Changing Marriage and Wedding Dimensions in 21st Century Africa

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ABSTRACT

The study of marriage and weddings in Africa today necessitates a multidimensional approach that considers historical antecedents, cultural diversity, economic influence, legal frameworks, and the impact of global cultural flows. With Africa housing over 3,000 distinct ethnic groups and languages, marital practices are far from being homogenous. They are deeply embedded in specific social, ethnic, and religious traditions (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2020; Nwoye, 2019). There is growing evidence of convergence toward shared practices influenced by postmodernism and digital culture (Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023). The article explores these dimensions in depth, examining how African societies are negotiating the evolving meanings and functions of marriage and weddings in the 21st century. The article begins by offering a historical overview of African marital traditions, then systematically unpacks the cultural, religious, economic, legal, and technological dimensions that shape marriage and wedding practices across different African regions in the 21st century. The article draws on recent scholarly literature and case studies to demonstrate both persistent cultural tenets and emerging transformations.

Keywords: Marriage, Wedding, Africa, Tradition, Kinship

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in Africa remains a central institution of social organization, identity, and cultural continuity. While the foundational aspects of African marriages have persisted across generations, the 21st century has ushered in transformative changes shaped by globalization, technology, shifting gender dynamics, and legal reforms. These evolving dynamics have not only redefined marriage practices but have also recast the symbolism, structure, and socio-economic implications of weddings across the continent (Adebanwi, 2021; Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2020). The intersection of traditional norms with modern realities presents a complex landscape where continuity and change coexist, prompting scholars to revisit and reinterpret the meaning of marriage in contemporary African societies. Marriage is not merely a private affair; it plays a crucial role in determining access to social resources, legitimacy of offspring, inheritance rights, and kinship affiliations (Therborn, 2006). Accordingly, any shift in the structure or symbolism of marriage and weddings has far-reaching implications for family systems and social cohesion. While traditional African societies prioritized communal values, kinship obligations, and economic exchanges such as bride price, contemporary trends indicate the increasing importance of individual choice, romantic love, legal recognition, and consumer-driven ceremonies (Chitando & Mateveke, 2021; Ekechi, 2022).

Historical Overview of Marriage in Africa

Historically, marriage in Africa has functioned as both a social contract and a strategic alliance, transcending the union of two individuals to involve extended families and entire communities. Precolonial African societies regarded marriage as a vital institution for the reproduction of society, the consolidation of inter-family alliances, and the preservation of lineage and heritage (Goody, 1973; Mair, 1969). The structure of these marriages was shaped by the socio-cultural values of kinship, clan systems, and customary laws which varied significantly across ethnic and geographic lines. In many African cultures, marriage traditionally involved polygyny, whereby men could marry multiple wives to signify wealth, increase labor productivity, and ensure lineage continuity, especially in agrarian economies (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Ezeh et al., 2020). Women's roles in marriage were often closely linked to reproduction, domestic labor, and maintaining household harmony, while men were

expected to provide security and economic stability. These roles were not merely gendered but were embedded in cultural logic that emphasized complementarity and collective responsibility (Mbiti, 1991; Nzegwu, 2006).

The institution of bridewealth or bride price was a central element in traditional marriage systems, serving both symbolic and functional purposes. It validated the marriage, legitimized children born into the union, and compensated the bride's family for the loss of labor and reproductive capacity (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde, 1950; Osei-Tutu, 2023). Although frequently criticized by modern rights advocates as commodifying women, scholars argue that in traditional African contexts, bridewealth was more about social reciprocity and alliance-building than economic transaction (Ansell, 2001; Mangena & Ndlovu, 2020). Colonialism profoundly altered African marriage systems by introducing Western legal codes and Christian moral frameworks. These colonial interventions often delegitimized indigenous marital forms, especially polygyny, while promoting Christian monogamous unions as the legal and moral standard (Merry, 2005; Meek, 1950). The colonial state's codification of marriage into customary and statutory categories resulted in dual systems that continue to shape marital practices in postcolonial African states (Bennett, 2011; Moore, 2019).

In post-independence Africa, the influence of Christianity, Islam, and Western education further reshaped marriage ideals. The rise of nuclear family models, increased mobility, urbanization, and formal employment challenged the extended family structures that had underpinned traditional marriage arrangements (Obbo, 1980; van de Walle & Meekers, 2004). Nevertheless, customary marriage practices remain resilient in many rural and peri-urban areas, albeit often adapted to modern exigencies (Adebowale, 2022; Akintunde & Adedokun, 2021).

