

# Woman-to-woman marriage: practices and benefits in Sub-Saharan Africa. (Special Issue: Comparative Perspectives on Black Family Life, vol 1)

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**This article examines the various forms of woman-to-woman marriage in sub-Saharan Africa and discusses how each form can or could have been used by a woman to advance her social and/or economic status in society. Woman-to-woman marriage may also be beneficial to the persons involved other than the woman who initiates the marriage (the so-called female husband). The motivations of the other participants are also examined. Cross-culturally, women take wives under three circumstances, all of which enhance the status of the female husband: 1) barren women take wives to gain rights over children produced; 2) rich women accumulate wives to gain prestige and wealth in the same way men do through polygyny; and 3) in societies where women possess the right to have a daughter-in-law, a woman without a son may take a wife to give her a non-existent son.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic studies reveal that many African societies have practiced woman-to-woman marriage, and some still do (Herskovits, 1937; Krige, 1974; Obbo, 1976; O'Brien, 1977; Oboler, 1980).<sup>(1)</sup> Woman-to-woman marriage, also known as woman marriage or marriage involving a "female husband," refers to the institution whereby a woman marries another woman and assumes control over her and her offspring (Krige, 1974:11). In most cases, the wife will bear children for the female husband. All ceremonial aspects of these marriages are observed, bridewealth is paid to the girl's father, and all rules of divorce in the society apply (Herskovits, 1937:335). Despite the fact that woman-to-woman marriage has existed or exists in many societies, this institution has often been overlooked by researchers studying such topics as marriage, the family, gender relations, and the position of women in African societies. However, it is important to realize that woman-to-woman marriage has great relevance to these subjects.

The theory of male dominance and female oppression in terms of gender relations has long been discussed in the literature. Claude Meillassoux (1981) claims that senior men control the labor and produce of women through their control of the marriage (see also Potash, 1989:190). Such theories virtually ignore woman-to-woman marriage because the concept does not concur with the ideology of male dominance. However, another approach to the study of gender relations views both women and men as social actors who use various systems and their positions in society to achieve maximum personal benefits (Obbo, 1976:371; Potash, 1989:191). This article examines the relevance of woman-to-woman marriage as a strategy that women use to further their social and economic positions in society.

Cross-culturally, women take wives under three circumstances, all of which increase the status of the female husband: 1) barren women and widows take wives to obtain rights over children produced; 2) rich women accumulate wives to gain prestige and wealth in the same way men do through polygyny; and 3) in some societies where women have the right to have a daughter-in-law, women without sons can exercise their right to a daughter-in-law by marrying a woman and giving her to a non-existent son (see Huber, 1969; Krige, 1974). In each of these situations, African women are able to manipulate the existing system through woman-to-woman marriage in order to achieve higher social and economic status.

Woman-to-woman marriage can also be beneficial to persons other than the female husband. Woman-to-woman marriage involves the following persons: 1) the female husband herself; 2) if the female husband is already married, her own husband (the female husband's husband); 3) the woman who is married by the female husband - the wife; and 4) the lover(s) of the wife who may father her children. To obtain a full understanding of the topic, it is important to examine the motivations not only of the wife, but also those of the wife's lover(s) and the husband (if any) of the female husband.

This article will examine the various forms of woman-to-woman marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, discussing how each form can or could have been utilized by the female husband in order to advance her social and economic status in society. In addition, the benefits of woman-to-woman marriage to the other players involved will be examined.

## BACKGROUND ON WOMAN-TO-WOMAN MARRIAGE

The institution of woman-to-woman marriage, which has existed at least as early as the eighteenth century (O'Brien, 1977:109), still exists in some societies today.

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However, as the Christian church banned polygamists (male and female) from taking communion during colonial times and Western influences have emphasized that girls have the right to choose their own husbands, woman-to-woman marriage may be dying out (Krige, 1974:17; Amadiume, 1987:132). For example, a recent study of the Western Igbo shows that women are becoming less tolerant of woman-to-woman marriage. Among women aged 15 to 24, 95 percent disapprove of the institution, as do 91 percent of women aged 25 to 44 and 89 percent of women between ages 45 to 64; only 73 percent of women above age 65 disapprove (Okonjo, 1992:350).

