

Lessons from Scripture for Maasai Christianity, Lessons from Maasai Culture for the Global Church

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Meetae tonyorraki maibai — “there is no one-way friendship.”

— Maasai proverb¹

Faith in Christ can and should transform every area of human life. Not only are believers transformed through their relationship with Jesus, ultimately resulting in a transformed culture, but as the Christian faith is enculturated around the globe, Christianity itself is also enriched by new insights and deeper understandings.

One area where transformation is needed is marriage relationships. In many African contexts, women are oppressed and frequently abused. Having spent a decade working with Maasai churches, I can attest that this is an important issue among the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania. There is clear evidence that Christianity empowers many African women. Not only do they “receive social, spiritual, psychological and material benefits” in churches, “but they also feel affirmed and their dignity [is] upheld.”² I am equally convinced that the gospel is transforming gender and marital relationships within Maasai culture and that Maasai Christianity can bring valuable insights to the practice and theology of marriage and relationships in global Christianity.

In this article, I will first examine the Maa (the Maasai language) word pair *olkitok* and *enkitok*. *Olkitok* refers to a “master” whereas *enkitok* is the usual word for “woman.” I will then discuss the problems in gender relationships which the Maasai experience. These problems are often rooted in sinful attitudes held by men and women against each other. Today among the Maasai, for example, women are not seen as “great” (the root meaning of *-kitok*) but as “only children.” For this reason, the dignity Jesus offers women appeals to Maasai women. The Scriptures offer an uncompromising vision of gendered relationships, which is counter-culturally liberating for women. The gospel has been less appealing to Maasai men, leading one western scholar to refer to the Maasai churches as “a church of Women.”³

I will then explain that, while there are certainly areas where Maasai culture can benefit from Christian transformation, a recovery of traditional Maasai cultural values through a theologically robust process of inculturation can strengthen the Maasai churches as well. Maasai believers need a Maasai Christianity within which they “feel at home.”⁴ In addition, Maasai cultural hermeneutics has much to offer the global church. “Cultural hermeneutics” refers to communities viewing the Scriptures through the lens of their own culture. It “enables women to view the Bible through African eyes and to distinguish and extract from it what is liberating.”⁵

***Olkitok* and *Enkitok*: “Master and Woman” or “Master and Mistress”?**

The Maa language has no word pair precisely equivalent to man/woman. Instead, there are numerous terms for people based on their

stage of life.⁶ Each age set has distinct roles, and honor increases with age. One way this is demonstrated visually is by children (including young boys as well as all unmarried girls and young women) bowing their heads to receive a blessing from adult men. Similarly, uncircumcised boys are required to show this respect to married women.⁷

The root of *enkitok* (“woman”) is *-kitok*, “great.” Today, however, *enkitok* is sometimes used by men as a disparagement. Similar to many traditional African cultures, Maasai females are often told, “all in all, it is not good to be a woman.”⁸ An adult woman is required to bow her head, as if a child, when greeting a man older than her husband’s age set. A boy old enough to be circumcised, and therefore counted as a man, feels free to treat women of his mother’s age with scorn.⁹ At least since the introduction of western education in Africa, there has been “a systematic, structural and cultural discrimination carried out consciously or unconsciously against the female sex.”¹⁰ Yet a Maasai man will greet a group of women by calling out “*Nakituaak!*”—literally, “O great ones!” This is usually translated as “O women!,” but I believe it hints at something deeper.

Even today, a Maasai woman is the mistress—in the literal sense, the feminine form of “master”—of the house, no matter how she might be oppressed within Maasai society at large. Etymologically, the common Maa term for “woman” means “mistress” or “great lady.” In actual practice, the masculine form *olkitok* means “master” or “boss” but is never used simply for “men.” Previously among the Maasai, “relationships between men and women varied by their age, kinship, clan, and age-set affiliations, but they were generally based on mutual respect (*enkanyit*) and relative autonomy.”¹¹ I have seen that, within marriages of Maasai Christians, this mutual respect has often been restored. As the word of God is articulated in Maa, *enkitok* can again become an honorific. To quote from a March 2018 interview with a Maasai pastor named Ntinga Tomë:¹²

Christianity brings back the hidden meaning of *enkitok*.

In how women are treated, you can see this. This is especially changing in the church, as men are beginning to change how they treat women with respect. This is happening not only in the church, but as the church is acting as salt and light this is also changing in the broader, not-yet-Christian Maa society.