Cultural Dimensions

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the form, meaning, and rituals of marriage and weddings across Africa. In the 21st century, cultural continuity coexists with change, as young Africans negotiate identities and relationships within both indigenous and globalized cultural frameworks. Marriage is often a deeply cultural rite that signals the transition into adulthood and consolidates social identity and status (Nwoye, 2019). Despite the continent's vast diversity, certain cultural themes recur, including the importance of family involvement, symbolic rituals, community participation, and rites of passage. Among the most prominent cultural practices is the lobola or bride price, which is still widely practiced in Southern and parts of East Africa. This practice, which involves the transfer of wealth (often in cattle or cash) from the groom's family to the bride's family, symbolizes appreciation and helps legitimize the union (Mangena & Ndlovu, 2020; Osei-Tutu, 2023). While critics argue that lobola commodifies women and reinforces patriarchy, proponents maintain that it affirms social cohesion and creates inter-family bonds, particularly in societies where collective welfare is prioritized over individualism (Ansell, 2001; Akintunde, 2022).

Despite growing liberalism in some quarters, cultural conservatism remains strong in many African societies, particularly concerning marital norms such as monogamy, polygamy, same-sex relationships, and divorce. For example, polygamous marriages, while declining in frequency, still hold cultural legitimacy in numerous communities, particularly in West Africa and among certain Muslim and traditionalist populations (Ezeh et al., 2020). The tension between cultural values and modern legal-ethical frameworks around gender equality and personal autonomy makes marriage a site of both cultural preservation and contestation. Moreover, wedding rituals often reflect ethnic diversity. For instance, the Yoruba traditional engagement ceremony (introduction) is steeped in symbolic exchanges, prayers, and communal dancing, while the Shona marriage rite in Zimbabwe incorporates the roora (bridewealth) negotiation and beer rituals (dare) that engage elders from both families (Gombe, 2021; Ncube, 2019). These ceremonies are not only performative but also serve as mechanisms for cultural transmission, reinforcing intergenerational continuity and community norms.

Religious and Traditional Influences

Religion and tradition remain two of the most enduring influences on marriage and wedding practices in Africa. With Christianity, Islam, and indigenous belief systems deeply embedded across the continent, marriage is often regarded not only as a legal or social contract but also as a spiritual covenant. The religious dimensions of marriage confer sacred legitimacy on unions and guide the moral expectations and roles of spouses within the marital framework (Obadare, 2022; Gifford, 2020).

Christianity, which is dominant in large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Southern, Central, and East Africa, often emphasizes monogamy, chastity before marriage, and the sanctity of the marital bond. Christian weddings typically involve a church ceremony, officiated by a pastor or priest, and the reading of marriage vows that symbolize divine endorsement of the union (Burgess, 2021; Chitando, 2020). The influence of Pentecostalism, in particular, has grown considerably and has reshaped perceptions of ideal Christian marriages to include notions of prosperity, spiritual compatibility, and divine favor (Maxwell, 2006; Biri, 2022). In some circles, religious leaders wield significant influence over marital decisions, sometimes acting as counselors, moral gatekeepers, or even matchmakers.

Islam, which is prevalent in North and West Africa and parts of East Africa, upholds its own marital traditions derived from the Qur'an and Hadith. Islamic marriages typically involve a nikah (marriage contract), which must be witnessed and include a mahr (bridal gift) given to the bride. Polygamy is permissible under Islamic law, provided that husbands are just and capable of supporting multiple wives (Sylla, 2021; Ahmed, 2022). In many Muslim communities, Sharia-based legal systems operate alongside national civil law, often complicating the status of marriage and divorce, especially for women. Yet, as Muslim women across Africa gain access to education and employment, they are increasingly questioning and renegotiating their marital rights within the framework of Islamic teachings (Nasir, 2021; Abubakar, 2023).

Traditional African religions also maintain a stronghold in many communities, where marriage is viewed as an ancestral and communal covenant. In these belief systems, the union of a couple is sanctioned not just by the living but by the spirits of the ancestors, who are believed to oversee the moral order of society (Mbiti, 1991; Gombe, 2021). Rituals involving libations, animal sacrifices, and consultations with spiritual intermediaries are common in traditional marriage ceremonies, especially in rural areas. These practices underscore the belief that marriage is not solely about the couple but about harmonizing the spiritual, social, and familial domains.

Interfaith and inter-religious marriages present unique challenges in contemporary Africa. While some families and religious institutions permit them, others oppose such unions due to concerns about doctrinal purity and cultural dilution. In societies like Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, interfaith marriages have sometimes sparked controversy, with couples facing resistance from both communities and religious leaders (Oladosu, 2020; Kalu, 2018). However, younger generations, especially in urban centers, are increasingly crossing these boundaries, viewing religious diversity as surmountable with mutual respect and compromise.

Moreover, the growing influence of religious organizations in marriage counseling and premarital education has contributed to changing attitudes toward marital preparation. Many churches and mosques now require couples to undergo formal counseling sessions that cover financial planning, communication, sexuality, and child-rearing—all within the framework of religious morality (Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2020; Burgess, 2021). This trend reflects an institutionalization of religion in not just solemnizing but also shaping the quality and longevity of marital relationships.

