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Violence in the family

The polygamous family in Cameroon

topics:

- violence in families
- structure of family in Cameroon
- problems of polygamy

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The African continent has not been spared the problems of profound crises which shake the very foundations of human relationships. Ever since the beginning of time, crises have been dealt with and resolved within the families themselves. And the present political, cultural, religious and socio-economic situation once again imposes on the members of the family, the immediate parents, the Church (the Pastor and his wife and the whole congregation) the heavy task of accompanying the relatives who are experiencing difficulties. The methods used so far have been those of proximity, a tender, sympathetic and understanding ear, confrontation between the protagonist and, finally, narration which reflects the point of view of the person who is complaining.

If we have found ourselves exercising more or less empirically a ministry which was not ours initially, it is due to the lack or, more exactly, the limitations of structures, the lack of institutions and the lack of a literature which could have helped us to act in the same way as it is done in the countries of the North. The limited means put at the disposal of everyone tend to tremendously curb the intervention of specialists.

Before I continue with this presentation, I wish to express our gratitude to the organizers of this important seminar. They have not hesitated, in spite of the numerous difficulties – financial ones, ones of communication, and otherwise – to invite us to come and participate, as an African woman, a Christian, a Pastor's wife confronted with the various forms of violence which are being experienced in the African continent these days.

Violence in the African context

Africa South of the Sahara has for centuries been experiencing the most sordid and abject violence. African history is characterised by slavery, colonisation, neo-colonialism, the systematic and anarchic exploitation of all its resources, diseases and epidemics, wars and genocide, etc... The list goes on and on.

The multiple forms of violence which are rife on the continent at all levels and in all domains can henceforth be analysed, understood and resolved by the theory of René Girard. Africa is experiencing violence; Africa is all violence. If violence is therefore inherent in us or, in other words, if we “are” violence, “all our relationships are governed by a mechanism of imitation and rivalry which continually fuels violence”.

It is necessary to re-read the history of mankind. And Professor James Newton Poling raised the issue rightly.¹ All human and social sciences ought to question themselves. The deterioration of social and family values, the lack of a clear distinction between Good and Evil which we are witnessing in our societies (said to be heading towards modernity) provoke violence in everybody. Nothing and nobody are spared. If there were still to be a difference between a being said to be “normal”, and another one who would have thoroughly experienced violence, it would only be a matter of degree or opportunity offered to one and not to the other.

Girard’s theory sheds extraordinary light on the problems of our African families. It is based on the discovery of the miracle that “the collective murder of the emissary (victim) brings back calm” (Girard, p. 346). Men are doing everything to perpetuate and renew it by “thinking” it. “Myths, rituals, kinship systems ‘thus’ constitute the first results of this ‘thought’” (p. 346).

In order to give a response to Professor Poling, we particularly got interested in the kinship systems as they enable us to highlight the existence of the “differentiated unity” of our societies. For this purpose, we have dealt with marriage in the polygamous form.

The human relationships which exist in an African polygamous family are extraordinarily diverse and require an analysis deeper than the one we can offer you within the framework of an answer to Professor Poling’s outstanding presentation. It is a network whose complexity is only outmatched by its amazing richness. The management of these relationships requires thorough mastery and intelligence. It would be very imprudent to make any generalisation at this stage.

The structure of a family

In our opinion, conflicts necessarily arise when there is a mismatch between the members, when there is an accumulation of “crises of violence”, “crises of desire”, when all the protagonists aspire to the same thing, when they “desire the same object”. Yet, Cameroonian culture, Islam, and Cameroonian law, allow men to build polygamous families. Within the framework of our reflection, we are going to present you with a rather typical case:

Mr. MBA, 45 years old, a State Employee who was recently “retrenched”, is married to three wives. ADA, the first wife, is 40. When she was getting married to MBA, she was 20 years old. Five years later, as she did not bear any children,

¹ Rose Zoe-Obianga refers to lectures presented at the 11th International Seminar on Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling, which focussed on the question of violence and the theory of René Girard. The lecture of James N. Poling is reprinted in this workbook p. **Fehler! Textmarke nicht definiert.**

MBA decided to take another wife named ONDO. She is the second wife. At the time of the marriage, ONDO was 15 years old and MBA was 30. They have four children: Ella (13), Andémé (11), Essi (9), Mekui (87). A few years later, MBA, aged 43, decided to marry OYAN (18) who gave birth to a child, Olo, who is now 2 years old.

a) According to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, MBA is the head of three "elementary families" defined as one man + one wife + children in the first degree:

- 1) MBA + ADA + 0
- 2) MBA + ONDA + 4 children (Ella, Andémé, Essi, Mekui)
- 3) MBA + OYAN + 1 child (Olo).

b) And these three elementary families engender three special kinds of social relationships:

Parents + Children:

- 1/ MBA + ADA + 0
- 2/ MBA + ONDO + Ella, Andémé, Essi, Mekui
- 3/ MBA + OYAN + Olo
(MBA + ADA + ONDO + OYAN) + (0 + Ella + Andémé + Essi + Mekui + Olo)

Children of the same marriage:

- 1/ Ella + Andémé + Essi + Mekui
- 2/ Olo

Parents:

- 1/ MBA + ADA
- 2/ MBA + ONDO
- 3/ MBA + OYAN

To the above should be added all the collaterals (2nd and 3rd degrees).