Ntinga says that this teaching on *enkitok/olkitok* has pastoral and evangelistic implications for the Maasai Church. When Maasai men see how enjoyable marriage is—for both husbands and wives—when husbands love their wives, they embrace the change.

***Enkanyit*: Mutual Respect in Maasai Relationships between the Sexes**

Enkanyit (honor, mutual respect, obedience) is one of the most important cultural values for the Maasai. Children

approach adult men and women respectfully. When greetings are exchanged, the child bows the head in submission to show proper respect. In turn, the adult reaches out his or her right hand and bestows a blessing by touching the top of the child's head. By demonstrating respect to elders, the child is in a position of reception for the blessing.

A position of vulnerability is sometimes a prerequisite of reception of blessing. After circumcision, Maasai men and boys place themselves in an invulnerable position of social power and are thus unable to receive a blessing from those perceived as their social inferiors. After a girl has been circumcised, she is considered ready for marriage.¹³ Even so, for the rest of her life she will still be considered a child and will be expected to bow her head in respect to all men who are older than she is. Since husbands are always older than their wives in this culture, a married woman with many children must bow her head to her husband's friends. But her twelve-year-old son, once circumcised, will stand with his head high among his uncles, boasting in having attained a higher social status than his own mother.

A cultural taboo forbids a woman to touch the head of a man. If a wife is seen touching her husband's head, a fairly serious transgression, she is likely to be fined one cow. The clear implication is that men cannot receive blessings from women. Given the importance of reciprocity in gift exchanges in the Maasai culture, this is even more tragic. From a Christian transformative viewpoint, it seems that the good and planted-by-God Maasai cultural value of respect has become tangled with sin—male hubris leading to an unholy patriarchal oppression and devaluing of females. This is one factor that degrades the relational quality of Maasai marriages, in which both husbands and wives frequently admit, “We do not love our spouses. We love our lovers.” But Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike reminds us:

Jesus Christ came to heal a broken humanity. He empowered and enabled the downtrodden of society to realize their dignity and worth as persons. He continues to empower and enable the African woman today so that she passes from unauthentic to authentic human existence, and so that she discovers her true identity of being made in the image and likeness of God.¹⁴

One of the most poignant reminders of this empowerment in the Gospels is when Jesus allows himself to be anointed by a woman. Referring to this, Ogbu Kalu has noted that “the irony that it was a woman who anointed the head of a man is not lost on feminist theology.”¹⁵ Had she and Jesus been Maasai rather than Jewish, the authorities would have surely levied a fine of cows against her for that breach of etiquette.

A Maasai myth teaches that men and women once each had separate herds of livestock. The women proved unable to care for their cows, sheep, and goats, because they were arguing and bickering. Thus their livestock wandered into the bush. These lost animals became the ancestors of wild animals such as antelope and wildebeest. Thus all of the remaining livestock belong to the men.¹⁶ This myth “expresses a clear ideological position: Maasai men care for and therefore control the cattle, while women attend to their children and depend on men for their subsistence.”¹⁷ As a result, women have a “relatively weak position . . . in Maasai society.”¹⁸ Even though Maasai culture has a reputation of valuing

egalitarianism, “the rigid straitjacket that confines all women to a life of bondage displays the supreme inequality.”¹⁹ According to traditional Maasai culture, “daughters” are expected to submit to a “passive role of silent assent.”²⁰ “Daughters” here refers first to all unmarried females and also to women who are younger than the ruling elders of the community. Any complaint is considered an act of disobedience. While a woman is usually beaten only by her husband, any man in her husband's age set might beat her if she is thought to be disrespectful or even lazy. Maasai women are “in a subordinate role with no control over their individual destinies,”²¹ and there is “a strong sense of women's powerlessness in the face of the abuse of male authority.”²²

An older Maasai woman typically collaborates with the elders to maintain the “regime that subjects younger women in a way that she herself has had to endure. . . . this extends to female circumcision, an arranged marriage, wife-beating, and subservience to men at normal times (women's delegations and fertility dances are not ‘normal’).”²³ Male church leaders among the Maasai across denominations have recognized that female circumcision has costly effects for women—health problems such as incontinence, increased chance of death in childbirth (for both mother and child), decreased sexual pleasure for the women often accompanied by increased promiscuity. Often Maasai Christian fathers will not allow their daughters to be circumcised. But when they are married, their mother-in-law will see that the ritual mutilation is carried out forcibly. In the Community Christian Church, where I minister, the male leaders want an alternative initiation program for their girls. As another example of some women's desire to maintain the oppressive status quo, these leaders' greatest opponent has been one of the leaders of the Women's Ministry.

