

MARRIAGE WITHOUT SEX? SAME-SEX MARRIAGES AND FEMALE IDENTITY AMONG THE NANKANI OF NORTHERN GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *Marriages, same-sex or otherwise, are undertaken for varied purposes. Yet, like many other African societies, the preservation of lineages has remained a core factor for contracting marriage among the Nankani of Northern Ghana. Woman to woman marriage among the Nankani is one of the practices set in place to sustain genealogies or the immortality of one's ancestry. Although situated within the traditional religio-cultural system of the people, woman to woman marriage which is the only overt form of same-sex marriage, contravenes both the projected religious and moral code. This raises critical concerns. Among these are the current discourses around the role of women in African religions, the role of women in sustaining patriarchy, the place of same-sex marriages, sex, and female identity in traditional African societies. This essay examines the aforementioned concerns from a Nankani daughter and woman's perspective.*

Introduction

Regardless of its form or nature, marriage is an important cultural institution among the Nankani.¹ For instance, the institution of marriage is crucial for the attainment of personhood, identity and maturity. Like other African societies, the celebration of marriage among the Nankani is a sign of maturity. It ushers in a set of responsibilities for both the individuals and the families. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye puts it, it is at marriage that the individual's maturity is "fully recognized, and the individual publicly accepts the responsibility of child-bearing and rearing.

¹The Nankani are one of the ethnic groups that share linguistic, cultural and geographical characteristics with the Gurnne or Frafra and Tallensis. Although there are dialectical variations, linguists have continuously placed these three groups together. See Diedrich Westermann and M. A. Bryan, *Languages of West Africa: Handbook of African Languages, Part II* (England: International African Institute, 1970), 55-65 and Peter Barker, *Peoples, Languages, and Religion in Northern Ghana: a preliminary report* (Ghana: Asempa Publishers, 1986) 98-100.

The marriage ritual is one of bonding – the physical bonding of two individuals as sexual partners and the covenantal bonding of two families”.² Yet, that which is generally projected in these marriage settings is heterosexuality, the family as community and its presumed sense of a genealogical continuation through procreation. These underlying features of marriage have elevated heterosexual marriages to the detriment of the other types of marriages. Nonetheless, this has not nullified the existence of these other marriages; they have only been subordinated. It is this subordinated status that is currently being unearthed for examination. Same-sex marriage is one of these other marriages that are now receiving attention. This paper seeks to examine the phenomenon of same-sex marriages within the context of woman to woman marriage among the Nankani. As a non-heterosexual relationship, the paper takes into consideration the intricate internal religio-cultural dynamics of the people to investigate the issues of sex, procreation and female identity.

According to Anne Bolin, woman to woman marriage is an institutionalized African practice. She observed that:

Woman-marriage is a predominantly African institution where one woman marries another. There are a number of types of woman-marriage, but the debates occur over the kinds of sexual practices associated with this form of marriage and/or whether a woman-husband is a transformed status.³

Although Bolin’s statement helps to locate the phenomenon within a specific cultural frame, it does not exclude the current global practice of same-sex relationships and marriages. The importance of the statement is however situated in the context in which she identifies with the core issues under consideration. Not only has it located the institutionalized form of the phenomenon in Africa, it also notes the fact that the practice has cultural variations. It is within these multiple perspectives that this paper investigates the issue with special interest in the role of women in the Nankani religio-cultural system.

²Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Women and Ritual in Africa,” in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, eds. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 13.

³Anne Bolin, “Traversing Gender: Cultural context and gender practices,” in *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 31.

According to John Mbiti and Kwame Gyekye, African religions are built into the culture.⁴ The need to consider these two aspects of life and society as a composite unit is thus relevant. Besides, there is no better way of understanding the contextual practice of woman to woman marriage among the Nankani except through the religio-cultural lens.

This paper forms part of the ongoing search for women's roles in religion. It searches for the female identity within an overt culturally proclaimed female practice. It questions the concepts of marriage, sex and chastity within this African religio-cultural system. It also interrogates the role of the ancestors and patriarchy by examining some of the cunning ways in which religion is used to sustain male hegemony in the Nankani traditional society. Finally, it reiterates the discourse on whether the presence of women in religio-cultural practices is synonymous with female identity and empowerment. It acknowledges the view that contemporary discourses on same-sex marriages are cross-cultural, although not universal.⁵ Similarly, it recognizes the viewpoint that discourses around same-sex marriages are controversial and stir up different emotions in people.⁶ While for some groups of people it may be a welcome relief to discuss these practices openly as this enable other people to know about the diverse forms of the phenomena, for others, it is received with disdain and contempt. Yet for another group, it does not make a difference. Within these assumed emotional expressions is the view that same-sex marriage has a long historical and religio-cultural standing in many societies.

⁴John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1-5 and Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17.

⁵Bolin, "Traversing Gender", 22-43.

⁶Raymond M. Lee and Claire M. Renzetti, "Problems of Researching Sensitive Topics: An Overview and Introduction," in *Researching Sensitive Topics*, eds. Claire M. Renzetti and Raymond M. Lee (London and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1993), 3-13.

