

The Mixed Marriages and Their Effect on Christian-Muslim Relations in Bulu Sub-County, Uganda

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of mixed marriages on Christian-Muslim Relations in Bulu Sub-County, Uganda. The study aims at establishing an understanding of marriage and mixed marriages among Christians and Muslims in Bulu Sub-County. It assesses the impact of challenges in mixed marriages on Christian-Muslim Relations and finally identifies solutions to mixed marriage challenges in Bulu Sub-County. The study used a descriptive survey design that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data. The sampling technique employed was the non-probability sampling technique, while the instruments for data collection were interviews and questionnaires using simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The data was analysed using thematic methods. Marriage in Christianity is a lifelong monogamous covenant between a man and a woman, whereas Islamic marriage is a contract between a woman and a man called nikah. The mixed marriage challenges like differences in religious beliefs and practices such as dress code, dowry (mahr) payment and remittance, maintenance, threats of violence, discrimination and religious sanctions will lead to poor Christian-Muslim relations unless massive capacity building on freedom of religion and beliefs is done or establishment of interfaith dialogue centres in Bulu Sub-County to address marriage and family issues before the problem ruptures to the community.

Key terms: Christian, marriage, mixed marriage, Muslims, religion.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Abalogu and Okolo (2020) stated according to the anthropologist Edward Burnett Taylor (1832 - 1917), religion is the belief in spiritual being, but other scholars define religion as a means or system of symbols which act to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations, whereas Clifford (1963) said that "religion is a cultural system" which is characterised by varying myth, rituals, doctrine, ethics, social dimensions, experiential dimensions and artistic dimensions.

Bwire (2007) says that "religion is intrinsic which cannot be seen using our eyes". This means that converting one from one religion to another cannot be a one-day function; it takes time to convert the heart of a believer from one religion to another. Munroe (2005) states that marriage is when two separate, unique male and female persons make a covenant to exchange vows, committing themselves to remain together until death. Kabuba (2010) says it's a stage or period where people stay for a longer span of their lives with another person; therefore, one must be extra careful to choose the right marriage partner.

Mixed marriages can be drivers of poor Christian-Muslim relations, as is the case for the people living in Bulo Sub-County, Uganda. As mentioned earlier, there are two keywords which are commonly used in defining Christian marriage from Islamic marriage. These are "contracts" for Islamic marriage and then "covenants" for Christian marriages. A contract marriage is legally binding, it's an agreement between parties, which can be broken whereas a covenant, is a spiritual agreement and it's a perpetual promise. The conceptual definition for marriage in this paper is the relationship between a man and a woman; the marriage in this study is fenced around mixed marriages. According to Kabuba (2010), marriage was purposed for peaceful relations in homes and families for Christians and Muslims. The parents have a big role to play in choosing the right partner for the child; this can be done either directly or indirectly according to one's cultural background and closeness with the child. The indirect approach of using aunties or uncles is the one commonly used in Bulo, much as it's facing challenges from the young generation, which assumes that it is outdated and these aunties and uncles would give out their daughters to anyone without considering the effects of mixed marriages.

In Islam, the marriage ceremony is called nikah; vows are exchanged between the father or brother-in-law and the groom while the bride is somewhere only to be brought for the giveaway. On many occasions, the wife is not consulted for this matter, and it's like she is treated as an object. She is a recipient of its decision, not a decision maker (Wadud, 2006). While Muslims and Christians have different positions on many matters, love seems to overpass this, and they get married. The key issues in this study include the concept of marriage, religion, and the characteristics of mixed marriages between Christians and Muslims, challenges of mixed marriages in Christian-Muslim relations and finally, the likely solutions to these challenges.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Frevel (2011) says that mixed marriages are not a new phenomenon but a global concern, and it has been a centre for discussion in many international conferences since the twentieth century. The author adds that since then, the topic of mixed marriages has received much attention in many publications, and he argues that it is problematic to refer to all mixed marriages using the term mixed marriages or intermarriages and that not every incident concerning mixed couples refers to a legal marriage.

Maina (1992) describes a Christian marriage as holy matrimony, which is a lifelong monogamous union between a man and woman. He says there are marriages for visas and residency permits for those who crazily want to relocate to the United States or Europe. There are marriages for sex and money; these are more common today than ever, where men marry rich girls, women marry to get out of poverty, and others marry for business and political connections or marriage for status. Many end up in mixed marriages unknowingly. This study concentrates on mixed marriages, particularly Christian and Muslim marriages, for a lifelong serious relationship, not just for sex, money or business.