While some authors have argued that woman-to-woman marriage may involve lesbianism (Herskovits, 1937), most researchers vehemently oppose this idea (Krige, 1974; Obbo, 1976; O'Brien, 1977; Amadiume, 1987). For example, Amadiume (1987:7) claims that interpretations of woman-to-woman marriage as lesbianism would be "totally inapplicable, shocking and offensive to Nnobi women, since the strong bonds and support between them do not imply lesbian sexual practices." She disagrees strongly with those Western lesbians who have cited this African practice "to justify their choices of sexual alternatives which have roots and meanings in the West" (Amadiume, 1987:7).

Another topic for debate is the notion of whether the female husband is assuming a conceptual role of a male. O'Brien (1977:122) argues that the institution of woman-to-woman marriage sexually subordinates the female husband because she is forced to take on a male role. Thus, women in positions of power (usually political) must be conceptualized as male, or at least cannot be seen to hold the inferior status of wife, to justify their power and to set them apart from other women. Others argue that female husbands may or may not take on a male role (Krige, 1974; Amadiume, 1987). Among the Igbo, female husbands become heads-of-households and the Igbo word for family head is a genderless expression (Amadiume, 1987:90). The most convincing argument to date comes from Oboler's (1980) perceptions as they relate to the Nandi of Kenya. She concludes that the female husband is socially considered to assume the conceptual male role upon marriage to her wife. This is done in order to avoid the confusing situation which would arise in a patrilineal and patrilocal system whereby women have no right to land or inherited property. By conceptualizing the female husband as a man, the community recognizes that she possesses what are traditionally considered to be male rights, particularly in situations where property and

inheritance are involved (Oboler, 1980). Consequently, woman-to-woman marriage may be a "pro-female" institution because it can provide women with rights that would otherwise be reserved for males (Amadiume, 1987).

Regardless of whether the female husband takes on a conceptual role of a male, it is evident that she uses the institution as a way of achieving social prestige and increased economic security. The female husband usually has the same rights over the wife and her children as a man has over his wife and children. She must financially support them and is in charge of disciplining the children (Oboler, 1980:79).

### THREE REASONS FOR THE OCCURRENCE OF WOMAN-TO-WOMAN MARRIAGE

#### Barrenness/Increasing a Lineage

Given that in many African societies a woman's traditional social obligation is to marry and procreate, a barren woman is often considered a failure and is ostracized. Through woman-to-woman marriage, a barren woman is able to gain social prestige and her husband's favor.

Among the Kamba, a barren woman is a "social disgrace; she is an humiliation" (Kimutu, 1994). Furthermore, as long as "her husband is potent and fertile, the barren woman is obliged to accomplish her duty of providing the husband with children without interfering with their marriage" (Kimutu, 1994). A barren wife can resolve her unfortunate social position by engaging in a woman-to-woman marriage. In such cases, the wife bears children for the female husband, which brings honor and glory to the barren woman and subsequently to the husband of the barren woman. The jurisdiction of the female husband includes choosing the man with whom her wife will procreate. It may be the female husband's own husband or any of her husband's close male kin. Among the Kamba, barren women often do not succeed in finding a man to marry and thus many remain single. However, because of the social stigma attached to single women (and men), many barren women enter into a marriage with another woman while they are still single. In such cases, the wife usually chooses her own lover. The female husband in this situation also achieves prestige for taking a wife and obtaining children (Kimutu, 1999).

Among the Igbo and Kalabari communities of southern Nigeria, barren women have also been noted to enter into woman-to-woman marriages. The female husband gives her wife to her own husband or his male kin in order to

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procreate; an outsider would never be brought in as a lover (Herskovits, 1937:336). Often the female husband's wife is a purchased slave. Among these communities, barren women enter into woman-to-woman marriages primarily to increase their economic status. If a woman has no children, she has no claim on her husband's property upon his death and may have to leave the land on which she is likely to have lived for decades. Offspring from a woman-to-woman marriage guarantee the female husband secure economic standing by maintaining her rights to occupy property which is inherited by her children (Herskovits, 1937:336).

Huber (1969:751) claims that the occurrence of woman-to-woman marriage among the Simbiti may decrease and its importance may also decline with time. Medical advances may reduce infant mortality and barrenness. In addition, the increasing trend towards a monetary economy may alter inheritance rules. The acceptance of woman-to-woman marriage may lessen as wives of female husbands are increasingly taking advantage of their sexual freedom and behaving more like "prostitutes". The impact of Christianity and Western education may also have an effect on woman-to-woman marriage as it works to reduce the cases of polygamy (both male and female) among the Simbiti (Huber, 1969:752).