Postmodernism and Urbanisation Effects

Postmodernism AND urbanization have profoundly reshaped the landscape of marriage and weddings in Africa, particularly over the past two decades. These twin forces have not only transformed how individuals perceive marriage but have also altered marital norms, partner selection processes, and ceremonial practices. As more Africans migrate to urban areas, engage with global cultures, and pursue formal education and employment, the traditional foundations of marriage are being redefined (Adebowale, 2022; Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2023). Urbanization facilitates exposure to diverse worldviews and lifestyles, which tend to favor individualism, romantic love, and companionate marriage over kinship-based, arranged unions. In rural communities, marriages have historically been collective arrangements, often negotiated by families and elders with an emphasis on social obligation and lineage continuation (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2020). However, in urban settings, young people are increasingly prioritizing personal choice and emotional compatibility when selecting life partners (Chitando & Mateveke, 2021; Ekechi, 2022). This shift has contributed to the growing prevalence of delayed marriages, as individuals pursue educational and career goals before settling down.

The age at first marriage is rising across many African countries, particularly in urban areas. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2023), the average age at first marriage has increased by 2–4 years over the past two decades in countries such as Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa. This trend is attributed to increased access to education, particularly for women, and greater participation in the labor market, which collectively foster economic independence and delay marital commitments (Mutua et al., 2022). While delayed marriage may expand individual autonomy, it has also generated tension with older generations who continue to view early marriage as essential to cultural continuity and reproductive stability. Postmodernism is redefining wedding aesthetics and spending patterns. Urban weddings, especially among the middle and upper classes, are now highly stylized events that blend traditional customs with Western formalities, fashion trends, and media spectacle. The rise of the "wedding industry" across African cities—characterized by professional event planners, bridal expos, beauty services, and destination venues—demonstrates how weddings have become both social performances and economic ventures (Amadiume, 2021; Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023). These developments reflect not only changing tastes but also the symbolic importance of weddings as public displays of status, cultural hybridity, and aspirational lifestyles.

Technological modernization has further influenced marriage and courtship practices. The proliferation of mobile phones, dating apps, and social media platforms has enabled urban youth to form romantic relationships outside of traditional social circles and parental oversight. Research by Akinyemi and Isiugo-Abanihe (2020) shows that digital communication is now central to courtship, especially in cities like Lagos, Nairobi, and Johannesburg, where geographic and social mobility complicates face-to-face interaction. Online platforms have facilitated new forms of intimacy and transnational connections, including long-distance and diasporic relationships, though they also raise concerns about deception, short-termism, and marital instability (Obadare, 2022; Nasir, 2021). Moreover, urbanization contributes to the diversification of marriage forms, including civil marriages, cohabitation, and in some contexts, same-sex unions. While many African governments do not legally recognize same-sex marriages, there is a growing presence of LGBTQ+ communities in urban areas who challenge dominant heteronormative frameworks and advocate for legal reforms (Ekine & Abbas, 2013; Epprecht, 2014). Similarly, cohabitation without formal marriage, previously stigmatized, is gaining acceptance among young urban couples who wish to test compatibility or avoid the financial burden of elaborate weddings (Mutua et al., 2022). These practices signal shifting norms around partnership, family formation, and sexual autonomy.

At the same time, postmodernism and urbanization have introduced new challenges. Economic instability in urban settings is delay marriage or lead to marital strain, especially when expectations around financial readiness, housing, and lifestyle are high. Intra-urban class divisions mean that while some couples enjoy modern wedding luxuries, others struggle to meet even the minimal cultural obligations required for traditional rites (Akintunde & Adedokun, 2021). Additionally, the erosion of extended family systems in cities weakens the social support structures that traditionally helped couples manage conflict, child-rearing, and resource sharing (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2020; Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2023).

Despite these complexities, modernization and urbanization have also opened up possibilities for more egalitarian and negotiated marital relationships. With both partners increasingly contributing to household income and decision-making, there is a gradual shift toward more democratic models of marital interaction, particularly among urban and educated populations (Korieh, 2021; Chitando, 2020). Nevertheless, entrenched gender norms and cultural expectations often persist, creating tensions between modern aspirations and traditional obligations.

Economic Dimensions

Economic factors have long shaped the institution of marriage in Africa, and their influence has grown even more pronounced in the 21st century. From the determination of marriage eligibility to the form and grandeur of wedding ceremonies, economic considerations are interwoven with cultural and social expectations. Among the most enduring and contentious economic components of marriage is the bride price—also referred to as lobola, roora, or mahari in various regions. Bride price is a customary practice involving the transfer of goods, money, or livestock from the groom's family to the bride's family as part of the marriage transaction. While its

meaning has evolved, the economic dimension of bride price continues to influence marriage patterns, gender relations, and marital stability across the continent (Ansell, 2001; Mangena & Ndlovu, 2020).