Where there is balance in this system, the balancing mechanism itself is symptomatic of broken relationships. If a man has been guilty of some impropriety (such as breaking one of the few sexual taboos), he is “subject to being beaten by an assembled mob of angry women,”²⁴ and no man will dare to intervene. When women form a mob or group of some other kind (called a “delegation”), they are truly *inkituaak*, “great ones,” who lord it over the men. Paul Spencer notes that “as they mature, women have it within their grasp to humiliate any man who has infringed upon their domain.”²⁵ It is no surprise, then, that women are seen by Maasai elders as “the source of disorder.”²⁶ Some of these delegations of women are a form of fertility “dance.” Woe to the man who is caught by such women and is unwilling to obey their demand that he attempt to impregnate them!

Ephesians 5: Biblical Witness for Gender Relationships

The biblical teaching is clear, or should be: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen 1:27 NRSV).”²⁷ Likewise Paul stresses that “there is no longer male and female . . . in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 NRSV). Men and women are equally made in God's image; in spite of occasional claims to the contrary,²⁸ they both bear God's image.

Most English translations render Eph 5:22 as, “Wives, submit to your husbands” (where “submit” is in the imperative,

a command). This verse can be misunderstood and quite controversial, especially in light of misleading translations. In Eph 5:22 wives are *not* commanded to submit to their husbands. All believers are commanded to carefully examine how they live and not be unwise (v. 15), to understand the Lord's will (v. 17), to not get drunk with wine (v. 18a), and to be filled with the Spirit (v. 18b). Verses 19 and following are descriptive; they describe what a Spirit-filled life looks like.

If we are Spirit-filled, we will be speaking to each other, singing and "psalming" in our collective heart, always giving thanks, and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. What does that submission look like? Well, wives will be submitting to their own husbands just as they would to the Lord.²⁹ But all of these verbs, participial in form, describe what happens when the command to be filled with the Spirit is kept. Wives are *not* given another command, "submit to your husbands."³⁰

Ephesians 5:24 continues, "as the church submits to Christ, in the same way the wives to [their] husbands in everything." But the verb here is in the indicative. The verb "submit" nowhere occurs in the imperative in this passage. But the men *are* given an extra command: "love [imperative] your own wife" in the sacrificial way that Christ loved the church and care for her as well as you care for yourself. Of double significance is 5:33, where the extra command, given to men, for each one to love his wife, is repeated. So both men and women in the church are commanded to:³¹

1. *Examine* how you live (v. 15).
2. *Do not be unwise* (v. 17a), but
3. *perceive* the will of the Lord (v. 17b);
4. and *do not get drunk* with wine (v. 18a)
5. but *be filled* with the Spirit (v. 18b).

Both men and women are told that the Spirit-filled life is characterized by submission to Christ. Married women are told that the Spirit-filled life is characterized by submission to their own husbands. But they are not *commanded* to submit. On the other hand, men *are* given an extra command. This command, for each man to love his wife, is given in the context of what it means to be filled with the Spirit. But Paul switches from using a participial form to using the imperative. This command, for each man to love his wife, is so important that Paul writes several verses to explain that he means love your wife "just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her." In v. 28, Paul says that each husband is in fact *obligated* to love his wife. The structured summary below will help express the import of the key verses, 18b and 21–22:

Husbands and wives, be filled with the Spirit,
submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ:
wives to your husbands as the church to Christ.
Husbands: each of you love your wife as Christ loved
the church.

Many men become upset because they feel that their wives do not respect and honor them.³² But in this passage we see that as a natural result each man who keeps this commandment to love his wife will find that now his wife is respecting him. Grammatically, at least, v. 33 tells each man to love (a command) his wife *so that* she might then respect him. In the context of being filled with the

Spirit, a wife will naturally submit to her husband who loves her as Christ loves the church. Even when a culture is infused with the concept of submission, the gospel turns abusive patriarchalism on its head.³³