Widows entering into woman-to-woman marriages in order to increase the lineage of a deceased husband have been documented in a number of societies. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, for example, a widow could gain social status by becoming a female husband in order to add members to her dead husband's lineage. She is able to choose between levirate or woman-to-woman marriage. Many choose to become a female husband because it gives them control over land (Mackenzie, 1990:619).

Among the Nuer, the Dinka, and the Kamba, widows often contract woman-to-woman marriages. In such cases, a widow's wife produces children in honor of the female husband's deceased husband. Nuer female husbands pay a male outsider, usually in the form of cattle, to procreate with their wives, aware that if children are produced in the name of her deceased husband, she will be revered by his family (Herskovits, 1937:336). Among Kamba widows, the first child born to the widow's wife will belong to the lineage of the widow's deceased husband. Subsequent children born to the widow's wife may be affiliated with the widow's lineage, thereby giving her the prestige associated with having an heir (Obbo, 1976:375).

### As an Indication or Means of Accruing Wealth

In many societies where the institution of woman-to-woman marriage exists, wealthy women who have enough property may become female husbands. These women may be single or already married to men. The female husband may take a wife for purposes of enlarging her own family and/or for the sake of gaining public recognition and esteem. Wealthy women, just like their male counterparts, marry women to increase their social status and as a means of investing their wealth.

While this reason for woman-to-woman marriage appears to be most prevalent among West African societies where women, usually as traders, have had more opportunity to acquire wealth, it has been noted among the Kamba (Kimutu, 1994) and Simbiti (Huber, 1969) of East Africa. Kimutu (1994), a Kamba himself, notes that "when a woman marries an 'iweto' [a wife], she becomes highly esteemed, respected, influential and raised above other women because she virtually assumes the status of a [male] husband."

Traditionally among the Igbo in Nnobi, rich women were able to become female husbands in order to free themselves from domestic responsibilities (Amadiume, 1987:72). Their wives would perform all household chores while the female husband used the extra time she gained to devote her energies to other affairs, usually trading. It was the flexible gender system of the community which allowed this beneficial aspect of woman-to-woman marriage. In fact, "the ultimate indication of wealth and power, the title system, was open to men and women, as was the means of becoming rich through control over the labor of others by way of polygamy, whether man-to-woman marriage or woman-to-woman marriage" (Amadiume, 1987:42). Further, "women benefitted from the accumulation of wives in the same way as did men" (Amadiume, 1987:45).

Female textile traders in the Sokoto Caliphate in West Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries employed woman-to-woman marriage to advance their own economic status. As females accumulated wealth through trading, they often invested it by taking wives. The institution of woman-to-woman marriage was most likely used to gain control over the labor of children and wives with the aim of producing textiles at low costs (Kriger, 1993:395). Women were engaged in weaving and spinning and were able to trade freely and to keep all profits.

In the region of the Lamai Emirate at the turn of this

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century, female husbands often gained profit by sending their wives on extended trading trips. Many wives, while gone, would bear children legally belonging to the female husband. As the children reached the age of five or six (usually the age when children are able to begin working), the female husband would claim them, whereupon the biological father would often pay her to transfer her paternity rights to him. It has been noted that female husbands were known to generate large profits from such encounters (Kriger, 1993:395).

Alternatively, Kriger (1993:396) speculates that the female husband might have given a man sexual access to her wife in exchange for agricultural labor. The man would have grown and harvested cotton which was cleaned and spun into yarn by the female husband's children. The yarn would then have been woven into fabrics by her wife (or wives). The entire process could have been executed at extremely low costs and managed exclusively by the female husband (Kriger, 1993:396). In colonial times, woman-to-woman marriage was condemned by missionaries and colonial officials who believed it was simply used to exploit children's labor (Kriger, 1993:395).

### Marrying a "Daughter-in-Law"

Agricultural communities often recognize a woman's need for a daughter-in-law to help with domestic chores and farm work. Among the Gusii, Lovedu, and Simbiti this recognition is reflected in a form of woman-to-woman marriage whereby the female husband marries a "daughter-in-law." Closely related to the motivations caused by barrenness, women without sons would pay bridewealth for a girl and refer to the process as marrying a "daughter-in-law" for the "house." This form of woman-to-woman marriage gives a sonless female husband the opportunity to become the head of a "complete" house. Among the patrilineal Gusii and Simbiti, it also enables the female husband to expel the stigma attached to her because she failed to bear a male heir.