In traditional African societies, bride price served multiple functions. It acted as a symbol of goodwill, established social bonds between families, and compensated the bride's family for the loss of her labor and reproductive capacities (Goody, 1973; Mair, 1969). However, in contemporary Africa, the practice has been criticized for its economic burdens and its implications for gender inequality. In many communities, particularly in Southern and Eastern Africa, bride price has become heavily monetized, with negotiated sums often reaching unsustainable levels for young men, especially those without stable incomes (Osei-Tutu, 2023; Adebowale, 2022). The commercialization of bride price has, in some cases, transformed marriage into a financial transaction, undermining its social and emotional significance.

The economic pressures associated with bride price are exacerbated by rising youth unemployment and income inequality. According to the African Development Bank (2023), nearly 60% of Africa's unemployed population consists of young people, a factor that delays marriage or discourages formal unions altogether. Men may be reluctant or unable to marry due to the high cost of bride price and wedding expenditures, while women may face social stigma for remaining unmarried beyond a culturally sanctioned age (Mutua et al., 2022; Ekechi, 2022). In this context, some couples opt for informal unions or cohabitation, bypassing both traditional and legal marriage altogether.

On the other hand, supporters of bride price argue that the practice remains culturally relevant and that its purpose is often misunderstood. Rather than being a commodification of women, bride price is seen by many as a gesture of respect and a means of formalizing the marriage alliance between families (Mangena & Ndlovu, 2020; Akintunde, 2022). Furthermore, in many communities, the negotiation process allows for flexibility, and elders often reduce or waive the amount in cases of financial hardship. In this way, bride price can function more as a relational tool than a rigid economic barrier.

Beyond bride price, the broader economic context influences marriage decisions, wedding practices, and marital expectations. The growing commercialization of weddings—particularly in urban and peri-urban areas—has turned marriage ceremonies into costly spectacles that reflect not only personal tastes but also social status (Chitando & Mateveke, 2021; Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023). The demand for designer outfits, luxury venues, professional photography, and live entertainment has created an expanding wedding industry in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Ghana. While this provides economic opportunities for vendors and creative professionals, it also creates pressure on couples to conform to expensive norms, sometimes at the expense of financial prudence (Amadiume, 2021; Obadare, 2022).

Marriage is also increasingly linked to economic security and class mobility. In some contexts, particularly among the educated middle class, marriage is viewed as a strategic alliance that can enhance social standing and economic prospects. This dynamic is evident in the rise of "elite weddings" where marriage partners are chosen based not only on emotional compatibility but also on career status, educational background, and family wealth (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2020; Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2023). Conversely, economically disadvantaged individuals—especially women—may enter into early or forced marriages due to poverty, family pressure, or lack of alternative livelihood options (UNICEF, 2023).

In rural areas, economic considerations often intersect with subsistence farming, inheritance practices, and clan obligations. Marriage may serve as a means of consolidating land rights, securing labor, or fulfilling kinship duties. In some communities, a woman's access to land or agricultural support is contingent upon her marital status, thereby tying her economic survival to the institution of marriage (Nzegwu, 2006; Korieh, 2021). Similarly, for men, marriage may be a prerequisite for assuming leadership roles or accessing community resources. These socio-economic imperatives reinforce the centrality of marriage as a site of resource distribution and economic integration.

Legal and Policy Frameworks on Marriage

Legal and policy frameworks governing marriage in Africa reflect a complex intersection of customary, religious, and statutory laws. In many African countries, a plural legal system coexists, wherein traditional

customs, religious norms, and formal state legislation all shape how marriages are contracted, recognized, and dissolved (Bennett, 2011; Moore, 2019). This pluralism often results in overlapping and, at times, contradictory standards, especially regarding age at marriage, consent, gender equality, and rights within marriage. In the 21st century, efforts to reform marriage laws have gained momentum across the continent spurred by international human rights conventions, constitutional mandates, and advocacy from civil society organizations. Most African states legally recognize three forms of marriage: customary, religious, and civil (statutory).

Customary marriages: rooted in indigenous traditions, are still widely practiced, especially in rural areas. These are often polygynous and involve family negotiations and the payment of bride price.

Religious marriages: primarily Christian or Islamic, follow doctrines prescribed by respective faiths.

Statutory marriages: on the other hand, are regulated by civil law and typically require registration, consent of both parties, monogamy, and legal documentation (Bonthuys & Pieterse, 2022; Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2023).