This seems to contradict the perceived notion that it is a contemporary practice, especially in Africa. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe have shown that although it may seem all very confusing”, same-sex marriage “is neither random nor accidental” because “it is a consistent and logical feature of African societies and belief systems”.⁷

Contextualizing Woman to Woman Marriage

The theoretical frame from which an understanding of woman to woman marriage can be attained is situated within patriarchy. Rosemary Ruether puts this succinctly as the “rule of the father”. Expanding this, she states that “[p]atriarchy refers to systems of legal, social, economic, and political relations that validate and enforce the sovereignty of male heads of families over dependent persons in the household”.⁸

This is crucial for comprehending the phenomenon among the Nankani. This is because the Nankani are both patriarchal and patrilineal. Power and authority are not only vested in men, descent and identity is traced through the male parent.⁹ Kinship and descent are therefore crucial features of the Nankani religio-cultural system. They determine the socio-political and jural right of the individual. This has placed a high premium on male centered genealogies, making it a regulative focus for relationships and practices, except that which is related to the *suo* (maternal blood and lineage).

The patrilineal heritage system has also contributed to the central role of ancestral spirits as legal heads and custodians of existing families. This presupposes that one’s ancestry or ‘family tree’ must be visibly present as a source of identity, strength and personal stability. The Nankani specifically consider the visible presence of the natal household as a spiritual, moral and socio-political power base. This re-enforces the genealogical link on which many religio-cultural practices are hinged.

⁷Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, “Preface: ‘All Very Confusing’,” in *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, eds. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), xv.

⁸Rosemary Radford, Ruether “Patriarchy,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 205.

⁹Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 194.

My focus is, however, not on ancestors and for this reason, I will not dwell on ancestors except in instances in which it sheds light on the phenomenon of woman to woman marriage among the Nankani. My concern is on how the belief in ancestors and the survival of one's male ancestry is central to the female's identity and religio-cultural worldview.

Secondly, it also seeks to unravel how the preservation of the natal lineage is structured into the female's social-political system such that the traditional Nankani female perceives it as an asset worth sustaining. It is within these dynamics that this type of woman to women marriage can be deciphered, hence the trend of this investigation.

In this regard, it is important to state a few basic issues in the Nankani religio-cultural system. This is to provide some background information on the Nankani with the hope of facilitating a better understanding of the phenomenon. As a patriarchal and patrilineal society, male ancestors are at the core of the of the belief system. Even though there are female ancestors, they are not the basic unit of identity, authority or succession. As such, the primary obligation of an heir or successor is to his male deceased parent. It is the deceased father that must be acknowledged, institutionalized and worshipped. It is also through him that the family's petitions are channeled to the rest of one's forebears.¹⁰ For this reason Fortes declared that "a person who leaves no descendants cannot become an ancestor spirit".¹¹ It must be added that such a fellow's identity is annihilated. The remark to such a death among the Nankani is 'what a pity'. It is a pity because his identity is lost forever. Although the view that a person cannot attain ancestorhood without children is paramount, the emphasis among the Nankani is placed on having male descendants. It is only a son who can institutionalize his deceased father as an ancestor and whose descendants are acknowledged as part of the lineage. Fortes captured this among the Tallensi as:

[P]ersonhood is not regarded as complete and fulfilled until ancestorhood is assured and for this one must have surviving children, at least a son to install one as an ancestor. To die childless, therefore, not only condemns one to oblivion, it negates the entire personhood that might have been achieved during a life time.¹²

¹⁰Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person*, 74-5.

¹¹M. Fortes, "Ancestor Worship," in *African Systems of Thought: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Third International African Seminar in Salisbury, December 1960* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1965), 16.

¹²Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person*, 193.

Thus the prime roles of sons in the overall religio-cultural system among the Nankani is a driving force. With a general focus on male identity, it means that a male figure is required for the normal regime of life. It is therefore not an issue of childlessness but that of having a son. Nevertheless, having a girl may suffice if the right measures are taken. Therefore, the statements 'it is okay' or 'it is better than nothing' are applied.

To understand this aspect of the discussion, there is need to digress into some other areas of the Nankani religio-cultural dynamics. The birth of a son among the Nankani is welcomed as the arrival of landlord. His identity and authority are acquired with respect to his biological identity at birth. The first born son is heir or successor; hence, responsible for building upon his family's lineage and heritage. Irrespective of modern urbanization, a son's religio-cultural identity is fixed to his natal home. In other words, both personhood and identity are tied to maleness. Yet, unlike that of identity, personhood can only be fully achieved through childbearing, a prospect that can only be achieved with the aid of a female. For the Nankani, however, such a status (personhood) is recognized through selected channels. Among these channels, marriage is paramount.

On the other hand, the birth of a daughter is heralded with the notion that she belongs to another household by virtue of a future marriage. This implies that she is presented with a multiple identity from the outset. That is, a present identity in her natal home and a future one in a marital home. Yet for the Nankani the situation is not as simple as that. For the Nankani, the female's life and destiny is complex. Her multiple identities transcend life to death. While alive as a daughter, her personal, spiritual, political and socio-cultural identity is aligned to her natal home and kinsmen. In her marriage life, her identity becomes dual. Although her immediate and socio-cultural identity is transferred from her natal kinsmen to her marital kinsmen, her spiritual and socio-political identity transcends her marital home to her natal home. The Nankani say, a woman has two homes. While in her marital home, she says 'I am going home', referring to her natal home and vice versa.