While the gospel, including Paul's presentation of it here in Eph 5, frequently turns cultural expectations upside down, it is clear that it does so in continuity with OT revelation. In Mal 2:14–15, for example, we are told that "no one who has even a small portion of the Spirit in him" is unfaithful to his wife.³⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye notes that "whatever is keeping subordination of women alive in the church cannot be the Spirit of God."³⁵ Inasmuch as a failure to love one's wife as Christ loves the church is a failure of faithfulness, insofar as one oppresses his wife instead of serving her and building her up, to that degree he has shown that he does not have the Spirit of Christ. Abuse of women and girls, oppression and repression of people on the grounds of their female sex, is inherently unbiblical and anti-Christian. Francis Machingura of Zimbabwe correctly observes that, "as a way of buttressing men's patriarchal or chauvinistic views, the Bible is invoked to remind women about their place and role in society." For example, "texts like 1 Timothy 2:11–12 can be applied out of context and erroneously used to serve or support patriarchal agendas. . . ."³⁶ Thulani Ndlazi, a South African minister and theologian, agrees: "more often than not gender biased or gender discriminative biblical interpretation is more of *eisegesis* . . . than *exegesis*."³⁷

In spite of all-too-common misreadings of the Scriptures which support oppressive patriarchalisms, the Christian faith and the teaching of the Bible have "a liberating potential for a traditional society, especially in matters of family and personal relationship."³⁸

Footprints of Christ: Redemption of Maasai Traditional Marriage

Marriages among traditional Maasai are far from a Christian ideal. It has been widely observed by the Maasai themselves that sex within marriage is often merely a matter of procreation whereas sexual intimacy and even love can be found in an extramarital affair.³⁹ Because this is contrary to God's design for both sex and marriage, it is no wonder that marriage is more a matter of required outward mutual respect (with inner rebellion) than of love. But within Maasai culture itself, there are also signposts for a better way forward. First I will glance at the problems, and then I will examine some of the possibilities.

Polygamy

Biblical teaching is clear that monogamy is God's plan for marriage, but it is equally clear that the biblical narratives nowhere outright condemn polygamy. Besides, proponents will inform you, God honored polygamists like Abraham, Jacob, and David. Nonetheless, many early missionaries in Africa lacked a pastoral touch and cultural sensitivity when dealing with this issue. Typically, women who had co-wives were barred from the Lord's Table. Men were forced to either remain unbaptized or to send away all of their wives (quite possibly into a life of either destitution or prostitution) except one. This led to the depressing and distressing situations so ably narrated by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*.⁴⁰

When I was a seminary student, the school held an event for us all to meet a new professor, Kiptalai Elolia of Kenya. During the session, he asked us students what should be a missionary's response to a polygamous culture. Alluding to 1 Cor 7:26, I answered: "As a person is when he or she comes to Christ, they should remain in that state. A polygamist," I explained, "should absolutely *not* be required to send any of his wives away. Let them all come, be immersed in baptism, and be allowed to partake of the Eucharist in their polygamous state. Let them be taught to live in holiness with their spouses, neither playing favorites, nor neglecting any wife, nor engaging in extramarital sexual activity. And let them further be instructed that God's best design for marriage is one man and one woman. This is not merely what best pleases God but also what is best for men and for women. Eventually, of course, positions of church leadership must be reserved for the monogamous." After a thoughtful silence, Professor Elolia asked approvingly, "why were you not among the missionaries who first came to my country?"

Even so, polygamy remains a tragedy. When we lived in the Maasai bush, two of my wife's friends came and wept on her shoulder when their Christian husbands were each deciding to take a second wife. In another case, a gifted evangelist left the church to take a second wife and then returned "in repentance," but with a second wife and now disbarred (by the local church, not by missionaries) from his office as evangelist. His second wife became his favorite. As a result, his first wife became impoverished with no money for school fees for her sons, while his second wife became relatively wealthy. Polygamy led, among other things, to a loss of economic security for the unfavored wife.

Promiscuity

Among the Maasai, polygamy has a multivalent character far broader than the formal bonds of marriage. Indeed, among the Maasai sexual promiscuity has been institutionalized. Prepubescent girls are encouraged (often by their mothers!) to engage in sexual activity with boys who have been circumcised. The goal is for the girls to be sexually practiced before marriage. As a result, girls often have favorite lovers before marriage. Because each set of partners "becomes one flesh," their souls are bound together in an ungodly *osotua* (covenant relationship; I define the term more fully below). And when a girl marries, she marries not only her husband, but *de facto* she marries her husband's entire age set (with the exception of taboos such as incest). "When elders visit their age mates, the host is obliged to vacate his wife's hut for the night, in effect offering his wife—if she consents."⁴¹ Consent, however, is perhaps more common than refusal. Thus, "sexuality among the Maasai is characterized by institutionalized adultery with the wives of age mates and discreet adultery between men and women in general."⁴² Tragically, the term in the Maasai Bible that translates "adultery" is not considered sin or even bad. Instead, wives simply save their days of fertility for their husbands.