Legal reforms in recent decades have increasingly sought to harmonize these frameworks with constitutional and international human rights standards. Many African countries are signatories to key instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which promote gender equality and prohibit child marriage (African Union, 2022). Consequently, several governments have enacted legislation to set minimum legal ages for marriage, often at 18 years, and to require the free and full consent of both spouses (UNICEF, 2023; Nasir, 2021). However, the implementation of these laws is often uneven. In countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania, constitutional provisions outlaw child marriage, but customary and religious laws sometimes allow exceptions, leading to conflicting interpretations and inconsistent enforcement (Obadare, 2022; Mutua et al., 2022). In Nigeria, for instance, while the federal Child Rights Act (2003) prohibits marriage below 18, individual states—especially in the predominantly Muslim North—retain the autonomy to interpret marriage laws based on religious doctrine (Ahmed, 2022; Oladosu, 2020).

Another significant legal challenge concerns the status of polygamy. While polygamous unions are permissible under customary and Islamic law, they are generally not recognized under statutory law, which requires monogamy. This duality creates legal ambiguities, particularly in matters of inheritance, divorce, and child custody. Women in polygynous unions often lack the legal protections afforded to those in civil marriages, such as access to marital property or alimony in the event of separation (Bennett, 2011; Abubakar, 2023). This discrepancy has sparked legal and feminist debates over the need to either abolish or regulate polygamous marriages more stringently to ensure gender justice.

Marriage registration is another area where legal reform is ongoing. Unregistered marriages, which are common under customary and religious systems, pose serious risks, especially for women and children. Without legal recognition, spouses may be denied access to inheritance rights, property ownership, social benefits, and legal redress in cases of domestic violence or abandonment (Akintunde & Adedokun, 2021; Ekine & Abbas, 2013). To address this, several African countries have initiated campaigns to promote marriage registration and have integrated mobile technology to streamline the process in remote areas (Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023).

Divorce

The economic dimension of divorce remains contestable. In many African societies, bride price must be refunded if a marriage dissolves; creating a deterrent to separation or complicating divorce proceedings. This is particularly burdensome for women who may remain in unhappy or abusive marriages due to financial or social constraints (Bennett, 2011; Ahmed, 2022). In response, some legal systems and women's rights organizations are calling for reforms to decouple marriage from economic exploitation and ensure greater protection for women's rights in marriage and divorce (Nasir, 2021; Ekine & Abbas, 2013). Divorce and marital dissolution also reveal tensions between legal systems. Under statutory law, divorce is generally permitted on grounds such as adultery, cruelty, desertion, and mutual consent. However, under customary and Islamic law, the process can be more discretionary and often favors male spouses, especially in contexts where women are required to return bride price or face social ostracism (Nasir, 2021; Chitando, 2020). Legal aid, family courts, and civil society

organizations play a growing role in assisting women to navigate these legal hurdles and claim their rights during separation or divorce proceedings.

Moreover, there is an increasing focus on laws surrounding gender-based violence (GBV) within marriage. Domestic violence, marital rape, and emotional abuse have traditionally been underreported and inadequately addressed within African legal systems, particularly in marriages legitimized under customary law. Recent legislative developments in countries like South Africa, Rwanda, and Ghana have criminalized domestic violence and expanded the legal definitions of abuse to include economic and psychological harm (African Union, 2022; Burgess, 2021). These reforms aim to align marriage laws with broader commitments to women's rights and bodily autonomy.

Same-Sex Marriage and Lgbtq+

In parallel, debates surrounding same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights in Africa remain highly contentious. While countries such as South Africa have legalized same-sex unions, most African states criminalize homosexual relationships, often under colonial-era penal codes. This legal climate severely restricts the ability of LGBTQ+ individuals to access marital rights and recognition, and it contributes to broader social discrimination (Epprecht, 2014; Ekine & Abbas, 2013). The continued criminalization of non-heteronormative relationships underscores the tension between evolving notions of human rights and prevailing cultural and religious norms.

Dimensions of Power

One dimension of power in marriage is fonded on gender. Gender dynamics within African marriages have undergone significant transformation in the 21st century, driven by shifting social values, education, legal reforms, and global feminist discourses. Historically, African marriage systems were structured along patriarchal lines, with distinct gender roles that positioned men as heads of households and primary providers, while women were expected to be submissive, nurturing, and responsible for domestic labor and childbearing (Mbiti, 1991; Nzegwu, 2006). One of the primary drivers of changing gender roles in African marriages is the rise in female education and employment. Women across the continent are attaining higher levels of education and entering the formal labor market in greater numbers, which has expanded their autonomy and reshaped family dynamics (Mutua et al., 2022; Adebowale, 2022).