The social prohibitions of incest and exogamy mark the three relationships which make up the triple elementary family we are analysing. And as the separation is real between the *alliance*, the *filiation*, the *consanguinity*, all the children of MBA are indiscriminately the children of ADA, of ONDO, of OYAN. Marriage would be forbidden between MBA and all the five children, as well as between the five children themselves.

Diagnosis of violence

When the crisis occurred, that is, when MBA was "retrenched", the network of relationships is already saturated with contained violence. The various unions were already pregnant with traces of imminent violence. We can observe a remarkable and extraordinary play of various levels where desire is outstanding. The rivalry between the protagonists of this type of family stems from all these desires which "converge towards the same object" and "mutually impede one another" (p. 217).

a) *The desire for more positivity*

In getting married successively to three wives who are younger and younger each time, we can talk about Girard's hypothesis of desire. And in the final analysis, this 'desire of the being' which MBA is seeking in his three wives is what they incarnate in his eyes and in their own, that is, the way the women are: the strength of their eternal youth, their beauty, their life. And, on the other end, what he himself is, a man who has succeeded in life and gives proof of it by accumulating so much positivity in his family alone.

With ADA, MBA would not have succeeded in maintaining an abundant life. The birth of ONDO's four children and of OYAN's son puts him back on the track of a future the aspects of which he can control. He will no longer be absent from the future generations. Thanks to their actual youth, ONDO and OYAN recall ADA's previous youth and beauty. And, in accepting them near her and her husband, ADA benefits from this positivity which can still be found in them (ONDO and OYAN) and which is already fading in her (ADA).

b) The consequences

The five children are, par excellence, the expression of any positivity in our societies: youth, beauty, life strength, and hope for the future. If there is a crisis, it is because the threads which maintain the bank in place have suddenly frayed. Money, strength, power, work are shaken in their respective bases. MBA is "re-trenched". He no longer represents anything. He has lost part of his imposing bearing, part of those characteristics which used to make him desirable. And, being aware of this diminishing, he thinks that he is no longer an "object" of desire. His wives and children, in the disarray they experience so dramatically, send back to him the image of a non desired thing, of a non being. Everything is falling apart, the call for help is ringing out.

A rather interesting and curious phenomenon is now occurring. Each wife is going to start to "manage with her own children" and MBA is going to waver between the three elementary families he has raised himself. And, more often than not, the Church closes its eyes, as it is unable to understand what is happening.

Being himself a son from a polygamous family, MBA is perpetuating something he received from his parents. ADA, ONDA and OYAN, three wives who had become desirable for one man alone, bear in their family the seeds of the violence of a mimetic desire. By organising and integrating themselves in the religious community of their town or village, they will defend themselves with all their energy against any shortcomings or weaknesses on the part of MBA, who, as we already have seen, represents the object-being of his wives. The polygamous system therefore maintains, perpetuates and defends itself, although it is absurd to the "modern people" that we are.

Two questions

Following the presentation of the case we are studying, we would like to come back very briefly to two questions raised by Professor Poling: the issue of violence and gender, and the question of the role of Jesus Christ.

a) Who is responsible for polygamy – men or women?

As a matter of fact, this issue has been raised in our country and the discussion is under way. It would appear that when women accept to become a 2nd, a 3rd, etc... wife of a man, they socialise and therefore integrate violence in their relation-

ships. Thus the oppressor and the oppressed seem to delight in such behaviours. The group comprising the wives may, in the face of the man, express a certain type of power; the same also applies to the children who are very often aware of their priceless value to all the parents and the society at large.

b) *The question concerning the role of Jesus* is very relevant to us Africans.

The World Council of Churches recently conducted a world-wide study on “Gospel and Cultures”. Africans have strongly affirmed the value of their cultures, even though they recognise that the Gospel can enlighten and even transform them. It is therefore up to us to make a choice as Professor Poling has rightly demonstrated. In the case of a polygamous marriage, it is possible for us to steer clear of a network whose negativity we quite know.

Deep inside himself MBA must know that he cannot become younger by getting married to so many younger and younger wives, by begetting so many children. He is very much aware of the fact that he is not strengthening himself in any way by accumulating so many young forces within his family. Yet, as we have already said, the desire is there, alongside the object we have referred to as positivity and which MBA and all his wives – who are all his accomplices – are seeking relentlessly.

Professor Poling’s honesty and humility must be underscored. He leaves the door open to the only God capable of redemption when we no longer understand anything, when we cannot find a solution to an important problem such as that of violence within a polygamous family. On the Cross, Christ said: “Forgive them, for they know not what they do”.