

THE “*VAT-EN-SIT*”¹ UNIONS AS A THREAT TO THE STABILITY OF AFRICAN MARRIAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA: AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

A serious issue, that needs to be addressed if we wish to achieve moral regeneration in South Africa, is the devaluation of the institution of marriage in the African community in South Africa. Attempts to inculcate the upcoming generation with norms and values are hampered because marriage is not regularised among black people and can, therefore, not solve African problems. This paper identifies the so-called “*vat-en-sit*” custom or cohabitation as a factor that threatens and violates marriage. Although other factors also undermine marriage, this paper focuses on *vat-en-sit* because it puts African marriage under serious attack. This paper argues from an African-Christian perspective that marital unions which have not been legalised in accordance with African values do not only undermine the institution of marriage, but also attempt to destroy marriages that conform to African legal values.

Keywords: Marriage, African, lobolo, *vat-en-sit*, family relationships.

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- 1 *Vat-en-sit* is an Afrikaans expression literally meaning “take and sit”. This is a saying used to refer to a union where two people (man and woman) decide to stay together as married people while the marriage has not gone through the African traditional customs that are used to solidify marriage – bridewealth payment (lobolo) being the chief custom.



INTRODUCTION

There is a Tsonga idiom that says: *Wansati wo ka a nga lovorivi anga aki muti* (A woman who has not been lobolored or for whom lobolo² has not yet been paid, does not build a village) (Junod 1978, 186). It means that a woman taken in marriage without lobolo is not bound to her marriage; she goes away when it pleases her and leaves her husband in grief. This has been a fast growing concern for Tsonga-speaking people and other Black tribes that hold the tradition of lobolo in high esteem, particularly as the number of *vat-en-sit* or cohabitation unions has increased as a result of migrant labour and other related challenges.

A blog entitled “Only fools pay lobola”³ has recently gone viral on the internet (Writer 2012). It does not only undermine the cultural custom that has been the pride of African black parents for many decades, but also causes me to imagine our own identity without customs like lobolo (Writer 2012). Baloyi (2014a 136) argues that lobolo is one of those customs that some people are trying to forget and destroy by their own neglect. The number of marriages which have not received parental blessings is rapidly growing in South Africa. Many young people prefer staying together unmarried for a long time; perhaps only when they have given birth to children do they start thinking of legitimising their unions. This situation is evident from an SABC television programme broadcast on Sundays between 19:00 and 20:00, entitled “Perfect wedding”. Participants are mainly older couples with children. These couples have already stayed together as “unmarried husband and wife” and want to do the right thing by getting married. It becomes increasingly difficult for pastoral caregivers and marriage counsellors to prepare young, unmarried people for marriage, because they often regard cohabitation as a trial marriage. Baloyi (2014a, 23) writes that the so-called “*vat-en-sit*” marriages have long been problematic, particularly in the African context. This has to do with the fact that there should be agreement on the brideprice before any marriage is accepted by the family, the extended family and the clan. Dlamini (1991, 72) shares the same sentiments and argues that the relationship cannot be perceived as a valid marriage if lobolo has not been paid.

2 Lobolo is defined in the Recognition Act as “property in cash or kind...which a prospective husband or head of his family undertakes to give to the head of a prospective wife’s family in consideration of a customary marriage”. (“Customary Law v Common Law Marriages: A Hybrid Approach in South Africa.” Marissa Herbst and Willemien du Plessis, *Electronic Journal of Comparative Law*, <http://www.ejcl.org/121/art121-28.pdf>).

3 Lobolo or Lobola in Zulu, Swazi, Xhosa and northern and southern Ndebele (*Mahadi* in Sesotho, *Roora* in Shona, and *Magadi* in Northern Sotho, *Lovola* in Xitsonga), sometimes referred to as “bridewealth” or “brideprice” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lobolo>). In this article “lobolo” will be used throughout, unless used as “lobola” in a direct quote or publication title.