But this is not just the woman's projection. Her husband and his kinsmen acknowledge this. At the birth of her first child, a fowl is sent to the woman's natal home for a thanksgiving ritual to her ancestors.

Other ritual obligations transcending her marital life are also respected and conducted by her husband. At death her funeral rites are performed at the two homesteads. First, in her marital home and later integrated with her natal ancestry.¹³ It is only after this her son(s) can seek to retrieve her, if they wish to make her an ancestress in their family. This shifting identity status of the Nankani female presents multiple issues in relation to power and authority, and the politics associated with them, as well as inheritance. While her personhood and sense of maturity are linked to marriage, her identity is always tied to the men in her life.

For this reason, the Nankani female is not only identified with two socio-political lineages, she is also responsible for promoting and sustaining both. Her role, whether in her natal or marital family, is seen in this context. This analogy is expressed in the statements *budaa nmeti yeri* (a man builds a house) and *poka mali yeri* (a woman maintains or repairs a house). In other words, a man must make sure that he has sons to carry on after him. For the woman, ensuring the above is not her primary task. Hers is to expand the family networks through in-law relationships and later through her off-springs.¹⁴ This notwithstanding, she is also expected to help the men in her life with their task. This is not just a moral responsibility; it is for her religious and political security as well. This is because her spiritual needs in both homes are channeled through the male figure. She is therefore expected to nourish and resuscitate her families when the need arises. This is the context in which a daughter functions in woman to woman marriage.

Another way of obtaining understanding of the phenomenon and the attendant religio-cultural dynamics is to examine what I hereby describe as 'the tree' and 'its root'.

From the Nankani religio-cultural background, the physical presence of a son can be seen and symbolized as a tree. The daughter on the other hand represents the root. A tree needs roots for support and nourishment. Nonetheless, it must be visibly alive to be seen and identified as such. In this respect, the tree (son) depends on its roots (daughter) who through marriage disappears from her natal homestead to form the interconnecting links of 'the root' to support 'the tree'. Through a daughter's marriage, she provides the sons initially with wealth in the form of bride-wealth.

¹³Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person*, 70.

¹⁴Alastair Scobie, *Women of Africa* (London: Cassell, 1960), 26.

A lasting relationship is further created through the establishment of in-law relationships which is concretized through childbearing. This is the primary role of the Nankani girl-child. However, this primary function may be disrupted in times of crisis. In an unfortunate event where a family has no sons or loses all its sons, the primary duty of the son may fall on the daughter. In this case we may say the root has to spurt a new shoot from which the tree or both tree and root may regain life. Without this her immediate ancestry ceases to exist. Similarly, the socio-political security accrued from having a blood family which is religio-culturally presented as a fundamental spiritual support of the woman in her exogamous marital setting would be lost. Traditionally, the Nankani woman in this situation is without honor. The desire to re-establish one's natal ancestry is therefore an 'honor' and a basic need for daughters in these circumstances. Yet, to reinstate one's ancestry means to reinstate the male figure through the provision of a son in the natal homestead.

To effect this, a special avenue must be created for the daughter. Woman to woman marriage is one of these special arrangements. This is because females are not religio-culturally accepted as heirs, successors or religious leaders within this patriarchal system.¹⁵ It is a system that "women have no juridical independence and therefore no religious status in their own right".¹⁶

According to Joseph Akinḡle Omoyajowo, although women are fundamental in African religion, the religious sphere "is so fundamentally masculine" that "women are not accorded any visibly prominent status in religious matters".¹⁷ It is precisely this ambivalent context that raises questions. This is the case of woman to woman marriage among the Nankani and it is this interconnectedness of issues that makes it relevant for discussion.

¹⁵Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person*, 76.

¹⁶Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person*, 75. See also Afi Amadiume, *Male Daughters and Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Press, 1987), 69.

¹⁷Joseph Akinḡle Omoyajowo "The Place of Women in African Traditional Religion and among the Yoruba," in *African Traditional Religions In Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 73.

Woman to Woman Marriage among the Nankani

Woman to woman marriage among the Nankani is the last desperate religio-cultural practice employed to reclaim and reinstate the male genealogical descent structure of the people. It is embarked on only after all other attempts to resuscitate a depleted male stock in a family have failed. The family here refers to the extended African family system. This includes the first son or heir and his immediate family as well as all his siblings and their families. It however excludes those of his female siblings. As first son, he represents the head of the family in all spheres of life. He is the brother, husband and father to all under him. His younger siblings' wives and children might refer to him as 'senior' husband or father. Previously, these distinctions were not made. All marriages were spearheaded by the first son and all the children bore his name. In his absence or death, the next in line takes over. Currently, this practice has changed and children now bear their own fathers' names. Nonetheless, this was the context in which woman to woman marriage took place. If for any reason a family in this context could not reproduce a male successor or heir, then such a family was in a process of annihilation. To prevent this, daughters then stood in to raise the heir. It was not applicable to the individual; that amounted to alienation and selfishness and such a case had no place in the system.