The matrilineal Lovedu grant every woman the right to a daughter-in-law from the home which was established through the use of her bridewealth. That is, "the brother uses his sister's bridewealth cattle to obtain a wife; the sister is then entitled to her brother's daughter" (Strobel, 1982:121). Normally, this exchange would result in the well-known form of cross-cousin marriage. However, a woman does not lose her right to a daughter-in-law if she has no son; woman-to-woman marriage ensures her this right (Kriger, 1974:15).

The Simbiti female husband, like her Lovedu counterpart, often chooses her wife from her brother's house. As her bridewealth helped to establish his home, he is often more lenient about the amount of bridewealth he demands (Huber, 1969:748). The daughter-in-law is taken on to help with various domestic chores as well as to give the female husband prestige. She essentially legitimizes the existence of the female husband's "imaginary" son, thereby increasing the female husband's status in society. While everyone realizes the female husband does not have a son, having a daughter-in-law ensures the status of obtaining grandchildren as heirs.

Unlike the Simbiti and Lovedu, the Gusii female husband does not choose a daughter-in-law to marry from her brother's home. The sonless woman does, however, use the bridewealth from one of her daughters to marry a woman on behalf of her non-existent son. The married couple refers to each other as "mother-in-law" and "daughter-in-law," and their children are considered to be the female husband's grandchildren (Hakansson, 1985:97-98). While the practice was originally rare, Hakansson reports that its occurrence has been increasing since the 1960s. Like the Lovedu and Simbiti, this form of woman-to-woman marriage among the Gusii gives the female husband the prestigious role of head-of-household and ensures male heirs in the form of grandchildren.

### MOTIVATIONS FOR THOSE INVOLVED TO PARTICIPATE IN WOMAN-TO-WOMAN MARRIAGE

#### The Female Husband

The female husband is motivated by a number of factors to participate in woman-to-woman marriage. Cross-culturally, all women gain respect and prestige by taking wives. Barren women increase their social status by becoming "fathers" to their own heirs and increasing lineages, either their own or their husbands' (e.g., the Kamba, Nuer, and the Dinka). Female husbands benefit from the increased access to land which they achieve by "fathering" heirs (e.g., the Igbo, Kalabari, and the Kikuyu). Sonless women marry daughters-in-law in order to have domestic help and the status of having grandchildren (e.g., the Gusii, Simbiti, and the Lovedu). As a result of woman-to-woman marriage, a female husband can become powerful and wealthy through her ability to control her new family's labor.

If there are so many benefits associated with becoming a female husband, why are there not more incidences of woman-to-woman marriage? The institution appears to be

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dying out in many societies as a direct result of Western influences. Female husbands must be wealthy enough to pay bridewealth and, if they are married to men, they probably need to have their husband's support to enter into a marriage with a woman. Further, some women contemplating becoming female husbands have noted the difficulty associated with finding a willing and suitable wife. (Oboler, 1980:75)

While the female husband certainly has the most to gain from woman-to-woman marriage, there are certain benefits obtained by the wife, the wife's lover, and the husband of the female husband (if any).

### The Wife of the Female Husband

Among the Dahomey, the wives of female husbands are not considered to be in a socially undesirable position (Herskovits, 1937:340), and indeed this may traditionally be true of wives in woman-to-woman marriages throughout Africa. Certainly among the Kamba, women gain a great deal of prestige upon marriage. In fact, a woman remains a "child" in the eyes of the community until she marries. Traditionally, a Kamba woman's main function in society is to procreate, and her duties are restricted to domestic chores and farm work (Kimutu, 1994). As a result, a woman who excels in such duties is considered to be an "ideal" woman, and therefore a good wife. Hence, if conferred with the responsibilities and duties of a wife, it is not detrimental to become a wife to another woman.

Wealth possessed by a female husband also motivates women to agree in becoming the wives of other women. Many Kamba wives of female husbands consent to woman-to-woman marriage because they may otherwise be faced with starvation or poverty (Obbo, 1976:376). Among the Nandi, women often express the opinion that it is far better to be married to a wealthy woman than to a poor man (Oboler, 1980:76). Furthermore, female husbands tend to give more bridewealth than male husbands because of the anxiety and difficulty involved in finding a willing and suitable wife (Oboler, 1980:76).