Most black people in South Africa, as in many other African countries, respect marriage based on bridal agreements. For an African marriage to be recognised and respected by the family, the clan and the entire community, it is imperative that the exchange of bridewealth should take place (Gunga 2009, 172). Therefore, the prevalence of cohabitation and other forms of staying together as husband and wife – without being married – has long been a challenge to African marriage. These practices undermine the traditional customs of the black people, and erode the core of African marriage values and norms. The problem becomes visible when parents and family do not regard a relationship as a marriage. A family member of woman abused by her partner has been quoted as saying: “I cannot help stop the abuse because she is not married to her partner” (Curran and Bonthuys 2004). In addition, the status of children born out of “normal” wedlock is questioned at times. Children themselves live with the identity crisis. This article argues that intimate relationships that disregard the traditional practice of lobolo undermine the dignity of the African black marriages, and as such marriage is under attack.

SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Zwane (2016, 3) confirms that marriage is under attack when arguing: “An increase in the number of *vat-en-sit* relationships has contributed to fewer people getting married in Mzansi.” Relationships and unions which are formed by two individuals, male and female, without the consent of their families, always come under criticism from the traditional point of view. The legitimacy of such relationships is questioned. Just like other young and old people, Orkney Kgopa was quoted as saying: “I want to do the right thing for my future wife” (in Muranga and Mokwena (2016, 1-2). This happened after the couple realised that they need their families to negotiate their lobolo so that they can do away with the *vat-en-sit* situation (Muranga and Mokwena (2016, 1-2). The fact that they call it “the right thing” qualifies the wrongness of the union which did not start with lobolo. Luhanga (2016b, 10) confirms that the lobolo negotiations can be one of the happiest moments of the families concerned. One of the challenges faced by traditional African families is the payment of lobolo when a woman in a *vat-en-sit* union dies, as research by Baloyi (2014a) shows. Many young people declare themselves to be married while their families and communities do not recognise the marriage, because no marriage is recognised by both the family of the bride and the family of groom if the man has not paid the bridewealth. Baloyi (2014a, 136) says: “For African marriage to retain its dignity and respectable position in the community, this study becomes an important one.”

The issue of families forcing each other to pay lobolo before burials, as has become prevalent in our society, has called for this study. There have been families which, instead of burying the dead woman, approach the courts to legitimise a

marriage, while the anger and resentment between families grow because they do not agree about the particular marriage. Also, many women do not regard themselves as married if their lobolo is still unpaid. It is, therefore, Baloyi’s (2014b, 23) theoretical assertion that the payment of lobolo for his wife should be a matter of pride to an African man and he should strive to pay that lobolo on his own. Inheritance and children give rise to problems that waste more time when the legitimacy of a marriage is still questioned. This article intends to show how marriage is undermined and compromised by *vat-en-sit* unions and cohabitation. Luhanga (2016a, 1-2) reports about a recent incident when a certain Aaron (whose wife died in 2002) is being summoned to pay lobolo presently, as the family felt disrespected and articulated that the spirit of the dead will not rest in peace until that is done.

There is a heated debate about lobolo and whether the custom should be continued or discontinued today. The author’s opinion is that avoiding *vat-en-sit* relationships by allowing the lobolo process to take place, is the right thing that every black African couple should aim at. It is a good thing to have more people like Orkney Kgopa and Ntholeng Matlomelo, who are painfully looking for their families to come and help them out of the *vat-en-sit* misery, by negotiating their lobolo (Muranga and Mokwena (2016, 1). This is because many people think lobolo is outdated or has been commercialised and should no longer be negotiated. In contrast, this article argues that lobolo is a proud custom of African black people; that it should be treasured and safeguarded. The importance of this custom is highlighted by the proposed norm to settle lobolo even when the woman concerned is dead. It is a tradition and an integral part of African black identity, and without it that identity will be diminished. It does not matter that some people discredit, ignore and even undermine this custom; it is an African tradition that should be embraced by the African people. It is prejudicial to use Western standards to undermine and devalue an African tradition. The irreplaceability of the custom is emphasised, as accentuated by Williams (2012) who argues that as Africans we do not need to change into being something else.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT AMOUNT FOR LOBOLO?

