REVISITING LEVIRATE AND SORORATE MARRIAGE IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES: A CONTEXTUAL-HERMENEUTICAL DIALOGUE WITH OLD TESTAMENT FAMILY ETHICS

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Abstract

This study undertakes a critical re-examination of levirate and sororate marriage within African traditional societies by placing them in rigorous hermeneutical dialogue with Old Testament family ethics. Both cultural worlds construe marriage as a corporate institution oriented toward lineage preservation, inheritance stability, and communal cohesion; however, prevailing Western exegetical traditions frequently misconstrue these practices through Eurocentric interpretive grids that obscure their ethical and theological sophistication. Employing a contextual, postcolonial hermeneutical methodology, this research systematically analyses key Old Testament texts (Deut 25:5–10; Gen 38; Ruth 4) alongside anthropological and theological descriptions of African kinship systems to delineate substantive convergences, critical divergences, and areas of mutual illumination. The study argues that African successor-marriage systems embody moral commitments parallel to those found in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the protection of widows, the perpetuation of lineage, and the safeguarding of familial identity. Furthermore, it demonstrates that a dialogical interpretive model, where African cultural realities interrogate and enrich biblical texts, disrupts colonial epistemologies and reinstates African interpretive agency. The article concludes by engaging contemporary ethical questions surrounding gender justice, pastoral praxis, and evolving socio-legal contexts, proposing a nuanced theological framework that preserves communal values while affirming human dignity.

Keywords: Levirate Marriage, Sororate Marriage, African Hermeneutics, Old Testament Ethics.

Introduction

Marriage has long transcended its function as a private contract between individuals; it is a pivotal social and theological institution shaping kinship, inheritance, communal identity, and covenantal ethics. In African traditional societies and the world of the Old Testament, marriage is not merely a romantic or economic arrangement but a communal mechanism designed to sustain lineage, ensure social stability, and embody moral obligations.[1] Within this broader framework, levirate and sororate marriage practices stand out as culturally embedded strategies to secure familial continuity, protect widowhood, and reinforce communal solidarity.[2] Levirate marriage, where a man marries his deceased brother's widow, is explicitly legislated in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and vividly dramatised in narratives such as Genesis 38 (Tamar) and Ruth 4 (Boaz and Ruth). Although less prominent, sororate marriage, where a man marries his deceased wife's sister, is implied within Israel's kinship structures and household ethics.[3] Parallel practices are documented across various African societies where they serve similar purposes: safeguarding widowhood, preserving inheritance lines, and stabilising communal structures.[4]

Despite these striking convergences, modern theological and biblical discourse often interprets levirate and sororate marriage through Western exegetical frameworks that fail to grasp their cultural logic and theological significance in African contexts.[5] This epistemic imbalance marginalises African perspectives, framing traditional marital institutions as "primitive" or "anachronistic," rather than as legitimate theological interlocutors with the biblical text. Nevertheless, these practices continue to shape lived experiences, kinship expectations, and communal ethics in many African societies, making their theological re-engagement imperative. This study seeks to revisit levirate and sororate marriage in African traditional societies as a contextual-hermeneutical dialogue with Old Testament family ethics. It aims to identify points of convergence and divergence, interrogate Eurocentric interpretive assumptions, and propose a constructive theological reading that honours both the canonical text and African cultural frameworks. Such an approach contributes to the growing field of African biblical hermeneutics and enriches global Old Testament scholarship.[6]

The research employs a contextual hermeneutical approach, integrating historical-critical analysis of key Old Testament texts (Deut 25:5–10; Gen 38; Ruth 4) with anthropological and theological readings of African traditional marriage systems. It draws on the interpretive frameworks of African biblical scholars, such as Ukpong (1995, 2000), Adamo (2005), and Tiénou (1990), while engaging with Western exegetical voices, including Westermann (1974) and Matthews and Benjamin (1993), to achieve comparative balance. This interdisciplinary method allows for a nuanced theological reading that resists colonial hermeneutical dominance and foregrounds African cultural agency.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

By defining levirate and sororate marriage and situating them within both Old Testament kinship ethics and African traditional marriage systems, this framework lays the foundation for a robust hermeneutical and theological dialogue. It draws on contextual and postcolonial interpretive methods to engage biblical texts and African cultural realities with scholarly depth and sensitivity. Levirate marriage, from the Latin *levir* ("husband's brother"), is a marital institution in which a man marries his deceased brother's widow. This practice, codified in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and dramatised in narratives like Genesis 38 (Tamar) and Ruth 4 (Boaz and Ruth), perpetuates the deceased's lineage, protects the widow from economic marginalisation, and safeguards inheritance rights.[7]