Ata (2005) presents that mixed marriages impact the effects of globalisation on marriages between religious traditions and concludes that marriages between Catholic and non-Catholic Christians face fewer challenges today and far fewer than Muslim-Christian marriages. This is the basis of this study on the unique challenges of Muslim-Christian marriages in Bulo Sub-County, Uganda.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design with a qualitative approach was used in the study. Mixed marriages were used as the independent variables, the challenges as intervening variables, and Christian-Muslim relations as the dependent variables. The numerical calculations using frequencies and percentages of key informants led to triangulation, hence both quantitative and qualitative research. The study population was large, consisting of 19,032 people (UBOS, 2014 Census), using Mugenda and Mugenda's (1999) sample size determination, based on 30 percent for a large population. A total of 519 people would be the sample, but the study focused on two parishes with the highest number of mixed marriages, which made 182 the total sample size; however, only 165 respondents were realized. The sampling techniques were simple random sampling and purposive sampling. Data collection tools included an interview checklist and questionnaires.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Unique Challenges in Christian-Muslim Mixed Marriages

During the study, 82 per cent of the Christian respondents said the challenges of a Christian getting married to a Muslim. The only problem that comes at a glance is the differences in religious practices and beliefs, Islamic customs of circumcision, fasting, pilgrimage, use of Hijab or veiling, the daily five prayer sessions, and use of Arabic in reciting the Quran, among others. All these, it is true, make the life of a non-Muslim difficult; however, this article has gone deeper to dig out other challenges that are unique and likely to be a menace to either a Christian or Muslim in a mixed marriage, as discussed below:

Inheritance

The law of inheritance in Islam is about the economic sharing of wealth among dependents in terms of gender equality and human rights. Surah 4:11 shows that in the share of the inheritance, a male, for example, gets twice what a female gets, or to his brothers and sisters or the parents can inherit from him. The woman's share is for the use of the woman alone, and Surah 4:12 shows sharing of property to women, children, and relatives. In case one was barren, it is shared amongst the relatives. The new Islamic law, which is used in native courts, grapples with family issues like inheritance, succession, divorce, and mixed marriages (Bwire, 2019).

Maintenance after Divorce

The study revealed that maintenance after divorce is a unique challenge emphasized as an Islamic practice done practically when people separate. The husband is compelled to look after his family based on traditional Islamic jurisprudence; much as they have divorced each other, 80 per cent of the respondents said the practice is common in Bulo, and if one fails, he is taken to the qadi courts of law. This is a positive challenge, which would be ideal, but when it is done, it was revealed that if the woman was a Christian, the husband is only obliged to pay maintenance if that woman had children, but if she was barren, she could only benefit if she had converted to Islam.

Dowry Refund

The increase in divorce rates has resulted in increased practice of men requesting dowry refunds in Bulo Sub-County, Uganda. During the study, 90 per cent of the respondents agreed that dowry remittance is destructive to marriage institutions, bearing in mind that the increased rates of gender-based violence have been criticized as a sign of disrespect and an act of dehumanizing women.

Polygamy

Surah 4:1-3 says, "if you fear that you will not do justice to the orphans, then marry the women that seem good to you: two, or three, or four." Therefore, the Quran allows Muslims to marry up to four wives, whereas Christian laws are monogamous. According to the Hanafi School of Law, a Muslim is allowed to marry a Muslim, Jewish, or Christian woman who is a believer, not an idolater, and it prohibits marrying blood relatives and women never to remarry for less than three months. The Quran mandates Muslims to indulge in polygamy, which contradicts Christian teaching; therefore, in Islam, the women and children in polygamous families will not be seen as concubines and illegitimate bastards, as is the case with Christianity. Qadi courts grapple with family issues such as inheritance, succession disputes, and divorce; however, taking mixed marriage issues to qadi courts puts Christians at a disadvantage, hence the need to use civil courts.

Upkeep of Married Women by their Husbands

The study disclosed that the practice of giving upkeep to married women by their husbands in relation to traditional Islamic jurisprudence is good, and actually, 88 per cent of the respondents were in total agreement that in Islamic marriages, upkeep should be given to married women by their husbands. Therefore, Christians who marry Muslims have to adhere to this jurisprudence, and the practice is included in the marriage bill that a woman should be given a monthly salary by her spouse, which is a unique challenge that may prohibit many financially struggling men from marrying.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Due to Different Religious Practices

The study revealed that when a Muslim marries a Christian, there are many chances of gender-based violence due to the antagonistic religious practices and beliefs as mentioned earlier. These include the custom of circumcision of all males in Islam, the veiling or use of Hijab, the use of Arabic during greeting or any other communication in daily interactions, preparing night meals during the fasting period called sawm, and finally, eating pork by Christians or rearing pigs for commercial purposes, which is a taboo for Muslims. A good number of women in Bulo Sub-County testified they were survivors of gender-based violence after clashing with their Muslim spouses on reading the Bible, dress code, and eating habits.