Lobolo is traditionally known as a custom where the family of the husband-to-be will present a bridal gift to the family of the wife-to-be in asking her hand in marriage. For Mawere and Mawere (2010, 3) this custom functioned as a safeguard against marital dissolution, since it would need to be repaid upon divorce (Bere-Chekara in Meekers 1993). This is one of the most difficult questions about lobolo, because the amount varies from tribe to tribe and family to family. However, there are guidelines that may be followed to determine how much lobolo should be paid. Of course the amount also depends on the kind of family of the woman. In his article entitled “The real cost of lobola”, Nkabinde (2015) states that the price varies depending on the

bride’s culture – it is relatively high among the Zulu people. In KwaZulu-Natal the typical bridewealth is normally 11 cows, but the prices of cows can vary considerably, depending on the seller. According to Nkabinde (2015, 2) there are greedy families that demand exorbitant sums of money, as in the case of Robert Matsaneng, whose wife and children have been taken away from him because he would not pay lobolo amounting to R65 000. If a man failed to pay the required amount, Xhosas would withhold the woman (their daughter) from marrying. This practice is called *theleka*. Tsonga speakers say: *Lobola n’wananga anga heli*. This simply means that even if the agreed amount has not been paid in full, the marriage can go ahead, because the son-in-law will pay when he has the money (Baloyi 2014a, 138). This comes from the understanding that marriage is meant to build relationships between the families, hence lobolo cannot be used as a hindrance. The idiom connects well with the saying: “*Mukon’wana I nyonga ya ndlopfu* (The family in-law is the hip of an elephant), meaning that one does not forget to help a father or mother in law because they gave you your wife (Junod 1978, 2003). The son-in-law signs an undertaking (these days) that he will pay the rest of the lobolo when he can. In some families the price of an educated girl is higher, but in other families the girl’s level of education makes no difference to the price (Dlanga 2010, 1).

What should be understood is that there are families who regard lobolo as a benefit, while others understand that it is a way of forging family relationships. How lobolo is viewed depends on the type of family as well as its community. The author agrees with Moganedi (2012, 1) that it is unacceptable to demand more lobolo because the woman has attended a very good school or is educated. Families would not accept less lobolo when a highly educated man marries a woman who is not so highly educated. The bottom line is that many communities do not have a fixed amount of lobolo to be paid, but of course a reasonable number of cattle or good amount of money is required (Ngema 2013, 2).

It is important to acknowledge the school of thought that questions the validity and relevance of lobolo among black South Africans today. A blog entitled “Is lobola still relevant?” (News24 2013, 1) shows that there are people who want the custom to be abolished. For many years Westerners have argued that the paying of lobolo should be stopped; and it is argued that this view is the result of missionary thinking that has demonised black culture. Although the current article does not focus widely on black culture, it is important for the author to mention that lobolo forms part of the identity of black people, and without lobolo the identity is incomplete. The issue now is not to address the abuse and the misunderstanding of the custom, but to state frankly that traditional practices like lobolo should be upheld because they benefit the black community. Those who judge the custom should enter into a conversation with those who hold the custom in high esteem because it is their pride. It is for this reason that Baloyi’s (2014b) work entitled “Paying lobolo when my wife dies” has become important in the lobolo debate.

THE VAT-EN-SIT PROBLEM

Undermining the African concept of marriage

Gunga (2009, 173) is correct in saying the following:

Payment of bridewealth by a husband is a demonstration that the man has come of age, and has not only the capability to support himself and his wife, but also the level of commitment recognized to sustain the marriage. Acceptance of the bridewealth signifies the families’ recognition, authentication, support and blessing of the union, and seals it in life and in death.

Africans do not only expect marriage to take place, they also make plans to ensure that the marriage will endure. The sustenance, commitment and authentication of marriage have been and still are very important. When lobolo is paid in a Tsonga-speaking community, the woman in question is called in and asked by elders: *Xana hi dya xuma lexi ke, xana u ta ya tshama eka vukati lebyi ke?* (Do you guarantee that we can use this money, since you are going to stay in this marriage?) This question is always asked before the woman’s parents may take the money, and the woman is expected to answer it in the presence of everyone in the house. Lobolo is often called a payment, but the reality is that it has never been a payment – it is a token of gratitude to the woman’s parents. That is why it would be more acceptable and correct to call lobolo a gift of gratitude (Keil and Delitzsch 1992, 132). The problem is that whenever the word “payment” is used, lobolo is downgraded to the level of a sales transaction. This is sometimes used as an argument against lobolo. This echoes Moganedi’s (2012, 1) view that the term “payment” may imply that lobolo is paid to conclude a business deal.