Sororate marriage, though less explicitly legislated in the Hebrew Bible, refers to marrying the deceased wife's sister to preserve familial alliances, ensure continuity of care, and maintain household stability.[8] Both institutions are rooted in a corporate understanding of marriage that transcends individual desire and situates marital obligations into the broader kinship network.[9] The family in Old Testament Israel was a corporate unit, serving as the primary locus of identity, economic security, and covenantal responsibility.[10] Kinship networks determined inheritance, lineage, and social responsibilities, while marital institutions, such as levirate and sororate marriage, ensured the continuity of the *bêt ʾāb* (father's house).[11] Marriage was thus not merely a private relationship but a theological and social instrument for preserving the *Yahwistic* covenant community.[12] The ethical weight of these institutions reveals an understanding of family as a moral and theological unit.

African traditional societies share with ancient Israel a corporate view of marriage, where marital unions are deeply embedded in kinship structures. Marriage is not primarily a private contract, but a communal alliance that links families and clans.[13] Levirate and sororate marriages are widespread across many African societies, often functioning to protect widows, preserve property rights, stabilise family structures, and ensure children remain within the kin group.[14] These practices reflect a moral economy in which the welfare of individuals is inextricably linked to the community's well-being.[15] Importantly, these practices are interpreted as cultural customs and ethical systems, grounded in indigenous cosmologies that view family continuity as both a social obligation and a spiritual mandate.[16]

Family ethics represent a crucial intersection between text, context, and community in theological discourse. The Old Testament presents marriage as a theological site where divine covenantal purposes intersect with communal order. African theological reflections have long emphasised the need to read the Bible in light of African social and moral realities, allowing context to shape theological interpretation.[17] This approach departs from universalist or purely historical-critical readings by foregrounding cultural agency in the interpretive process. It treats African family ethics not as static traditions but as living, evolving hermeneutical spaces that can

both inform and critique biblical interpretation.[18] This study is further situated within postcolonial and contextual hermeneutics, which seek to deconstruct Eurocentric interpretive frameworks and affirm African voices as legitimate theological interlocutors.[19]

Postcolonial readings expose how colonial and missionary interpretations often dismissed African marriage customs as "pagan" or "inferior." At the same time, contextual hermeneutics insists that African realities must shape biblical interpretation rather than serve as mere background data.[20] This interpretive orientation encourages a two-way reading process: the biblical text speaks to the African context, and the African context interrogates and illuminates the biblical text. Such a hermeneutic produces fresh theological insights and reclaims interpretive agency for African communities.

Levirate and Sororate Marriage in Old Testament Family Ethics

The institution of levirate marriage in ancient Israel, known in Hebrew as *yibbûm* (יִבּוּם) from the root *y-b-m* (יבם), was a legally binding kinship obligation requiring a man to marry the widow of his deceased brother in order to "raise seed" (*lehaqîm šēm*, להקים שם) in the name of the deceased (Deut 25:5–10). This practice was embedded within the *bêt ʾāb* (בֵּית אָב, "father's house"), which functioned not merely as a nuclear family but as an extended lineage unit encompassing property, inheritance, cultic responsibilities, and social identity.[21] The primary objective of levirate union was not romantic companionship but lineage continuity (*zéraʿ*, זֶרַע, "seed") and the retention of family inheritance within the patrilineal clan.[22] Comparable customs are attested in Hittite and Assyrian legal traditions, such as the *Code of Hammurabi* 154–158 and the *Nuzi Tablets*, indicating a broader ancient Near Eastern legal milieu.[23]

Sororate marriage, though less frequently codified, reflects the practice of marrying the deceased wife's sister to preserve *mishpāḥâ* (מִשְׁפָּחָה, "family/kin group") alliances and provide continuity for dependent children.[24] Both institutions illustrate how Israelite society was structured around collectivist ethics in which individual choices were subordinated to kinship responsibilities and covenantal obligations.[25] The legislative center of *yibbûm* is *Deuteronomy 25:5–10*, where the text stipulates that if a man dies without a male heir, "his brother shall go in to her and take her as wife" (*wəʿālâh ʿālāyw wəlaqḥāh*, וְעָלָה עָלֶיהָ וּלְקָחָהּ), and "the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed in the name of the dead brother" (*wəqārāʾ šəmô ʿal-šēm-ʾāḥîw hamēt*, וקרא שמו על שם אחיו המת) (Deut 25:6). The public ritual of removing the sandal (*ḥaliṣâ*, חֲלִיצָה) and spitting symbolises the renunciation of familial duty and the communal shame attached to refusing to perpetuate the lineage.[26]