The direct result of this is that husbands and wives have divided hearts. They are fragmented from having become "one flesh" with far too many partners. This creates a lack of marital unity and makes mutual respect a virtual impossibility. Yet every

Maasai with whom we have spoken is attracted to the ideal of experiencing both respect and love within an exclusive marriage. No Maasai I know is happy about the prospect of sharing his or her spouse sexually with someone else.

Oсотua: The Tie that Binds

Jesus teaches us that "every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt 13:52 NRSV). In the same way, each culture and language, once every thought is made captive to obey Christ (2 Cor 10:4), can bring treasures to the Christian faith. A culture may have nailed down a concept in a single word that would take a paragraph or a page to express in a different language. *Oсотua* is one of these treasures. And with every Maasai couple with whom I have spoken, *osotua* must be present for a marriage to be healthy and enjoyable.

On the surface, *osotua* might be translated as "peace" or perhaps as "testament." The first, however, is inadequate and the second is misleading. *Oсотua* is derived from a verb meaning, "to join or bind together." The root meaning is "umbilical cord." But the primary meaning is a deep relationship of shared *shalom*-like peace which is characterized by closeness, tied-together-ness, and unity. A common Maasai blessing is "*Oсотua* of God!" It means, "May you be bound so closely together in a relationship with God that it is like that between a mother and infant when the cord is still attached!" Another way to put it is that *osotua* is that type of relational peace and well-being that can only be found within a covenantal relationship. Thus the Maa translation of the Bible is divided into two parts: *Oсотua Musana* (The Old Covenant) *Oсотua Ng'ejuk* (The New Covenant).

A common Maasai proverb about table fellowship says, "It is the stomach which has *osotua*." Another translation is, "the stomach creates friendships."⁴³ When we eat together, we have the opportunity to build *osotua* in our relationships. This is, of course, perfectly realized by Christians when we share together in the Lord's Supper. When we partake of loaf and cup, then we experience true *osotua*: *that deep communion within a covenantal relationship characterized by holy peace and a closeness that is like that between a mother and an infant while the cord is still attached.* This *osotua* is also a picture of the ideal that God has for every marriage relationship.

Esiankiki Narikitoi: The Bride Who is Led Away

Traditionally, there are two important parts of the Maasai wedding ceremony. The first is "the wrapping with a skirt." For a simple ceremony, sometimes this suffices (similar to a civil wedding before a magistrate). But for a proper wedding, there is also "the leading away of the bride to her husband's homestead." It is important to note that it is considered a bad omen if the bride looks back at her parents' village as she is led away. Thus the bride is referred to as "the bride which is being led away."⁴⁴

Shifting contexts, the church, of course, is the bride of Christ. Remember also that Ruth told Boaz, "spread your cloak over your servant" (Ruth 3:9 NRSV). She was telling him to cover her with his protection, to marry her. In the same way, each of us who is immersed into Christ has been clothed with Christ as with a garment—we have been wrapped with the skirt of righteousness.

The ancient church outwardly symbolized this by clothing the newly baptized with a clean, white robe after they emerged from their watery burial. We are also being led away from our sin and rebellion and toward our new home. Like a Maasai wife married properly, we demonstrate our devotion and our pledge of fidelity by not looking back as we are led away.⁴⁵

Before the bride builds a new house to share with her husband, they will live with her mother-in-law for three months to a year so she can learn the culture of her new family. This time of transition is so important that, upon settling in her husband's homestead, the Maasai bride leaves behind the name of her childhood and her husband's family will choose a new name for her.

This sounds strange, and maybe even troubling, to western ears. But as I am reflecting, I see that this cultural practice reflects a divine reality. We, too, shall receive a "new name" (Rev 2:17). This will not represent an abrogation of our former name but rather a fulfillment of our true identity. As Jacob ("heel-grasping deceiver") became Israel ("wrestles-with-God-and-prevails") and *Lo-Ruhamah* ("not pitied, not loved") became *Ruhamah* ("lovingly-accepted," see Hos 1:6, 2:1), so in Christ we become who we were created to be.