For the reader to understand this, it is important in the first place to understand that an African marriage is both a family and a community affair. In African communities we celebrate together as much as we mourn together. When neighbours or relatives are invited to participate in lobolo negotiations, it is expected that they would in turn invite you to participate in negotiations when their son or daughter intends to marry. This is called *xandla famba xandla vuya* in Tsonga. Every wedding in Africa ends with a party, a celebration and the coming together of the families, clans and the villagers. This is where the family attain its dignity and respect from fellow villagers.

On 29 December 2015 the author attended a family meeting during which lobolo was received for one of the relatives. Something remarkable happened there: when the final payment had been dropped on the table, it was followed by ululations and celebration, symbolising that it was a time when the right thing had been done. Young and old started dancing and singing songs of appreciation. Then the members of the two families started exchanging beer and other drinks. Statements like *Uhi endle vanhu and awu hi nyumisanga* (you made us people, you did not embarrass us) were directed to the newly married couple. This is an indication that the family would have felt dehumanised and embarrassed if the couple had just moved in together in a

vat-en-sit union. The parents and the entire community were proud because the man and woman would get married according to their customs.

Sizani (2013) tells about a woman who has demonstrated a high regard for the African traditional way of marrying, because it is dignified and society respects it. She is quoted as saying: “Many men wanted to have sex with me, but I told them that a man who wants to sleep with me should pay lobola first.” Although some would say she was only “playing hard to get”, the woman is to be commended. Traditionally this was how things worked in black Africans communities. Currie (1994) argues that many women who have been contracted to their husband through cohabitation do not feel married; they feel ashamed when they are invited to families where lobolo has been paid according to custom. Baloyi (2012) and Dlamini (1991) are in full agreement that the African marriage is only rendered valid when the lobolo issue has been put to rest. Thatcher (2009, 2) agrees that cohabitation has weakened the connection between marriage and parenthood since the 1970s.

IRRESPONSIBLE DOMINATION AND ABUSE

Curran and Bonthuys (2004) report that a woman said the following to them during an interview: “The nurse said that since I was not married to my partner, there was nothing she could do to stop the abuse. Her attitude was negative. She told her colleagues that I was a fool to stay with a man I was not married to.” This was after the abused concubine sought help from one of the relatives.

It has long been argued that one of the negative effects of lobolo payment is that it subjects the wife to abuse and violence. Baloyi (2010) states that this view is echoed by scholars like Waruta and Kinoti (1994, 105), Wasike and Waruta (2000, 125), Turaki (1999, 107) and others. A man once asked: “I do not understand why I am arrested for beating my own wife because I paid lobolo for her” (Baloyi 2010, 60). This article proposes the exact opposite, namely that women suffer abuse when lobolo has not been paid. Most of the gender-based violence and abuse result because the man feels no responsibility towards his concubine, and he feels no responsibility because no agreements have been reached between the couple’s families. The man may be tempted to abuse the woman because he knows that she has been disowned by her family since she has not followed customs. When a Tsonga speaker says, “*A nga humanga hi khoru*” (she did not use the right gate, or she went through the backdoor), he or she implies that even a visit from the woman’s parents and siblings may be difficult.

Parental involvement to restore peace may be absent when the unmarried couple fight, because the parents do not approve of the *vat-en-sit* union and do not want to get involved in its difficulties. Mistrust develops more easily between an unmarried couple than a married couple. Baloyi quotes the reporter Mavundza (in Baloyi 2014a, 138): “A young woman fears her ex-boyfriend is going to knife her

after beating her up for suspecting that she might be having an affair.” This “jealous boyfriend” was living with this woman without committing to marry her. Magagula and Nkhwashu (2013) write about an unmarried lover who was killed and buried in a shallow grave. The author’s argument is not that married people cannot mistrust or even kill each other, but that it is easier for unmarried people to mistrust and kill because they are not as committed to each other as married couples. Sekai (2013) quotes an angry family who found out that their unmarried daughter who had been missing was pregnant and staying with a man in town: “You have already used her without paying a cent. This girl is a flower. But look at her now; she is big, *atokurirwa nenhumbu*. And today, you say, go away, what will she do except return home? If you really want her, you will follow us back to the village and pay the lobola.” Parents often find that their daughters are abused because they are in a *vat-en-sit* relationship and not in a committed marriage.