Divorce

The onus of divorcing a spouse in Islam is only given to the male Islamic spouse, whereas the wife can also propose, but not until the man consents to the divorce—it cannot prevail otherwise. Divorce or (talaq) or repudiation either by khul (wife's ransom) or faska, which is the dissolution of marriage by the religious court, is required by the Quran and Hadith. Islamic scholars and the various schools in Islam under Sunni madhhab like the Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafii, then the Shia like Jafari, Zaidiyyah, and Zahiriyah, all address divorce. Both the Quran and the Bible talk about divorce, but Christians do not encourage divorce. The study also revealed that divorce is practiced and legally acceptable in both Islam and Christianity. Although Christians never disclose that it's done, 60 per cent of respondents admitted that divorce (talaq) occurs in Islam. Divorce is allowed when reconciliation proves impossible; if all efforts to reconcile fail and the partners consider it impossible to live together, they may separate peacefully to seek fulfillment in a new marriage. One respondent, who preferred anonymity, explained that upon realizing she had been tricked into a relationship and marriage with a Muslim, she tore her marriage certificate into pieces so her husband would not have grounds to divorce her, as the certificate is the principal requirement during divorce.

Freedom of Religion and Beliefs

Another challenge is limited freedom of religion. Of all the respondents, 90 per cent agreed that there is limited freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in Christian-Muslim relations, which is an abuse of international law on freedom of religion or beliefs, as outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Many Christian women interviewed who married Muslims said they were subjected to giving up their religion because they were not allowed to go to church on Sundays or identify themselves with the church. Many of them, if not all, have never gone to a mosque for prayers either, but are still not allowed to go to the church.

Apostasy

Muslim majority or minority states. The conversion helps to accomplish objectives that are impossible to achieve under their initial plans and legal status (Saeed, 2004). The Quran is a holy book for Muslim believers around the globe. This book is perfect knowledge because it gives guidance for human life. The book also has everlasting and global teachings, which apply to the entire human life. The message of the Quran applies to mankind; white or black, Western or Eastern, poor or rich, industrialist or farmer, teacher or student, illiterate or literate. Its instructions and knowledge satisfy all; the Quran is a book of Allah, a direct message to the entire world, a book of wisdom and truth. It is also a spoken word of Allah revealed in Arabic for people to comprehend clearly. This book serves as clear guidance on marriage. The challenge is that in Christian-Muslim marriages, Muslims will only use the Quran as their reference as opposed to the Bible.

The content of the Quran was revealed to the last prophet, Muhammad, through Angel Jibreel. This message is to be studied carefully because it was the last message. The prophet's companions collected and wrote down the words on any handy document. Some were committed to memory, and after all the collections, it was arranged as instructed by Angel Jibreel. This collection is called the Quran (Quraishy, 1987). The Quran discusses God's punishments for those who desert Islam in the next life. There was no clear statement concerning punishment on earth, but there is evidence from sources of the Quran and

Hadith (Sookhdeo, 2009). The Quran is open on the penalty of apostasy and contains no universal command to kill the apostate, but the Hadith is clear. History has it that traditional apostates were killed during the time of Prophet Muhammad on his order. This is the evidence on which Islamic scholars rely concerning the punishable offence of death for apostasy, as narrated in the Hadith by Ikrima from Ibn Abbas.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: In conclusion, the challenges of mixed marriages today, which include gender-based violence, limited freedom of religion and beliefs, and threats of violence and discrimination, serve as an early warning system on the effects of mixed marriages. Williamson (2013) noted that despite the increase of interfaith marriages in the United States of America from 15 per cent in 1988 to 42 per cent by 2018, interfaith marriages are generally associated with lower marital satisfaction and are often unstable, with particularly high divorce rates. The findings of this study confirm that this is also true in Bulu Sub-County, Uganda, where these challenges have led to unproductive Christian-Muslim relations.

Recommendations: The writer recommends that interfaith organizations should promote interfaith dialogue and undertake massive capacity-building programs for religious groups and individuals on the need for freedom of religion and beliefs (FORB), as well as the observance of human rights and the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, to foster peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christians. Additionally, the school curriculum at all levels should include religious topics or courses on ecumenism and interfaith relations.

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