Woman to woman marriage was and, debatably,¹⁸ still is a practice where a *pojaa* (matured daughter) is either allowed to or called upon to marry another woman under her median identity for the continuous propagation of her natal ancestry. This kind of marriage is usually arranged and contracted by the daughter's kinsmen who deem it necessary to preserve their kinsman's lineage and heritage. The wife in this marriage is expected to choose her sex partners discreetly from her matrimonial clan or community.¹⁹

¹⁸The current status of this practice is debatable. While it is difficult to encounter any practical example of the phenomena, the framework under which it operates presents few avenues for public disclosures. The general view is that it is disappearing. There is however need for further investigation and analysis so as to determine the current state of affairs.

¹⁹See Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sexual Morality in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 145.

The men involved in the relationship are culturally aware that they have no claim to the children. The children from this arrangement are accorded full religio-cultural and social status of the deceased whose name they bear.

The biological father of these children may be perceived as a 'sperm donor' for the religio-cultural father whose name was used to contract the marriage. In this sense, the deceased man begets his children posthumously. In this special context, the wife is not a widow in the normal sense; she is a wife of the living. She cannot be inherited or married as in the levirate system. In the same vein, she is not confined by the rules of chastity which prohibit adultery.²⁰ At the same time, she is not considered adulterous.

Another significant factor of this practice is the role and status of the daughter. For the purpose of streamlining the identities of the two women involved in this scenario, their traditional identities as 'daughter' and 'wife' will be maintained in the discussion. Unlike the wife, the daughter's role is still circumvented by the rest of the religio-political norms. Despite playing the role of a male, representing a *de facto* head of the household, she is not perceived as the heir. Neither is she perceived as male. As a result, she does not inherit the family property, that is, if there is any.

These will be under the control of her male kinsmen until an heir is produced and is capable of assuming control. Her role is therefore supervisory, holding the fort for the future heir and/or successor. Similarly, all religious and cultural practices related to the family are channeled through her male kinsmen, although this must be done with her knowledge and consent. The wife is also not identified as the wife of the daughter but as the wife of the deceased relation whose name was used in the marriage contract. The daughter is thus identified as the caretaker of the said fellow's wife. Although she is referred to as a *sira* (husband) if the woman was married with a brother's identity, it is not taken literally. This is because Nankani daughters are 'husbands' to their sisters-in-laws. On the other hand, she may also be referred to as a daughter

²⁰See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 144-5.

if a parental name was used for the marriage. In other words, the daughter's presence in her natal home represents the presence of the family and through her the family lives to perform its socio-cultural roles in the society. For the Nankani, a stranger does not go to an empty house. The need for a presence is thus symbolized by the daughter.

Other Religio-cultural Practices

Woman to woman marriage among the Nankani can be properly understood within the context of other religio-cultural practices. As noted, it is the last resort, which implies there are other preceding alternatives. Among Nankani and Gurunne speaking communities, a daughter may be prohibited from marrying. The purpose of this injunction is to detain her as a surviving legitimate member of a family to 'stay home' and remain unmarried.²¹ The aim of this injunction is to place her in a special category of representation so as to enable her to bear an heir or son to replenish her depleted male lineage. In placing her in such a special category, she obtains certain rights and privileges. She is not proclaimed or viewed as a son or male, but her children who under the prevailing norm do not constitute members of her family will now acquire that identity. She is not perceived as a woman (wife). She remains a daughter and it is this identity that is crucial to her role. This role, however, puts her ambiguously outside the traditionally demarcated boundaries in which daughters usually operate.

As stated, every Nankani girl-child has multiple or shifting identities. As a result of this, they do not have the right of inheritance in their natal homes. Secondly, because paternity is the source of authority and identity, a daughter's child is denied these. Children under this category were not supposed to exist, because marriage is the normal setting for childbearing; hence, the system had no provisions for the daughter's child. In order to contravene

²¹R. S. Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 269.

this norm for the acceptance of a daughter's child as a legitimate heir, an official proclamation or vow is needed by the female's father or his next of kin (male). It is this vow which also excludes her from marriage. The case must be well founded and established for the integrity of the future heir and lineage. Thus, she must remain a spinster or face the spiritual and socio-cultural consequences of 'breaking the covenant' set for her. She, more or less, becomes a taboo daughter in terms of marriage. Declaring her as someone 'set apart' secures the unique masculine role she is called to play.

From then on, suitors are rejected on the grounds that she is forbidden to marry. Persistent suitors may however be tolerated after notification. The interpretations given to this is associated with the man's lust. Under such a context, the relationship is no longer viewed as courtship; hence, it has no cultural backing for any future marriage or paternity claims. Thus the man's presence is tolerated for the inherent benefit of the daughter conceiving.