While vestiges of these traditional roles remain pervasive, contemporary African marriages increasingly reflect a renegotiation of gender expectations and power relations. The impact of gender-based violence (GBV) within marriage remains a significant concern. Studies have shown that intimate partner violence (IPV) is widespread in various African countries, particularly within contexts where male dominance is normalized and women lack access to economic resources or legal recourse (UN Women, 2022; Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023). Legal reforms criminalizing domestic abuse, marital rape, and psychological violence have been introduced in countries like South Africa, Rwanda, and Kenya, but enforcement remains inconsistent. Many victims continue to suffer in silence due to cultural stigma, fear of retaliation, or economic dependency (Bennett, 2011; Akintunde & Adedokun, 2021).

At the same time, African feminist movements are playing a crucial role in reshaping gender relations within marriage. Organizations such as FEMNET (African Women's Development and Communication Network), WILDAF (Women in Law and Development in Africa), and various grassroots women's groups are advocating for legal reforms, gender-sensitive education, and marital counseling programs that empower women within marriage (African Union, 2022; Ekine & Abbas, 2013). These initiatives have begun to influence public discourse, media representation, and even religious teachings, contributing to more gender-equitable perspectives on marriage.

As a result, modern African marriages—particularly among urban and middle-class populations—are more likely to exhibit forms of joint decision-making, shared financial responsibilities, and egalitarian household management (Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2023). This evolution challenges the traditional male-dominated authority model and has led to the emergence of more companionate forms of marital relationships. Despite

these positive trends, gender inequalities persist and often manifest through power asymmetries, unpaid care work, and socio-cultural expectations that continue to burden women. Even in dual-income households, women are frequently expected to bear the brunt of domestic chores and child-rearing responsibilities, reflecting the resilience of cultural norms that equate femininity with nurturing roles (Korieh, 2021; Chitando & Mateveke, 2021). Moreover, in some cases, women's financial success or professional visibility is viewed with suspicion or disapproval, particularly when it appears to challenge the traditional authority of the husband (Amadiume, 2021; Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2020).

Technology and Digital Influence on Weddings

The rapid advancement of digital technologies in Africa has significantly altered the landscape of marriage and wedding practices in the 21st century. From online dating to virtual ceremonies, technology has redefined how individuals meet, court, celebrate, and even document their marital unions. The integration of social media, mobile platforms, and digital financial tools into the marital process reflects a broader trend of technological appropriation in everyday life across the continent (Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023; Obadare, 2022). One of the most transformative impacts of technology has been in partner selection and courtship. Online dating platforms such as Tinder, AfroIntroductions, and even Facebook have become popular among African youth seeking romantic relationships. In countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, mobile dating has facilitated the formation of transnational, interethnic, and even interfaith relationships, bypassing traditional matchmaking methods once controlled by family and community elders (Chitando & Mateveke, 2021; Nasir, 2021). Although online platforms provide anonymity and broader access to potential partners, they also raise concerns about identity fraud, short-term intentions, and erosion of community oversight.

Social media has also redefined wedding aesthetics and performance. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are now central to the wedding industry, serving both as planning tools and performance stages. Couples share engagement photos, livestream ceremonies, and post elaborate wedding videos to document and showcase their unions to virtual audiences. This has created a phenomenon scholars term "digital spectacle" or "curated love," where weddings are staged not only for in-person guests but for online validation (Amadiume, 2021; Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023). In this way, social media reinforces consumerism and social competition, where elaborate weddings are linked with prestige and personal branding.

Technology also facilitates wedding planning and logistics, especially in urban areas. Couples now rely on mobile apps and websites for budgeting, vendor selection, guest list management, and even digital invitations. Platforms like WhatsApp are used for family coordination, while mobile payment systems such as M-Pesa in Kenya or EcoCash in Zimbabwe enable smooth financial transactions for services like catering and venue rental (Adebowale, 2022). These innovations reduce logistical constraints and allow for more efficient and customized planning, even across borders and time zones.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the digitalization of weddings across Africa. With social gathering restrictions in place, many couples turned to virtual weddings, streaming their nuptials via Zoom or Facebook Live. Although these events were sometimes viewed as impersonal, they provided cost-effective and inclusive options that allowed diasporic and distant relatives to participate remotely (Obadare, 2022; Burgess, 2021). Some religious and legal authorities adapted quickly, offering virtual premarital counseling and legally binding online ceremonies, which may remain a permanent option for tech-savvy couples in the post-pandemic era. However, the digitalization of marriage is not without challenges. The emphasis on curated perfection can create unrealistic expectations, and the pressure to stage lavish online content may lead to financial overextension. Additionally, privacy concerns have emerged, as couples sometimes face harassment or criticism from online audiences regarding their choice of spouse, appearance, or cultural conformity (Ekechi, 2022). These dynamics underscore the need for digital literacy and emotional resilience in navigating the technologically mediated marital space.

Diversity of Marriage Situations

To better understand the diversity and complexity of marriage and wedding dimensions in Africa, it is essential to examine country-specific contexts. This section presents brief case studies from Nigeria, South Africa, and

Zimbabwe to illustrate how historical, cultural, economic, and legal dynamics intersect to shape contemporary marital practices.