Olopolosua Esita: *The Fence-Remover*

When the proper customs have been followed, animals and other gifts have been exchanged, the bride price has been paid by the husband, the bride has followed her groom to his village without looking back, and the couple has had at least one child, the marriage is formally consummated.⁴⁶ But even this is not the most complete form of marriage. A woman can still flee back, or be sent back, to her parents' home and the bride-wealth can be returned, constituting a divorce. The next level of marriage, which few attempt, is "the passing of fence." After about fifteen years of marriage, a husband and his first wife might decide to commit to truly forge *osotua* together. There is a special ceremony to celebrate "this bond of love" called either "going through the fence" or "the tearing of the fence."⁴⁷

This transition to a new level of marriage commitment has only ever been chosen by a few Maasai couples. The bondage of sin is great, and the allurements of promiscuity are many. Couples who *pass the fence* turn their backs on institutionalized promiscuity. Many husbands are interested in *going through the fence*, but their wives are reluctant. They know that after going through the fence there can be no looking back, and no return to their parents' home.

This imagery calls to mind Eph 2:14, which states that Jesus "is our peace" who "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (NRSV). There are two primary words in Maa for "fence." The general term refers to the large fence that surrounds the cattle corral or the entire homestead settlement or village. But here a more specific word is used, which refers to a thorn fence described by some Maasai as being "behind the house." The implication may be that the fence which separates the house (the domain of the wife) from the surrounding area (the domain of the husband) has been torn. As a result, the newly instated husband is "one who has agreed to live with his first wife, to live with her in complete harmony and unity, and she has agreed with him to do the same."⁴⁸ Moreover, this is the only

Maasai cultural context in which sexual fidelity and purity make sense. Maasai Christians should renew this old ideal, which can be brought to perfection in Jesus, and thereby model Christian marriage for the global church.

Osotua within Christian Marriage

Osotua is always present in a healthy marriage. When marriages are struggling, or dying, *osotua* is either missing or tenuous. A close Maasai friend and I were discussing the cultural issues related to inter-gender relationships. He agreed that Maasai culture is good, but also that it is like a dirty Maasai garment. It can be kept, but it would be better if the thorns were plucked from it and the dust and manure were washed out. Traditional patriarchal oppression of females is like dust that needs washing out. But the respect, which is so important to the culture, can be kept. Indeed, it may be a point of redemptive analogy.⁴⁹ Of course, the mutuality of respect must be restored in Christ. In particular, Maasai spouses often struggle to craft a relationship that moves beyond shared economic concerns and the begetting of children. But we have seen transformation within some Maasai marriages. Where this has been the case, we have observed (at least) two things:

1. There is a deep, and perhaps a revivalist, devotion to Christ, as opposed to a nominal or superficial Christianity;
2. Husbands are willing to face public ridicule in order to show love by assisting their wives—perhaps with the cooking or childcare, or taking a wheelbarrow or bicycle to fetch water—in ways keeping with Paul's instructions in Eph 5:26–30.

ole Sakat's Testimony

A good friend of mine is ole Sakat. A believer, he is a man of deep Christian character who treats his wife as *kitok* (great, important) and not as a child. Moreover, he is known to help his wife carry water (strictly women's work in the culture). He is mocked incessantly for his weakness, but I see strength. I have spent time in their home—they share a deep and joyous *osotua* that makes their Christian marriage enviable.

ole Yenko's Testimony

Another good friend of mine is ole Yenko. One day when he and his bride—both committed Christians—were still newlyweds, they were talking and laughing together in their hut. An older man was passing by. He was baffled by their laughter! He knew that this couple did not yet have children. Lovers might laugh together, and parents might laugh with their children, but a husband and wife? Unheard of! He entered the house to see what was going on. He learned that they were full of joy because they were Christians. Because of their faith in Jesus, they were able to be not only spouses but also true lovers and friends. That elder soon sought an explanation of the gospel and now is a believer and a member of the Community Christian Church in his village—together with his two wives.