A woman may also marry a female husband because she is unable to find a man to marry. Perhaps she has a physical or mental handicap which makes her unattractive to men. Among the Nandi today, being the mother of illegitimate children is the most common reason women become wives to female husbands (Oboler, 1980:76). Woman-to-woman marriage "legitimizes" the wife's children and gives them rights of inheritance (Oboler, 1980:80).

Both the female husband and the wife gain status in society by maintaining a stable marriage. Female husbands do not usually fight as much with their wives, both verbally and physically, as male husbands (Oboler, 1980:76).

Wives of female husbands usually enjoy more freedom both socially and sexually because their role in the marriage is not as demanding as it is in man-to-woman marriage. While a wife's lover is usually chosen by the female husband, among the Nandi this arrangement must be agreed upon before marriage as wives do not like to have their freedom of choice taken from them (Oboler, 1980).

### The Wife's Lover

The wife's lover, with whom she will procreate, is often chosen by the female husband. The lover rarely lives with the married couple, but instead visits the wife. His main motivation is the "free" sexual access he gets to the wife without the financial obligation to support her or their biological children. Often he may work on the farm of the female husband in exchange for the access he receives to her wife. Among the Nuer, the lover receives one cow from each of his daughters' bridewealth payments (Krige, 1974:13). Thus, the wife's lover may not only gain sexual privileges, but also certain economic advantages.

### The Female Husband's Husband

While not all female husbands are already married to men, a great many are. In societies where the institution of woman-to-woman marriage exists, many male husbands urge their wives to marry a woman. If the female husband is barren, her husband virtually requires her to take a wife in order to produce children. Wealthy men are able to flaunt their wealth further by being married to women who have wives. Male and female polygamy glorifies the husbands of female husbands.

### CONCLUSION

Women across sub-Saharan Africa have used the flexible institution of woman-to-woman marriage to achieve maximum personal benefits. In a number of different cultures, barren women have employed the system to provide themselves with the children they need in order to be considered full members of society. By marrying other women, widows have also gained status by securing children for their deceased husband's lineage. Sonless women have married daughters-in-law to provide

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grandchildren and domestic help. Women have been known to become female husbands in order to secure rights over land. In West Africa, female traders have manipulated the system to gain power and wealth through their marriage to women.

In most societies discussed in this article, the presence of the institution of woman-to-woman marriage is declining. As Kimutu (1994) writes about the Kamba, "the customs that prevailed within the traditional Kamba people in the pre-colonial era were eroded, altered, and to some extent obliterated by the great socioeconomic, political, and educational changes that infiltrated the traditional Kamba community from the Western world during the colonial era." In addition to the changes brought about by colonialism, the incidence of woman-to-woman marriage may have been altered in response to medical advances which reduce barrenness and infant mortality.

The study of woman-to-woman marriage provides insights into the family, marriage, gender roles and status of women in African societies. Despite the fact that woman-to-woman marriage may also be beneficial to men, the institution is not simply given by men to women in order to appease them in the male-dominated system; rather, woman-to-woman marriage has been a way in which women could substantially advance their social status and/or increase their economic standing in their communities. The apparent decline of woman-to-woman marriage may negatively affect the position of women, particularly barren women who frequently use woman-to-woman marriage to gain the status associated with motherhood.

I am very grateful to Dominique Meekers for his encouragement, support, and valuable suggestions, and to Alice James for her comments on a version of this paper.

1 O'Brien (1977:110) lists a number of societies which have practiced woman-to-woman marriage. By region they are: 1) West Africa (mainly Nigeria) - Yoruba, Ekiti, Bunu, Akoko, Yagba, Nupe, Ibo, Ijaw, and Fon (or Dahomeans); 2) South Africa (especially the Transvaal) - Venda, Lovedu, Pedi, Hurutshe, Zulu, Sotho, Phalaborwa, Narene, Koni, and Tawana; 3) East Africa - Kuria, Iregi, Kenye, Suba, Simbiti, Ngoreme, Gusii, Kipsigis, Nandi, Kikuyu, and Luo; and 4) Sudan - Nuer, Dinka, and Shilluk. In addition, others have noted the practice among the Kalabari of West Africa and the Kamba of East Africa.

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