Nigeria: Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, exemplifies the legal and cultural pluralism that characterizes marriage in many African states. The country recognizes customary, religious (primarily Islamic and Christian), and statutory marriages, with each type governed by different rules and social expectations (Oladosu, 2020; Ahmed, 2022). In Northern Nigeria, Islamic law permits polygyny and includes provisions for mahr (bride gift), while Southern regions often emphasize elaborate traditional rites, including bride price negotiations, dancing, and public displays of wealth. Urban areas like Lagos have seen a rise in highly commercialized weddings, with multi-day ceremonies blending traditional Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa customs with Western aesthetics and luxury branding (Chitando, 2020). The Nigerian wedding industry is estimated to be worth over $3 billion annually, reflecting the cultural importance placed on marital ceremonies as symbols of status and success (Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023).

Despite this vibrancy, issues such as high bride prices, gender inequality, and child marriage persist—particularly in rural and conservative communities. Legal reforms remain contested, especially when they conflict with religious interpretations or customary norms (Obadare, 2022).

South Africa

South Africa is unique in that it is one of the few African countries to recognize same-sex marriages, following the enactment of the Civil Union Act in 2006. It also maintains a robust legal framework for marriage rights, including strong protections against domestic violence and a progressive constitution that affirms gender equality (Epprecht, 2014; Bonthuys & Pieterse, 2022). Marriage practices in South Africa are diverse, with the Zulu lobola system continuing to play a significant role in traditional unions. However, modern couples—particularly in urban settings—are increasingly questioning or modifying traditional practices to reflect personal and egalitarian values (Korieh, 2021). Civil and customary marriages can both be registered with the state, though customary unions must meet specific requirements to be legally valid. South Africa's urban marriage landscape also demonstrates high rates of cohabitation and delayed marriage, driven by economic concerns, changing gender roles, and greater emphasis on personal compatibility (Mutua et al., 2022). This underscores the country's position at the intersection of tradition and progressive legal reform.

Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe presents a compelling case of marriage negotiation under economic hardship. The practice of roora (bride price) is still widespread among the Shona people and holds deep cultural significance. However, the country's prolonged economic instability has strained these traditions. Families often demand high roora payments in foreign currency, creating barriers to marriage for economically disadvantaged young men (Ncube, 2019; Gombe, 2021). At the same time, Zimbabweans continue to value elaborate traditional and Christian wedding ceremonies, despite financial limitations. The use of mobile money platforms for wedding contributions and planning has become common, while digital platforms are increasingly used for matchmaking and sharing wedding content (Adebowale, 2022). Legal frameworks in Zimbabwe still struggle with harmonizing customary and civil laws, particularly concerning women's rights to property and inheritance. Efforts by women's rights organizations to strengthen protections in marriage and divorce remain ongoing (Ekine & Abbas, 2013).

Challenges and Controversies

While marriage in 21st-century Africa continues to evolve, it is also fraught with significant challenges and controversies. These stem from the intersection of culture, religion, economy, and legal reform, and they reflect the broader tensions within rapidly transforming societies. One of the foremost challenges is child marriage, which persists in several African countries despite legal prohibitions and international pressure. Cultural beliefs, poverty, and lack of education contribute to the prevalence of early marriage, particularly in parts of West and East Africa (UNICEF, 2023). While laws stipulate minimum marriage ages, enforcement is weak in many rural or conflict-affected areas, and girls are often coerced into unions without informed consent (Ahmed, 2022; Nasir, 2021). Child marriage undermines educational attainment, health, and long-term autonomy for girls and is a focal point for gender justice movements across the continent.

Bride price inflation has emerged as another source of controversy. Once symbolic, the practice has in some areas become highly commercialized, placing undue financial burden on grooms and reinforcing perceptions of women as economic assets (Mangena & Ndlovu, 2020; Osei-Tutu, 2023). The monetization of bride price can delay marriages, increase marital debt, and contribute to domestic tensions. In extreme cases, it leads to the exploitation of women, especially where bride price is treated as grounds for ownership or control in the marriage.

The criminalization of same-sex marriage is a major flashpoint. Except for South Africa, most African countries outlaw same-sex unions, and some enforce harsh penalties for LGBTQ+ relationships. This legal exclusion denies LGBTQ+ Africans the right to formal partnerships and exposes them to violence and discrimination (Epprecht, 2014; Ekine & Abbas, 2013). Advocacy for inclusive marriage rights faces strong resistance from religious and political leaders, who often frame such movements as threats to African cultural values.