OWNERSHIP OF CHILDREN

There is a strong bond between lobolo and children’s identity in the African context. Gunga (2009, 172) indicates that when a spouse in the Luo community dies, an investigation is immediately launched to determine whether the deceased has been properly married according to customs. In African tribes the legitimacy of children is determined by the lobolo. According to News/Crime Courts (2011, 1) two Pretoria families were at war because two young children had been removed from their father’s care because of unpaid lobolo. An investigation into the legitimacy of a marriage in accordance with traditional customs would help the family to determine whether the children belong to the family of the deceased or not. The status of the union is usually disputed when the man has died and the family starts negotiating inheritance-related issues. This is also why children that are born even after the death of the husband are named after him, unless the lobolo has been returned.

One of the reasons why a woman is forced into a levirate marriage (a type of marriage in which the brother of a deceased man is obliged to marry his brother’s widow) is that she is still legally married to the family of the deceased. The Global Widows Report (2015) argues: “Preventing remarriage is important because the children of the widow are considered to be the direct preservers of the dead husband’s family line, and therefore must be kept within the family.” Many widows are not allowed to keep their children if they refuse to marry the brother of the deceased in the family. This is meant to prevent her from marrying outside the family, and to encourage her to marry a brother or close relative of the deceased. If there is no one in the family of the deceased who can marry the widow, it is accepted that the family would keep the widow for the sake of the children while she would be allowed to continue bearing other children in the name of her late husband (The Global Widow Report 2015, 2).

Trivedi, Himashu and Mohan (2009, 3) state that upon a remarriage that has not been approved by the family of the deceased, the widow may be required to relinquish custody of her children as well as any property rights that she may have. The main reason for this is that since her dead husband paid lobolo or married her properly, she is still under the control of his family. Children from the legitimate marriage are likely to receive support from their father’s family; hence lobolo determines the destiny of the children. Kaganas and Murray (1991, 130) argue that once the brideprice has been paid, the husband’s family has absolute rights to any children borne by the wife. This argument is supported by Burman (1991, 38), who indicates that after the brideprice has been settled, the progeny remains part of husband’s family, even if conceived (in a subsequent marriage) after the husband’s death. If the man has not paid lobolo and the couple divorce, the man will not be allowed to claim the children as his (Nyirongo, 1997, 114). It is important to note that in many African tribes the lobolo payment entrusted the man with custody of the children from the union-rights to genetic inheritance (Mawere and Mawere, 2010, 226).

POOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Whenever an African couple experience marital problems, it is recommended that older, experienced people like uncles, aunts and village elders become involved to save the marriage. This practice is jeopardised when lobolo has not been agreed upon by the two families, because the elders would not like to be seen betraying either the parents or the families of the couple. The relationships between the two families involved often deteriorate because they have not approved or agreed upon the marriage. It is reported that the members of two families from one village could not greet one another; the families hated each other because a young man from one family cohabited with a daughter from the other family. The couple was regarded as traitors of *ndhavuko* (tradition) by the community. Even though Kathide (2007, 108) and Nhlapo (1991, 135) agree that the extended family relationships sometimes serve to subordinate the interests of the woman, Baloyi (2014a, 30) and Van der Walt (1991, 10) are in agreement that the extended family judgements are sometimes honest and helpful. Many marriages are saved because the decision to separate or divorce a wife or husband is not an individual matter; older, experienced members of the family are involved in decision-making about the marriage. Although this is not the focus of the study, it is helpful to understand that only when lobolo has been agreed upon will the parents and other elders attempt to reconcile differences in the marriage. While many women’s families in Zimbabwe will report a man’s family to their chief for failing to pay lobolo (Staff Reporter 2015, 1), some families in South Africa are forced to pay lobolo (when the wife dies) before they are allowed to bury her (Baloyi 2014b). This is one area which depicts the poor relationships that exist between families because lobolo is not paid in accordance with accepted customs.

In such instances, the bad blood that exists between families impedes the spirit of Ubuntu, which should characterise African village life. It should be known that when two families are at loggerheads, members of the clan as well as the families’ communities become involved.