Children from this category bear the names of their mother's ancestry. Other than this, the daughter chooses her lovers from her not-so-near kin, *yiven zaba* (home lover) or *ta-zaba* (near kin lover).²² This places the daughter in a somewhat ambiguous position. Although her sexual life is not restricted or monitored, her choice of sexual partners must fall within a range in which neither incest nor paternity claims can be made.²³ As in woman to woman marriage, the daughter's role and identity are silent. The children take up her father's name and identity. Her first born son becomes heir and successor of the family. As heir, he is structurally situated. He also inherits the status and roles as other sons begotten by the male members of the clan. Nonetheless, his religious obligations must be rendered through his mother's immediate family.²⁴

²²A. Agnes Apusigah, "Gender, Vulnerability and the Politics of Decision-making in Ghana: The Case of the Upper East Region," *Ghana Journal of Development Studies* 1 (2004):15.

²³See Robert Parkin, *Kinship: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 47-9.

²⁴Pattroy, *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*, 153, 269-73.

The biological parentage is strategically suppressed while the religio-culturally identity, the mother's lineage identity is projected. On the other hand, if for some reasons, the children born by the daughter are females and the possibility of getting the heir is diminishing by virtue of age, the final option, woman to woman marriage as described above, is employed.

According to some of the prevailing narratives, in desperate situations, special arrangements can be made for existing marriages to be abrogated to enable a daughter to return to her natal home to rescue her lineage. The roles of such daughters fall within the two scenarios already discussed. If she is capable of bearing children, she does so herself. Where the daughter is past childbearing age, she may marry another woman to do so. This particular case takes place in extreme situations. References are situated in misfortunes or crisis in which the heir(s) of the family dies. Examples of this may be found within tribal conflicts or war situations where entire families or clans can be killed. In such a case, a married daughter who might have survived due to the exogamous marriage system returns home with the duty of restoring her ancestry. The reinstatement of a married woman as daughter is essential for establishing woman to woman marriages among the Nankani. Females must be daughters when performing this role because the phenomenon takes place within the natal home context. The essence is that they are not contracting the marriage for themselves but for a specific purpose and that must take place in the proper setting. To reinstate her natal genealogy, her identity as an unmarried daughter must be firmly established. Traditionally, daughters who felt responsible for restoring their ancestry had a sense of achievement and fulfillment after a son was provided. For even though females are culturally socialized to know that they belong to 'another house' through marriage, they are equally informed that having a natal home is crucial to attaining identity and security in their marriage context. Nankani children are taught the proverb, 'you do not use your left hand to point at your natal home'. One's natal home is so important that it must be accorded all the necessary respect. The use of a left hand in this case is a sign of disrespect. Females therefore grow up believing that having a surviving natal home is as much an

important part of their lives as it is to have a marital home. It is a source of security and pride to be able to refer to one's natal home and family while in a marriage. Thus daughters willingly play these self-denying roles as a duty and with spiritual undertones.

Yet, woman to woman marriage is sometimes misunderstood and, in the process, other socio-cultural practices are interpreted as part of the phenomenon. There is need to differentiate such closely related practices for a clear understanding of what is and what is not. That is to say, in a situation where the woman's status as a wife is maintained, the practice cannot be realized. A wife in her matrimonial home cannot marry another woman. Although the practice can be interpreted as an affront to the dignity of her matrimonial kinsmen and daughters, it is classified as a taboo. A wife can and may arrange for a young woman of her choice for marriage to her husband or his relations but cannot marry for him or herself. Although it is often casually referred to as 'a woman has married a younger wife for her husband', her role is structurally seen as facilitating the marriage. This particular process finds expression in a context where a barren or aging wife arranges for her husband to marry a younger woman from her family or community. This practice is quite common. Elderly Nankani women or women whose son's are married are traditionally expected to withdraw from sexual intercourse.²⁵ To facilitate this withdrawal from sex without denying the man's sexual needs, some women arrange for younger wives for their husbands.²⁶

Perhaps this is to facilitate understanding and to help provide peaceful relations among the co-wives. Yet it may also be a way of placing the first wife in the position of power and authority. What is important is that this does not form part of woman to woman marriage.

²⁵See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 146.

²⁶This practice is rooted in the traditional notion of the ideal woman.

Marriage without Sex?

The question arising from these narratives concerns the contextual understanding of marriage and whether or not a marriage can exist without sex. Nonetheless, the underlying assumptions on these two do not produce clear-cut solutions. Traditional marriage, the presumed centre of sexual relations, also puts emphasis the union of families. At the individual level, it is a sign of maturity and readiness for responsibility.²⁷ Responsibility here includes that which relates to mature members of the community, in-law relations, that which pertains to the marriage itself and, subsequently, its procreative aspect. It is also the beginning of the individual's personal journey to the fullness of life and independence (personhood). In the context of men, it is a journey that initials a path towards that individual's personal genealogy. This is principally because marriage remains the setting for producing successors and/or family heirs.