Divorce stigma and inequality also remain pervasive. While legal divorce is possible in many countries, social stigma—especially for women—often deters individuals from leaving unhappy or abusive marriages. Additionally, women in customary or unregistered marriages may lack access to marital property, child custody, or spousal support upon separation (Bennett, 2011; Akintunde & Adedokun, 2021). Legal aid and judicial reform are critical to addressing these inequities.

Finally, economic hardship and marital instability are growing concerns. High unemployment, inflation, and social insecurity affect marital dynamics, leading to delayed marriages, increased divorce rates, and growing acceptance of informal unions. These shifts raise questions about the long-term stability of marriage as a social institution and about the capacity of legal and cultural frameworks to adapt (Obadare, 2022; Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2023).

Future Directions and Trends

Looking ahead, the institution of marriage in Africa is poised for further transformation under the influence of demographic shifts, global cultural flows, legal reforms, and technological innovations. As Africa's youth population continues to expand, and as urbanization accelerates, marriage practices will likely undergo additional diversification, challenging rigid traditions while preserving core cultural values (UN Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2023; Mutua et al., 2022). One significant future trend is the continuation of delayed marriage. As education—especially among women—becomes more widespread, and as youth prioritize economic stability before settling into marriage, the average age at first marriage is expected to rise (Adebowale, 2022; Odimegwu & Adewoyin, 2023). This may lead to smaller family sizes, shifts in reproductive timelines, and a growing normalization of non-marital cohabitation. These demographic patterns will require adjustments in family law, housing policy, and reproductive health services.

Secondly, the rise of dual-income and egalitarian households is likely to redefine gender roles further. As more women achieve financial independence and professional advancement, African marriages may increasingly be based on partnership models emphasizing shared responsibilities and mutual support rather than rigid patriarchal authority (Chitando & Mateveke, 2021; Akintunde & Adedokun, 2021). However, achieving true gender parity will require targeted policies on workplace equality, paternity leave, and domestic labor redistribution. The digitalization of marriage and weddings is expected to deepen. Technologies such as AI matchmaking, virtual reality weddings, and blockchain-based marriage contracts could redefine how relationships are formed and formalized (Alhassan & Kwakwa, 2023; Obadare, 2022). Mobile-based legal and counseling services are also likely to become more accessible, particularly in remote areas. However, the proliferation of online platforms will need to be balanced with concerns over privacy, digital literacy, and the preservation of culturally meaningful rituals.

Legal pluralism will remain a central issue. While statutory marriage law is expanding, many Africans will continue to adhere to customary and religious marital frameworks. Future reforms may focus on harmonizing these systems more coherently to avoid contradictions and ensure basic rights for all spouses, particularly women and children (Bonthuys & Pieterse, 2022). Customary systems may also be reimagined in ways that preserve cultural identity while affirming constitutional values of equality and non-discrimination. Another area of

transformation involves inclusive marriage rights. LGBTQ+ advocacy is gaining visibility across parts of Africa, despite legal and social resistance. While the pace of change is uneven, there is a growing discourse around human rights, bodily autonomy, and the need to protect diverse family formations (Epprecht, 2014; Ekine & Abbas, 2013). Future shifts may depend heavily on generational attitudes, judicial rulings, and international advocacy.

Finally, climate change and migration may indirectly affect marriage patterns. Environmental stressors and economic displacement could disrupt traditional marital practices by separating families, intensifying resource competition, and altering dowry and bride price customs (Korieh, 2021). Similarly, diasporic communities will continue to influence continental trends, blending global ideas with African heritage through hybrid practices. In all, the future of marriage in Africa is likely to be plural, adaptive, and context-specific. It will reflect the continent's dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity, resistance and reform, cultural pride and global engagement.

CONCLUSION

Marriage in 21st-century Africa remains a deeply significant institution, embodying not only personal commitment but also cultural heritage, economic relations, legal recognition, and social identity. This article has examined the multifaceted dimensions of marriage and wedding practices on the continent, exploring how they are shaped by historical traditions, economic factors, legal systems, gender dynamics, urbanization, technology, and broader social change. The persistence of customary and religious practices, such as bride price and polygamy, illustrates the enduring influence of African traditions, while the rise of statutory marriages and civil rights movements signals a parallel push for legal modernization and gender equity. Weddings have evolved from familial rites into public performances of identity and status, mediated by global trends, digital technologies, and consumer markets. At the same time, numerous challenges remain. Child marriage, gender-based violence, bride price inflation, and legal inconsistency continue to impede progress toward more inclusive and equitable marital systems. However, change is already underway, driven by youth agency, feminist activism, policy reform, and digital innovation. Ultimately, marriage in contemporary Africa is not a static institution, but a living cultural practice that reflects the continent's complexity and its ongoing negotiation between continuity and change. As Africa strides further into the 21st century, the institution of marriage will undoubtedly remain a critical site for reimagining identity, rights, and social belonging in a rapidly transforming world.

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