Genesis 38:6–11 provides an early narrative illustration. Judah gives Tamar to Onan to "raise offspring for his brother" (*ləhāqîm zéraʿ leʾāḥîw*, להקים זרע לאחיו). However, Onan deliberately "spills his seed on the ground" (*waʿšīḥēt ʾarṣāh*, והשחת ארצה) to avoid fulfilling the levirate obligation. This act incurs divine displeasure,

underscoring that levirate responsibility was a familial and theological mandate.[27] Similarly, *Ruth 4* depicts Boaz's marriage to Ruth as a form of *goʾēl* (גֹּאֵל, "kinsman-redeemer") responsibility. Though not technically a brother-in-law, Boaz acts within the spirit of *yibbûm*, declaring before the elders, "I have acquired Ruth the Moabite… to perpetuate the name of the dead" (*ləhāqîm šēm hamēt*, להקים שם המת) (Ruth 4:10). Here, levirate-like redemption is portrayed not merely as a legal obligation but as **ḥesed** (חֶסֶד, "covenantal loyalty") that restores both lineage and social dignity.[28]

Levirate and sororate marriages reveal a rich ethical and theological fabric in Israel's covenantal society. Ethically, these practices embodied the principle of *ʿărēvūt* (ערבות, "mutual responsibility"), ensuring that no family line would be extinguished, no widow would be left destitute, and no inheritance would be alienated.[29] Theologically, they reflect Yahweh's concern for the vulnerable, particularly the widow (*ʾalmānâ*, אַלְמָנָה), and the preservation of covenantal community through family continuity.[30] These marital institutions transformed the reality of death into opportunities for covenantal renewal, as seen in Tamar's vindication (Gen 38:26) and Ruth's incorporation into the Davidic line (Ruth 4:13–22). Such narratives are not mere legal footnotes but theological commentaries on God's fidelity through human kinship structures.[31] Family ethics became a site of divine–human cooperation through these institutions.

The preservation of lineage (*šēm*, שֵׁם) lies at the heart of levirate and sororate practices. These marriages ensured that ancestral land, an inalienable covenant gift, remained within the patrilineal family (Num 27:36) and prevented the erasure of names from Israel's genealogical memory. This function was not merely socio-legal but theological, tied to Israel's understanding of identity, promise, and divine inheritance.[32] Moreover, these institutions reinforced communal cohesion through shared responsibilities within kinship networks, similar to African kinship systems, where collective responsibility governs marriage and inheritance.[33] Thus, Levirate and sororate marriages emerge as ethical instruments of communal stability, sustaining social order and covenantal identity.

Levirate and Sororate Marriage in African Traditional Societies

Across many African societies, marriage is a public, lineage-making institution rather than a private contract. It consolidates alliances, redistributes obligations, and embeds individuals within corporate kin groups; practices akin to levirate (widow inheritance) and sororate (marriage to a deceased wife's sister) function to stabilise households disrupted by death.[34] Classic ethnographies demonstrate that such unions are intelligible within a moral economy where marriage reproduces the group, not merely the couple.[35] In East African pastoral settings, successor unions also buffer households against labour and herd-management shocks, revealing an economic and symbolic logic.[36]

Patrilineal and, in some regions, double-descent systems tie property and progeny to groups of corporate descent. Widow inheritance safeguards the deceased's "name"

and land within the patriclan, keeps bridewealth transactions coherent, and ensures children remain attached to their father's lineage.[37] Sororate unions likewise maintain affinal bonds and childcare continuity between allied families.[38] Nigerian customary law surveys echo these dynamics, noting that successor unions regularise guardianship, succession, and the reallocation of marital payments within the kin group.[39] These institutions carry a thick ethic of mutual obligation: the kin group is morally bound to protect widows and dependents, while successors are bound to sustain the deceased's household.[40] Gender, however, is neither uniform nor static. Studies of Igbo and Yoruba contexts show negotiated roles that sometimes invert or redistribute normative expectations.[41] African Christian theologies underscore that the moral telos of such practices is communal flourishing rather than individual fulfilment, even as churches interrogate coercive or exploitative forms.[42]