Conclusions

There are many "examples of women whose lives were transformed not by uncovering the social construction of gender roles, but by

knowing Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, those transformed women have in turn measurably impacted both laws and customs related to gender equity and women’s lives. We affirm that:

Christ conferred equal dignity and personhood on women in a culture and time when they were not considered worthy of such treatment. In response, women recognized Christ’s treatment of them as genuine liberty, to be individuals in relationship with God, though the church has struggled with a Christlike application of his example.⁵¹

Among the Maasai, “Mutual respect . . . was central to defining and monitoring appropriate behaviors between and among men and women of different ages, and it still serves, with love . . . as the guiding principle for Maasai social protocols and ideals.”⁵² But while it is the guideline in theory, practice falls far short of the ideal. Too often, respect is not mutual. But when Christ enters a culture, all things are made new. For Maasai Christians, respect can flow out of love and love can flow out of respect, all in and through Christ Jesus, leading to a deep shared *osotua* among believers. This especially can be realized within Maasai marriages, as the ideals of the bride (who is led away from her old culture without looking back) and the husband (who has torn away the fence of separation so that he and his wife may dwell together in perfect *osotua*) find their fulfillment in Christ.

In order for this deep and effective transformative inculturation to take place, Christ must rule in the minds of his people; which means extending his dominion over those corporate structures of thought that constitute a culture. The very act of doing so must sharpen the identity of those who share a culture. The faith of Christ is infinitely translatable, it creates “a place to feel at home.” But it must not make a place where we are so much at home that no one also can live there. Here we have no abiding city. In Christ all poor sinners meet, and in finding themselves reconciled with him, are reconciled to each other.⁵³

“This,” as Paul reminds us, “is a great mystery” (Eph 5:32 NRSV).

Notes

1. Naomi Kipury, *Oral Literature of the Maasai* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1983), 154.

2. Philomena Njeri Mwaura, “Gender and Power in African Christianity: African Instituted Churches and Pentecostal Churches,” ch. 16 in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu Kalu (University of Pretoria, 2005), 411, 436. The importance of preserving dignity is one of the themes of Lalsangkima Pachau, “Engaging the ‘Other’ in a Pluralistic World: Toward a Subaltern Hermeneutics of Christian Mission,” *Studies in World Christianity* 8, no. 1 (2002): 63–80.

3. Dorothy Louise Hodgson, “Engendered Encounters: Men of the Church and the ‘Church of Women’ in Maasailand, Tanzania, 1950–1993,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 1 (1999): 758–83; see also Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters Between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

4. In his landmark essay, “What is African Christian Theology?,” *Africa Theological Journal* 4 (1971): 7–24, Harry Sawyerr concludes that “there is a strong case for a *Theologia Africana* which will seek to interpret Christ to the African in such a way that he feels at home in the new faith,” 24.

5. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, *Introductions in Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 11.

6. Including words for child, unmarried girl/daughter, small boy, big boy (until circumcision, 13–16), youth, teenager until marriage, warrior/warriors, junior elder, elder, adult man, husband, bride, wife, important (old) man, full elder, important (old) woman, very old (and weak) man/woman.

7. See further, Paul Spencer, *Youth and Experiences of Ageing among Maa: Models of Society Evoked by the Maasai, Samburu, and Chamus of Kenya* (Warsaw: DeGruyter, 2014), 24.

8. Musimbi Kanyoro, “The Meaning of Story: Theology as Experience,” ch. 2 in *Culture, Women and Theology*, ed. John S. Pobee (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 27.

9. He will no longer bow his head to receive a blessing even from his mother or grandmother. Dorothy L. Hodgson studies this phenomenon in “Women as Children: Culture, Political Economy and Gender Inequality among Kisongo Maasai,” *Nomadic Peoples* 3, no. 2 (1999): 115–30. She notes elsewhere that, in spite of the now old-fashioned mutual respect with which traditional Maasai culture expected men and women to treat each other, men commonly “mock women as ‘stupid’ and ‘childlike.’” See Hodgson, “Pastoralism, Patriarchy and History: Changing Gender Relations among the Maasai in Tanganyika, 1890–1940,” *Journal of African History* 40 (1999): 64.

10. John Mary Waliggo, *Struggle for Equality: Women and Empowerment in Uganda* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba, 2002), 3.

11. Dorothy L. Hodgson, *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 26.

12. I am using real names throughout—with permission to share their stories.

13. Though the same verb is used for male and female circumcision, with females it refers to a range of female genital mutilation.

14. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Christology and an African woman’s Experience,” 78.

15. Ogbu Kalu, “Daughters of Ethiopia: Gender, Power and Poverty in African Christianity,” *Currents in World Christianity*, position paper 99, 23.

16. Kipury, *Oral Literature of the Maasai*, 31–32.

17. Hodgson, *Once Intrepid Warriors*, 21.

18. Michael Burton and Lorraine Kirk, “Sex Differences in Maasai Cognition of Personality and Social Identity,” *American Anthropologist* NS 81, no. 4 (1979): 870.