Although there are other ways for men to engage in sexual relationships, the children from these are not readily recognized; hence, cannot succeed unless specific agreements and rites relative to the specific situations are performed. Marriage is therefore fundamental for the establishment of the individual's socio-cultural legitimacy and identity.²⁸

This places prime importance on marriage in the traditional setting as the centre for procreation and therefore sex. It also sets marriage within heterosexual relationships where the procreative role of the couple is most visible. In this setting, men have the primary responsibility to perpetuate their lineage with their wives who are either 'sought for' or 'given into' marriage to play the supportive role. In the exogamous marriage system, this helps to locate the identity of the children. It is the one who seeks, who has ownership of that which is found. If marriage is thus set in heterosexual relationships with a desired aim of procreation, then it presupposes that the topic of discussion is either wrong or misleading.

²⁷See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Cameroun, Clé and Regnum Africa, 2002), 81 and Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, Forward by Jacob K. Olupona (Albany State: University of New York Press, 2003), 95-7.

²⁸Toyin Falola, *The Power of African Cultures* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 258-9.

This is because, if marriage is the traditional home of sex, in which the parties form the legitimate centre of procreation, then both sex and heterosexual relationships are necessary. This excludes any notion of same-sex marriage or a marriage without sex. Nonetheless, it is within this setting that this topic finds expression. This is because the traditional Nankani marriage does not require or stress on the consummation of a marriage by the couple for its validity. Instead, it considers the marriage rites in which a male identity and family is identified. In this respect, marriages can be contracted for very old men who are sexually inactive as well as for impotent and sterile men.²⁹ In these marriages, the socio-political and reproductive needs of the men are discreetly arranged with a community member. Similarly, when a married man dies before having children his widow may be encouraged to stay on so as to bear him children posthumously. This is because without a remarriage her children belong to her deceased husband. These are the usual forms of providing continuity and preserving lineages. It is only when these measures have failed that the daughter's role comes into effect.

The framework is simply transferred to woman to woman marriage when the religio-cultural need of securing an heir is required. This is because a Nankani daughter can help her brother to marry in addition to being referred to as a husband by his wife. Besides, in woman to woman marriage, it is the married woman's biological function and the already culturally accepted masculine identity of the daughter that are essential. In this situation, no sexual relationship is required between the two women. They are already, culturally, 'husband' and 'wife' if the said wife was married to a brother. As such, no overt notions or reference is made to a sexual relationship between the two. Perhaps such a view is based on the understanding that the women involved have the culturally prescribed avenues for meeting their sexual desires.

²⁹Allan Wolsey Cardinall, *The Natives of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast: Their Customs, Religion and Folklore* (London: Routledge, 1920), 75-6. On sterile or impotent men see Mbiti. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 147.

As such questions about sex between the two women are perceived as ridiculous. The presence of the two women to effect the phenomenon is to provide the religio-cultural conditions as well as companionship. This is especially essential where there are no surviving members in the household. In other words, there are marriages without sex in the traditional Nankani society. Yet, in placing sex, procreation and identity within the context of heterosexual marriage relationships contradicts same-sex marriage. It is thus in this perspective that woman to woman marriage or the daughter's role and identity subdued.

Implications of the Traditional Concept of Chastity

Traditionally, chastity is a major preoccupation of the African discourse on morality. For the Nankani, chastity lies within the domain of sex and sexuality. This involves the biological distinctions of male-female, intercourse as well as procreation.³⁰ Chastity in this sense is primarily a heterosexual moral construct, taking into consideration that which is culturally 'right, proper and/or normal'. Irrespective of recent scholarly criticism of such constructs and their inherent tendency to privilege heterosexuality against other sexual orientations, the Nankani uphold this view.³¹ Thus, without engaging in the intricacies of this discourse, it throws light on the divergent views on the situation. Chastity among the Nankani is an all-embracing term. Although traditional chastity norms precede marriage, its primary focus is on female sexuality within marriage.

³⁰Lloyda Fanusie, "Sexuality and Women in African Culture," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, eds. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 141.

³¹Majella McFadden and Ian Sneddon, 'Sexuality', in *Gender and Psychology*, eds. Karen Trew and John Kremer (London, New York, Sydney and Auckland: Arnold, 1998), 48.

The custodians of marital chastity are the ancestors and they are noted to exact punishment on women during childbearing. In a study on chastity in the Naga traditional area, a Nankani community, Rose Mary Akurigu observed that females are not only expected to abstain from sex until marriage, they must be faithful to their "husband until her death or after the death and final funeral rites of her husband have been performed".³² This is because the traditional concept of death is not complete until the final funeral rites are performed to usher the deceased into the ancestral abode. Thus the physical death of a husband does not end a marriage. It is the ritual separation that brings the marriage to an end and unlike a man; a woman must wait until the process is over unless otherwise required. Woman to woman marriage and all the other practices aimed at the production of heirs contravene the general norms of chastity. As shown in the narratives, the females in both daughter and wife categories are religio-culturally permitted to break the rules within the prescribed limits in order to achieve the ultimate objective. In this context, not only are the rules on chastity broken, the norms regarding marriage as well as the identity and status of a daughter's child are all broken with the consent and blessings of the ancestors. This is one of the areas this paper seeks to bring to the fore for questioning. Mbiti contends all these practices, though culturally specific, are part of the religious systems of the African.³³ Yet there is need to question further on the identity and status of the daughter caught in this structural arrangement.