Convergences with Old Testament *yibbûm* are apparent: preservation of lineage, protection of widows, and containment of property within corporate kin (cf. Deut 25:5–10). Both systems encode marriage as a collective duty ordered to stabilise the *house* and land.[43] Divergences matter: African successor unions are often more flexible in their selection of successors (senior agnates, classificatory brothers, or even affinal proxies), and sororate analogues can be more explicit and routinised than the Hebrew Bible's relatively muted sororate footprint.[44] Contemporary practice also collides with statutory law and Christian ethics, requiring critical discernment to preserve protective aims while rejecting coercion.[45]

A Contextual–Hermeneutical Dialogue

A contextual-hermeneutical dialogue between Old Testament family ethics and African marital customs reveals striking intersections at the level of kinship logic, lineage preservation, and communal moral responsibility. In both worlds, marriage is not merely a contract between two individuals but a corporate institution embedded in larger kinship networks.[46] The levirate practice in ancient Israel (*yibbûm*, Deut 25:5–10) ensured that a man's *šēm* (שֵׁם, "name/lineage") and land remained within his clan. Likewise, in Igbo, Yoruba, and Shona societies, successor unions (*widow inheritance*) serve similar goals of lineage perpetuation and social cohesion.[47] Both systems interpret marriage as a covenantal mechanism for protecting vulnerable members, especially widows, ensuring property rights and stabilising kinship structures.

Nevertheless, divergence also exists. African successor systems often exhibit greater flexibility in successor selection and negotiation processes, whereas the Old Testament text assumes fraternal succession as the normative pattern.[48] This comparative reading allows the biblical text to be situated not as an alien artefact but as part of a broader human moral imagination about family, land, and community. Theologically, such dialogue generates productive continuities and discontinuities. The continuities highlight shared ethical commitments to community survival, covenantal fidelity, and the moral obligation to protect widows and children.[49] These

shared commitments expose a resonance between Yahwistic covenantal ethics and African indigenous moral frameworks. The discontinuities, however, emerge around gendered agency and ritualisation. While the Deuteronomic text frames refusal of levirate duty as a public act of shame (*ḥaliṣâ*, חֲלִיצָה), many African systems allow pragmatic alternatives, such as designating a classificatory relative or renegotiating the union entirely.[50] These differences invite reinterpretation, a hermeneutical process in which the biblical text and African traditions engage in reciprocal critique and theological enrichment.[51]

Historically, Western biblical scholarship has often approached African marital practices through a colonial hermeneutic, portraying them as "primitive" or "pagan" in contrast to "biblical norms".[52] This interpretive violence obscures the complex theological rationalities within African kinship systems and erases local agency in reading Scripture. Postcolonial biblical interpretation challenges these epistemic hierarchies by exposing how Eurocentric readings universalised Western marriage ideals and delegitimised African indigenous ethics.[53] African theologians such as Ukpong (2000) and Adamo (2005) have insisted that African cultural experiences must be valid interlocutors in biblical interpretation, not merely background "illustrations." This posture displaces interpretive control from the colonial centre to local communities, allowing for a polycentric hermeneutical space where Scripture speaks from and to African realities.

A contextual hermeneutic does not romanticise the biblical text or African tradition; instead, it seeks a dialogical space where both can illuminate and correct one another. Ukpong (1995) refers to this as a "two-way" hermeneutic, where the text interprets the context and the context, in turn, interrogates the text.[54] Such an approach resists both uncritical cultural essentialism and rigid textual literalism. This contextual reading enables the ethical core of levirate and successor unions, lineage preservation, communal care, and justice for vulnerable persons to be reappropriated in ways that speak to contemporary African Christian communities.[55] It also invites theological creativity, allowing churches and communities to engage Scripture faithfully without severing it from their lived histories. This is not syncretism but a hermeneutics of responsibility, in which biblical and African voices co-shape moral vision.

Contemporary Ethical and Theological Reflections

Debates around levirate (*widow inheritance*) and sororate marriage have gained renewed urgency in contemporary African Christianity as faith communities confront the tension between traditional kinship structures and Christian ethical teachings. While many African societies still practice forms of successor marriage, especially in rural contexts, urbanisation, legal reforms, and ecclesial teachings have complicated their acceptance and meaning.[56] For some communities, successor unions continue to be viewed as mechanisms of social protection, ensuring widows and dependents are not left destitute.[57] However, churches and theologians increasingly interrogate these

practices through the lens of Christian ethics, emphasising human dignity, gender equality, and personal consent.[58] In many congregations, debates over levirate and sororate arrangements now intersect with questions of biblical authority, cultural identity, and pastoral responsibility.

