated by agreement or by decree of the court and subject to any subsisting order of the court– (a) it shall be the duty of every husband to maintain his wife or wives and to provide them

³⁵ Cfr. Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, p. 83–93.

³⁶ Cfr. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*.

³⁷ Mbiti, *African religions and Philosophy*.

with such accommodation, clothing and food as may be reasonable having regard to his means and station in life; (b) it shall be the duty of every wife who has the means to do so, to provide in a similar manner for her husband if he is incapacitated, wholly or partially, from earning a livelihood by reason of mental or physical injury or ill-health”³⁸.

Some erroneously argue that there is no existence of a law that would have regulated a status of a woman who lost her husband. The above legal example indicates the enormous gap as well between what the law guarantees to a woman in Tanzania on one side and the way a woman might facing still within a marriage union.

To get a closer picture of it let us remind that talk about an African tribe general, we should get familiar with its particular customs and traditions that derive from the culture. As stated already in the introductory part, Tanzania as a nation is built on their 127 tribes, mostly Bantu, that predominantly are patrilinear. Among them there are only three known as matrilinear tribes in Tanzania. But this doesn’t interfere with the fact that correct observance of laws based on both traditions and customs of a particular tribe is reserved for men that are also known as the elders. It is obvious that interpretation of the marriage issues, inheritance matters, and widows’ rights belong to the same elders. Every member of clan within a tribe is devout and follows their guidance in all matters³⁹.

Normally, elders are chosen from among the oldest members, and it is believed that they possess the power to curse other members of the tribe, especially younger ones.

As a reaction to it there are some cultural changes that appear to penetrate the society. For example, it has been noticed a rapidly growing number of “single mothers of choice” in main cities of Tanzania. Being educated and often economically stable with good and secure job they fear that once married they will be forcedly put under the cultural dominance of their husbands.

Nevertheless, in Tanzania, there is a good sign of growing awareness of the necessity to educate all girls and women about their rights within the society also through an advanced legislative system. Unfortunately,

³⁸ Law of Marriage Act (1971) Chapter 29, (r.e. 2019), <https://tanzlii.org/en/akn/tz/act/1971/5/eng@2023-12-31> [6.04.2022].

³⁹ Cfr. *Countries and their cultures*, Tanzania, <https://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Tanzania.html> [20.09.2025].

these positive changes are still far from upgrading the status of women in a marital union. This is sad especially when ones learn of a Tanzanian civil law that in theory protects the rights of a woman.

* * *

In the closing part we may now realize how different still is the understanding of a marriage for a Tanzanian and a Polish, for a person born in Africa and in Europe. What is the role of a community in western culture and on the black continent. Similarly, there is a long way ahead to understand unanimously a role of a man and a woman in the society and in a marriage union. Likewise, what is considered a violation of religious freedom in Poland might not necessarily be understood the same way in Tanzania (and vice-versa). Surely, it is not our intention to indicate the better or worse. Rather we wanted to invite a reader of this article to accept these differences and to feel invited into a dialogue that might make a multicultural marriage possible without compromising cultural identity of either of its parts. Nevertheless, we should have realized already the benefits of the conference organized by the University Center for Religious Freedom Studies, where this kind of information is gathered, discussed and presented to the public.

Equally, we wish to stress the unique role of Pastoral theology that in Tanzania seeks to bridge these divides by fostering dialogue between Christian teachings and cultural practices. The challenge is to balance respect for tradition with a commitment to Christian doctrine. This involves recognizing the legitimacy of diverse family structures while advocating for values like mutual respect, equality, and community cohesion.

If we were to identify some pastoral steps for integration, we should have come out with these few:

- Community Workshops: Educate on both Christian and Traditional Family values, fostering mutual respect.
- Intercultural Marriage Counseling: Address conflicts arising from differing cultural and religious expectations and advocating the reality where religion, tradition and law are inseparable in marital life
- Parental Guidance Programs: Integrate communal child-rearing practices with Christian principles and African values.
- Gender Role Education: Promote equality while respecting traditional roles, ensuring shared responsibility within the family.

The negotiation between Tanzanian family traditions and Christian values reflects the broader challenge of religious freedom in a culturally

diverse society. Balancing these paradigms should require openness to cultural continuity while embracing transformative Christian ideals.

It is believed that information discussed in this study, by fostering dialogue and understanding of the Tanzanian multicultural and multi-religious uniqueness, shall help to promote its cultural identity while protecting the religious faith of all wanting to live out their faith in families.

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