African Religio-cultural Traditions and Female Identity

There is cross-cultural acknowledgement that women take on responsibilities which transcend their specific cultural constructed gender divides. Some of these duties demand self-denial and unquestionable devotion. Although these tasks are usually recognized as crucial and sometimes indispensable, they do not always earn women respect or a place as men. Even though this perspective varies in respect to societies and religious traditions, very often, the task seem to be given better public recognition than the female executor.

³³Mbiti *African Religions and Philosophy* 148

In Ghana, women are accorded the saying, 'women are the pillars of society' or 'women hold up half the sky' yet when it comes to sharing the honor for the work done, the language is immediately transformed to 'what/who is a woman?'³⁴ Immediately, the woman's visibility, voice and identity are muted.³⁵

This inconsistency is a major concern for women. In her contribution to a volume on the *Turning Points in Religious Studies*, Ursula King noted that the crucial role of feminism has been to find visibility, voice and identity for women in an entirely andocentric and masculine world. Nonetheless, King moved beyond this with a request to scholars to transcend the secular sphere to the religious realm of life. For King, there has been a concentration on the secular area of gender to the detriment of the religious where, she argues, the precepts, beliefs and practices related to gender originate.³⁶ The need to unearth some of these embedded traditions for re-examination is crucial in questioning the current status and/or identity of women in religion and society. This is also crucial in arriving at and for understanding the female identity in its 'collected and fractured' forms.³⁷

The quest to understand the identity of the African woman within its specific religio-cultural and historical contexts has drawn many African scholars to different spectrums of the discourse. For some, acknowledging the patriarchal nature of the world and its subsequent subordination and suppression of

³⁴See Christine Obbo, *African Women: Their Struggle for Economic Independence* (London: Zed Press, 1980), 1.

³⁵Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 94-7.

³⁶Ursula King, "Religion and Gender," in *Turning Points in Religious Studies*, ed. Ursula King (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1990), 175.

³⁷Judith Butler, "Collected and Fractured: Response to *Identities*," in *Identities*, eds. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 439-47.

women is crucial to strengthening both the individual and/or collective efforts.³⁸ Others contest this stance as another unguarded importation or imposition of a Western gendered framework on the African continent.³⁹ In the process, the traditional gendered constructs are unearthed for re-examination.⁴⁰ The resulting products have been a growing consensus on a multiple frame of relatively cultural gender flexibility.⁴¹ Drawing from her matrilineal Akan society Brigid Sackey noted that despite the instances of exclusivity, the African scenario is both inclusive and flexible. According to Sackey, sometimes these different dimensions function synonymously in the person of the Queen Mother among the Akans. As a result, she argues that the African scenario defies any strict classifications.⁴² Thus, she disagrees with the universalization of patriarchy with the view that the matrilineal Akan woman is neither subordinated nor suppressed because she knows when to act. Although African feminist scholars have variously illustrated these divergent perspectives, there is still the need to question whether these diverse perceptions are not exhibiting the inherent problem of ambiguity. As Oduyoye has pointed out:

It is often argued that traditional African religions and cultures afford adequate and requisite participation for women. This ignores the fact of women's common experience in Africa, that by the time a woman has spent her energies struggling to be heard, she has barely the energy left to say what she had wanted to say. It is true that women close to royal thrones were formidable powers and may still be. But one ought also to hear the women who warn us against basking in the glory of 'old shells', retained to govern social relationships, when the material causes that gave rise to those structures are no more, or are fast fading away.⁴³

³⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996).

³⁹ See Amadiume, *Male Daughters and Female Husbands* and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

⁴¹ Amadiume, *Male Daughters and Female Husbands*, 15 and Brigid M. Sackey, *New Directions in Gender and Religion: The Changing Status of Women in African Independent Churches* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 59-63.

⁴² Sackey, *New Directions in Gender and Religion*, 61.

⁴³ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 75

It is true that some cases defy strict gender categorization but we must also question the extent to which these instances present ambiguities. In order that the right understanding of the situation may be obtained, scholars must interrogate the intricate relationships of sex, sexuality and the crucial issue of female identity in the Africa context.⁴⁴ As shown in this paper, the contextual nuances cannot be viewed simply as instances of inclusivity, exclusivity and/or flexibility.⁴⁵ The various scenarios present inherent ambiguities and there is need to move beyond this traditional overt construct of 'woman to woman marriage' to examine the hidden exploitation and denial of the female's personal identity in the roles she plays. Thus the study questions the arguments surrounding gender inclusivity and flexibility. It calls on researchers to transcend the overt projection of gender flexibility and female empowerment to the intricate dynamics therein. Traditionally, women are said to play complementary roles

Among the Nankani and Gurunne speakers, elderly women are perceived as *toolluum* (warmth or heat).⁴⁶ In her research on the traditional concept of *toolluum* as a potential conservationist practice for sustainable development in the Northern part of Ghana, Apusigah identified among its diverse meanings and connotations, a gendered dimension.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi and William E. O'Brien, "Revisiting 'Woman-Woman Marriage': Notes on Gikuyu Women," in *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (New York and England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 145-65.