A critical dimension of contemporary discourse concerns gender justice and the protection of women's autonomy. Traditional levirate systems often presuppose communal control over women's reproductive and marital futures, which can conflict with modern understandings of human rights and dignity.[59] The biblical text contains tensions, while *Deuteronomy 25:5-10* assumes levirate obligation, narratives like *Ruth 4* show how agency and negotiation can shape outcomes.[60] Modern African Christian theology increasingly views these practices through liberationist and feminist hermeneutics, foregrounding the dignity and consent of women as bearers of the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27). Moreover, family systems are evolving, with blended families, single-parent households, and legal marriage reforms challenging rigid customary expectations and inviting contextual theological reflection.

The church stands at a critical pastoral intersection: mediating between biblical faith, cultural heritage, and contemporary social realities. Many African churches have historically condemned or overlooked traditional levirate practices, but recent theological discourse suggests a more nuanced and dialogical approach.[61] Pastoral praxis requires discernment, distinguishing protective cultural values (such as community care for widows) from coercive or oppressive practices. In some contexts, churches have developed ritual substitutes or pastoral counselling frameworks that allow cultural values of solidarity to be upheld without violating personal dignity and Christian ethics.[62] Ecclesial engagement thus becomes a site of theological negotiation, where the gospel interacts dynamically with African cultural memory.

These debates hold profound implications for African biblical hermeneutics. They demonstrate the necessity of readings that are neither uncritically traditionalist nor unreflectively Western, but contextually negotiated.[63] Postcolonial and feminist interpretive approaches highlight how Scripture can expose liberating and problematic dimensions of cultural and biblical texts when read in African contexts.[64] This hermeneutical space enables theological reinterpretation of family ethics in light of contemporary realities. It invites African theologians to articulate contextual theologies of marriage and kinship that affirm communal care while rejecting coercion and gender subordination.[65] In this sense, levirate and sororate debates become hermeneutical laboratories for shaping a living, contextually resonant African theology.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that levirate and sororate marriage practices in ancient Israel and African traditional societies serve as communal strategies of social and theological significance, rather than merely private marital arrangements. In the Old Testament, *yibbûm* (levirate marriage) ensured the preservation of lineage (*šēm*) and inheritance within the *bêt ʾāb*, safeguarding the family's identity and land.[66] Sororate practices, though less codified, also reinforced kinship alliances and continuity. Similarly, in many African societies, successor marriage operates as a mechanism of social protection, preserving family bonds, stabilising inheritance systems, and preventing the marginalisation of widows and children.[67] The comparative dialogue revealed notable points of convergence, especially in their communal, covenantal, and ethical logic, as well as divergences concerning flexibility of successor selection, ritual procedures, and gendered agency. These findings underscore the theological depth and cultural complexity of both traditions.

The comparative hermeneutical engagement between Old Testament ethics and African cultural practices has yielded significant theological insights. First, both systems articulate a communitarian ethic, in which marriage safeguards individual welfare and the integrity of lineage and community.[68] Second, this study highlights how African cultural frameworks can serve as legitimate interlocutors in biblical interpretation rather than merely background illustrations.[69] Third, the dialogue emphasises the importance of critically discerning continuities and discontinuities: affirming cultural practices that align with biblical justice, such as care for widows and communal responsibility, while rejecting coercive elements that undermine human dignity and gender equity.[70] In this way, African traditions and the biblical text can mutually illuminate and critique one another, enriching theological reflection.

Further research should focus on empirical and theological studies exploring how successor marriage practices are reinterpreted in contemporary African Christian communities. This includes examining how legal reforms, gender justice movements, and church teachings shape these evolving practices. Interdisciplinary work combining biblical studies, anthropology, gender studies, and contextual theology would deepen the conversation. For ecclesial engagement, African churches should adopt pastoral strategies that respect cultural heritage while upholding human dignity and Christian ethical standards. This includes creating pastoral counselling frameworks, contextual liturgies, and theological education curricula that critically engage traditional practices without romanticising or dismissing them.[71] Such engagement affirms the protective communal values embedded in successor marriage while confronting harmful power dynamics.

This study contributes to global biblical scholarship by demonstrating the theological fruitfulness of comparative contextual hermeneutics. It challenges the dominance of Eurocentric biblical interpretation by foregrounding African interpretive agency and

situating African marital practices as serious theological partners in dialogue. Within African contextual theology, it underscores that cultural practices are not static relics but living ethical frameworks capable of engaging Scripture critically and creatively. By placing Old Testament family ethics in conversation with African marital traditions, this study affirms that theological interpretation is both local and global, capable of enriching the broader church's understanding of kinship, justice, and communal identity.

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