LACK OF COMMITMENT INTO A MARRIAGE

It has been evident in more than one way that whenever lobolo has not been paid, the commitment to such a relationship is usually poorer. That is why some women who are in a *vat-en-sit* relationship do not feel married. One woman, in a heated court case of a killed boyfriend, defended her cheating life that compelled Mr Buthelezi (the former boyfriend) to kill her new boyfriend, by saying that she “cheated on Buthelezi because he did not own her” since lobolo was not yet paid. When Mr Buthelezi argued that he paid R75 000 for lobolo, the woman went on indicating that he only bought rings with the money, but had not paid lobolo as yet (Dlamini 2016, 8). On the question of commitment some may still argue that no amount of money can be equated with commitment. This is relevant to issues like when a young man under circumstances like unemployment and lack of enough money to marry, fails to meet the needs. Although I view this as future research on its own, in the context of this article it must be understood that lobolo is a negotiation and not a payment. Those who made it a binding payment before marriage misunderstood the tradition. It evolves around the fact that amongst the Tsongas in particular, the two families can reach an agreement to marry the couple, while it will be expected that whenever they have money they will bring it. In Tsonga such arrangement is under “*lovola n’wanaga anga heli*,” meaning lobolo is a practice that cannot reach an end. I will, however, elaborate on this in future research about the topic.

PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND ADVICE

The theology of marriage unions in a black African context should prevail. The acknowledgement of customary marriages by the South African Constitution, among others, should help black people to realise that their way of doing things when marrying is not discarded. Secondly, the Bible never prohibits practices like lobolo, therefore black Africans can take pride in moving this tradition forward. The author does not equate lobolo to the biblical dowry, but since the dowry was accepted and established in the ancient Near East, Africans may legalise their marriages in a similar way without being judged by any other culture. Honouring fathers and mothers, as we are instructed to do in Exodus 20, does not exclude taking instructions and advice on marital issues. A *vat-en-sit* union is a form of rebellion against parents who want marriage to be agreed upon by two families. It is the duty of theology, among other things, to emphasise the importance of marriage vows which lead to and strengthen

commitment. There is no single biblical justification for premarital sex or living together unmarried (1 Corinthians 6:9 & 10; Matthew 15:19; Leviticus 18:20). I am in full agreement with Ngudu (2014, 2) who argues that the pastor who intends to be a marriage officer should meet with the couple and their family (or representatives) to explain his role and responsibility. His role may also include assisting them in understanding lobolo as a gift and a token of appreciation. This may even help those who are commercialising the practice.

One lady was quoted (in Tembe 2010, 74) saying: “Traditionally, Beattie is correct to say that lobola legalises the marriage whilst the born-again Christians believe that only the blessing of the couple by God legalises the marriage.” The Bible says: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless He guards the city the guard keeps watch in vain” (Psalm 127:1)” (Tembe 2010, 75). The author’s contends that the statement is clouded with a distorted understanding of what African marriage is all about. The verse is misquoted, because even in the ancient biblical times in which the Psalm was written, a particular context determined the marriages of the time. For example, the dowry of Old Testament marriages was never disregarded by the Jews of the time. It can be argued that being a born-again Christian does detract from being an African. If there is nothing sinful about lobolo, there is no reason why it should be discarded and demonised. I am in full agreement with Opoku (2012) that the unhesitating condemnation or demonisation of African culture, even by the churches founded by Africans, is very strong. This stems from the notion that the African cultural environment was regarded as a *tabula rasa* on which missionaries had to inscribe whatever they thought about Africans. It would be wrong to use being born again as a reason to undermine one’s own culture, particularly where the culture has done nothing wrong. The author’s understanding of lobolo is basically that it is a token of appreciation and gratitude, which are Christian elements. Ngudu (2014, 1) is correct in saying that Western statutory laws of marriage have succeeded in making the African traditional norms irrelevant. The author’s reminder would be to ask those people who use Christianity to avoid paying lobolo to read the story of Jacob, who served seven years for Rachel, as told in Genesis 29.

Marriage counsellors and pastors should look for a way of working together with parents in getting their children married. Parents should not only expect pastoral involvement when the wedding is close. Likewise, pastors should not distance themselves from marriage arrangements and wait only for the wedding day. Pastors and parents should journey together right from the start of marriage preparations. Even though it is the constitutional right of young people over the age of 18 to marry without the consent of their parents, pastors and marriage counsellors should not use that as an excuse to allow young couples to live together unmarried. They should encourage young people to do the right thing and discourage wrong behaviour.