⁴⁵ See also Beverly J. Stoeltje, "Asante Queenmothers: A Study in Identity and Continuity," in *Gender and Identity in Africa*, eds. Mechthild Reh and Gudrun Ludwar-Ene (Münster/Hamburg, 1995), 16.

⁴⁶ Agnes Atia Apusigah, "*Toolluum*: A Gendered African Concept with Potential for Development," A draft paper presented at the CODESRIA Annual Campus on African Knowledge Systems, Dakar, Senegal, (May 2006), 2.

⁴⁷ Apusigah, "*Toolluum*," 4-5.

Apusigah particularly noted titled and elderly women as *toolluum*, it is however worth adding that the relentless selflessness of women form part of *toolluum*. As is often expressed, it is only when a man has a wife that he has a home. Woman to woman marriage and the other religio-cultural constructs in which women are used to secure male heirs form part of *toolluum*. Without their identities as individuals or collectively as women, these traditional women have served their families, clans and communities, providing the warmth of life when the need arises. Yet, these Nankani women form the quorum of “[w]omen as a muted group” as observed by Fiona Bowie.⁴⁸ Bowie attributes this to language and ritual. For her, it is “language, and ritual that maintain a heterosexual view of ‘normality’ and morality. Their [women] experiences of the world, their models, are ‘muted’ in relation to the hegemonic voices of those in power”.⁴⁹ Women form both the subjects and objects of woman to woman marriages, yet both their collective and individual identities are lost in the process and history keeps no record of them because they were and still are never to be known. For the Nankani all that matters is the male and his identity and only this has been preserved. All that is there is the conceptual frame but who are they and which genealogies can be traced to them?

Conclusion

It is important to keep in mind that woman to woman marriage is the final attempt in rescuing a male centered lineage from total oblivion. For that reason, it is situated within a context in which there are no men. The phenomenon operates within the disguised umbrella of masculinity. According to tradition, the daughter who heeds the pledge of her family in these matters is exalted and religiously blessed. Her obedience and role in the perpetuation of her ancestry is held as a sacred duty.

⁴⁸ Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion*, 94.

⁴⁹ Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion*, 96.

In spite of the differences in traditions, some of the issues are cross-cultural. Not only does patriarchy continue to emerge as a major global phenomenon, the use of biological sex differentiation as the primary conceptualization of gender is also present among the Nankani.⁵⁰ The peculiarity of these narratives lies in the roles and identity status arising from this gender framework where biological sex confers identity and status on the individual. The difference between the Nankani and other woman to woman marriage narratives is the fact that for the Nankani, one's biological identity and status are fixed irrespective of the role performed. This is where Nankani daughters stand at a loss. The projection of one identity to the detriment of the other is coached in the Nankani proverb 'a woman does not behead a snake after killing it'. For the Nankani, irrespective of the magnitude of the act or achievement, it must find its expression through a man. Hence, even though daughters take up the responsibility of restoring the lineage, the effort finds expression in the form of a male identity. This is similar to the Akan proverbs, 'when a woman buys a gun, it is placed in a man's room' or "a woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence around it".⁵¹ Although Mbiti tried to set his proverb within the framework of gender complementarity, his discourse illustrated female subordination. In other words, a woman's manifest potentials are contained and controlled by a man.⁵²

The narratives also illustrate that traditional women transcended the gender boundaries of their cultures. This notwithstanding, woman-to-woman marriage among the Nankani is not seen as an alternative marriage system. Unlike Igbo 'female husbands' or the complex scenario among the Gikuyu,⁵³ the Nankani perspective is not empowering to the women.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Karen Trew, "Identity and the Self," in *Gender and Psychology* eds. Karen Trew and John Kremer (London, New York, Sydney and Auckland, 1998), 4-7.

⁵¹ Falola, *The Power of African Cultures*, 250-3.

⁵² Mbiti, John S., 1991, 'Flowers in the Garden: The Role of Women in African Religion', in Jacob, K. Olupona (ed.), *African Traditional Religions In Contemporary Society*, Minnesota, Paragon House, p. 68.

⁵³ Njambi and O'Brien, "Revisiting 'Woman-Woman Marriage'," 145-65.

⁵⁴ Njambi and O'Brien, "Revisiting 'Woman-Woman Marriage'," 147.

It is a masculine construct and the desired aim is to sustain patriarchy. Although these examples have added another perspective to the discourse on women's roles in the traditional African society, they have also contributed to the current discourse on woman-to-woman marriage on the African continent. For the Nankani, family membership or identity is dependent on one's natal home, where natal identity is linked to a male figure. The alignment of religious authority and responsibility, identity and inheritance on the male identity denies the woman a place and identity in the structure. Yet, underlying these Nankani scenarios is the issue raised by feminists on the role of women in maintaining and perpetuating patriarchal structures and systems.⁵⁵ This is one other perspective that calls for a critical examination of women's inclusion in traditional practices. Besides, there is an emerging new outlook and attitude to the practices discussed here. Contemporary Nankani men and women are questioning and challenging these traditional gender frameworks. Thus, there is need for a broader study of the phenomena to include current views and their impact on this traditional practice.

⁵⁵ Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), 144.