19. Spencer, *Youth and Experiences of Ageing among Maa*, 57.

20. Dorothy L. Hodgson, “‘My Daughter . . . Belongs to the Government Now’: Marriage, Maasai and the Tanzanian State,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 30, no. 1 (1996): 109.

21. Paul Spencer, “Being Maasai, Being in Time,” ch. 7 in *Being Maasai*, ed. Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, *Eastern African Studies* (Oxford: James Currey, 1993), 153.

22. Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, eds., *Being Maasai*, *Eastern African Studies* (Oxford: James Currey, 1993), 138.

23. Telelia Chieni and Paul Spencer, “The World of Telelia: Reflections of a Maasai Woman in Matapato,” ch. 8 in *Being Maasai*, 160. Spencer is here specifically referring to Telelia enole Chieni, but I have noticed this in many Maasai women.

24. Duran Bell, “Defining Marriage and Legitimacy,” *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 2 (1997): 240.

25. Spencer, “Being Maasai, Being in Time,” 154.

26. Spencer, “Being Maasai, Being in Time,” 154.

27. “Humankind” (NRSV) and “humanity” (CEB) are more faithful to the Hebrew *ha-adam*, which refers not to the individual first male human, Adam, but to humankind.

28. E.g., Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan, NPNE, 1st Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 12.7.10.
29. It is important to note that this is not telling all women to submit to all men. Rather, each wife is assumed to be submitting to *her own* husband.
30. See, for example, Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 49–50.
31. In what follows, I indicate the imperatives in underlined italics for clarity.
32. I have witnessed this equally in the United States, India, South Africa, and Kenya.
33. The more common terms “patriarchy” and “patriarchal” could simply refer to the idea of a husband and father *serving* as head of his family. I have chosen to use “patriarchalism” and “patriarchalistic” to refer to a particular type of patriarchy which objectifies, devalues, and discriminates against females; patriarchalism is inherently unbiblical and even abusive.
34. New English Translation. The rather elliptical Hebrew *w'lo'-ekhad 'ashah wushar ruakh lo* can be literally rendered, “and not one has done, and a remnant of the spirit to him.”
35. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 97.
36. Francis Machingura, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission” (1 Timothy 2:11): Empowering Women in the Fight against Masculine Readings of Biblical Texts and a Chauvinistic African Culture in the Face of HIV and AIDS,” *Studies in World Christianity* 19, no. 3 (Dec 2013): 233–34.
37. Thulani Ndlazi, “Men in Church Institutions and Religious Organisations: the Role of Christian Men in Transforming Gender Relations and Ensuring Gender Equality,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 61 (2004): 64.
38. Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 175.
39. See, for example, Aud Talle, “‘Serious Games’: Licenses and Prohibitions in Maasai Sexual Life,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 77, no. 3 (2007): 363.
40. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). See also Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1973).
41. Spencer, *Youth and Experiences of Ageing among Maa*, 64.
42. Spencer, *Youth and Experiences of Ageing among Maa*, 64.
43. S. S. ole Sankan, *The Maasai* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1971), 92.
44. Paul Spencer offers a description of the leading away of the bride in *The Maasai of Matapato: A Study of Rituals of Rebellion* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 30–31.
45. Luke 9:62 and Gen 19:26 come to mind.
46. In many ways it is the combination of proper reciprocal exchange and the birth of a child that consummates a marriage from the Maasai point of view, not sexual intercourse. Children are so important to the Maasai that a childless couple will be given a child to raise from a relative.
47. These are the names listed in Jan M. H. Voshaar, *Tracing God's Walking Stick in Maa: A Study of Maasai Society, Culture and Religion, a Missionary Approach*, *Doktoraalscriptie* (Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1979), 333–34. See also Frans Mol, *Maasai Language and Culture* (Lemek: Maasai Centre Lemek, 1996), 374; S. S. ole Sankan, *Intepen* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1982), 41–42.
48. Voshaar, *Tracing God's Walking Stick in Maa*, 333–34.
49. To use Don Richardson's phrase. See his three books: *Lords of the Earth*, *Peace Child*, and *Eternity in their Hearts*.
50. Lynne Marie Kohm, “A Christian Perspective on Gender Equality,” *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 15 (2008): 338–39.
51. Kohm, “A Christian Perspective,” 353–54.
52. Hodgson, *Once Intrepid Warriors*, 39.
53. Andrew F. Walls, “Culture and Coherence in Christian History,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 9.



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