Parents should also teach their children at a young age about their marriage traditions to prevent *vat-en-sit* unions.

The Bible teaches that sex before marriage is a sin. The church must not shy away from this teaching. Not only are trial marriages most likely to end in separation, but the Bible also calls such unions infidelity (Thatcher 2009, 2). The church and other institutions must fulfil the mandate to restore the morality of people. Wells (1997, 179) writes about the American moral state saying: “Today, the Church finds itself in the midst of a culture whose moral fabric is rotting and whose spirit is troubled.” There has been a quest for moral regeneration in South Africa for many years, and sexual immorality is one of the biggest challenges facing the country. The author agrees with Kunhiyop (2008, 71) that the church should touch every aspect of life and avoid disjointing, dichotomising or compartmentalising the true teaching if it wishes to teach people in totality.

CULTURALLY ENRICHED SEX EDUCATION

A long time ago, even before the arrival of Western civilisation and its theologies, Africans had their own ways of regulating marriages, including teaching their young boys and girls to respect sex before and outside marriage. When the discussion about sex education begins, many people are wrongly convinced that sexual conduct has to comply with the Western culture. It has always been said that black Africans relegate sexual matters to the bedroom of older married people, and it is taboo for parents to talk to their children about sex. This statement can be contested, because traditional circumcision schools teach boys about sex. At a certain age boys are taken to the initiation school in the bush, while girls are initiated around the home. (The fact that boys are taken to the bush illustrates that men will always be expected to work or spend much of their time outside the home, where they will face many challenges, even sexual challenges.) At initiation schools, young men are prepared to become men and they are taught about sex and marriage. This is just a brief argument to indicate that Africans do not disregard the issue of children’s sex education; they just approach it differently than Westerners. Aunts spend a lot of time with girls and educate them about marriage and sex. Although discussions about sex and marriage may start when children are quite young, puberty is regarded as the right time for sex education. Even though schools and other educational institutions may take some responsibility for sex education, parents should not underestimate the importance of the culture-based sex education. Aunts and uncles may take responsibility for this in a home situation, and may teach children the values and customs that we as Africans need to uphold, including lobolo. Our children’s sex education needs to be shaped by our own customs and traditions, and taboos and sayings from Africa help us to teach the young ones. The whole community should ensure that our children assimilate good morals. As our forefathers said: “When a thorn gets into a toe, the

whole body bends to pull it out” (Opoku 2012), meaning that we need our communal togetherness to rid ourselves of practices that are foreign to our culture, like staying together unmarried.

The recent heated debate about virginity tests cannot be addressed without acknowledging traditional sex education among black South Africans. One of the incentives used to encourage girls to keep their virginity in KwaZulu-Natal is a bursary (see the report entitled “Girls be warned: Lose your virginity, lose your bursary” by Khosa [2016, 1]). This bursary has been offered by the UThukela District Municipality in a bid to encourage young girls to keep their virginity until they are married. Despite growing criticism from some politicians and gender activists, the UThukela mayor Dudu Mazibuko insists that the engagements are now at an advanced stage because the community supports the idea, and there is interest from other countries outside South Africa to fund this scheme (Motha 2016, 7). The bursaries may be criticised, but their main aim is to encourage young girls not to become involved in casual sex that might be detrimental to their education and their future.

CONCLUSION

Unions in which lobolo has not been agreed upon have always been regarded as invalid by African people. That is why disownment of daughters – who involve themselves in such unions – is made even worse by forcing husbands to pay lobolo when their wives have died. *Vat-en-sit* relationships do not only disregard parents, but also contravene biblical teachings that forbid sex before or outside marriage. Conflict between families and claims over children become a disgusting and unexpected issue if a mother dies before the husband has paid lobolo. Women are abused because *vat-en-sit* unions lack commitment; some women in such unions have even been killed. It is, therefore, the duty of theology to ensure that African youths are made aware of the importance of doing the right thing in the eyes of their parents and God before they get married. Pastoral involvement is necessary to help our communities understand the dangers of ignoring lobolo, and to encourage them to embrace lobolo as it plays an important role in healthy family and community life.

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