

Marriage is words—and affectionate practices

Lessons from Congo on enhancing sex in marriage

Sidonie Swana Tangiza Tenda (Falanga)

God created us to be married, to have sexual relations, and raise children. . . . Marriage is the most beautiful form of friendship. A marriage is not successful unless the spouses are faithful to one another.¹

These convictions articulated by the women's theology group of Umtata (Eastern Cape, South Africa) would be shared by many men and women in our context in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Unfortunately, however, our conversations with married people in the settings where we live revealed dissension in many Congolese homes generally and among the Pende tribe in particular. We need to pay more attention to our marriages, if they are to become the beautiful friendships God intends that we enjoy.

The dissension that arises in many homes is the result of multiple factors, which contribute to changes in sexual relations

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between spouses. Among these many factors, we can point to neglect of certain practices for couples, especially exchanging gifts; receiving each other with warmth; and taking time to go out together, share conversation, and show affection. In a word, many marriages have cooled off. The spouses have lost their first love (Matt.24:12).

Masamba ma Mpolo was right to say that “a couple's life is comparable to the growth of a tree; it is also like a dry skin which must be oiled to make it more beautiful. As the tree and the skin must be maintained in order to grow and have beauty, so a marriage must be, for its stability.”² The marriage relationship in general and the sex life of couples in particular is better when carefully cultivated.

In the face of this social concern about the state of marriage among Pende people, we felt led to undertake a brief study of the topic. However, given the vastness of the Democratic Republic of Congo, we limited the study to the Pende tribe to which we belong. In particular, the study focused on individuals of the Pende group living in or visiting Kinshasa, but who come originally from Lozo, in Gungu territory, Kwilu district, Bundundu province.

Our research used a study questionnaire. The report that follows relies especially on our interviews with older people. These focused on traditional practices that strengthened relationships between married people. In particular, we sought to know when and how Pende couples have experienced good sexual relations. On the basis of our interview findings, we make several recommendations, in an effort to remedy some of the difficulties married couples today face.

What daytime practices contributed to good marital relations?

According to the late Madame Ndende a Mukelenge, “the husband of [an earlier] era often combed his wife’s hair and covered her body with red paint (*lukula*). The spouses shaved the hair of one another’s armpits (*khaya*). The husband from time to time offered gifts to his wife (cloth or beads, for example) and took pleasure in decorating her topknot (*mukombé*) with beads.” An old song says, “*Sangu dia bonga ditamega njila, gakhetu ga bonga gatamega yala, we iyaya, yay’awe.*”³ (“Good millet attracts a bird; a beautiful woman attracts a man.”)

Another love song speaks about how a husband’s neglect endangers his relationship with his wife: “*Mona mukhetu njong’ à tendé, ùtema gumukuata, gula ndo ikologa mushina dia tende.*”⁴ (“The young girl is a grasshopper among the plants. You’d better hold on to her; otherwise she slips through the grass and is lost.”) *Njonga* is the specific name of the grasshopper to which the young girl or woman is compared. The song’s message is that the husband must treat his wife well; otherwise, she might leave for good (divorce him).⁵ Another song explains the daily practices through which affection is shown between husband and wife: “*Gayala gazumba mukanji enji e gadi gale gamulogela, we e mama iyaya, we e mama iyaya.*”⁶ (“The husband who feels affection for his wife must chew his food to feed the other”—that is, his wife.)

In traditional Pende practice, at the death of her husband, a wife went into a long period of mourning to grieve her absent partner. In the case of the death of his wife, the husband grieved for his spouse with tender words: “*Mukaji’ami ngaguzudile ulenge.*”⁷ (“My wife, I married you when you were young.”)

What nighttime practices aided good marital relations?

In addition to these daytime attentions, Pende couples traditionally experienced affection and sex in bed. The husband of an earlier time embraced his wife while sleeping (*gumububigiza*).⁸ The Song of Songs also refers to this position of spouses: “O that his left hand were under my head, / and that his right hand embraced me!” (8:3).

The conjugal act, being a union that is important and desired by God (Adam knew Eve his wife, according to Gen. 4:1), must be prepared for carefully in order to be successful and especially so that both partners find it satisfying. Therefore the Pende

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ancestors who also understood the function of this act prepared for it as well. “The woman applied certain medicines to enhance her pleasure and that of her husband. He might take initiative by eyeing his wife with an affectionate gaze or by winking at her to indicate that he wanted her that night. Or he might show his desire by going to bed early or by a romantic smile.” Foreplay contributed to

their pleasure.⁹ As the sex act reached its climax—during this important moment—the spouses spoke tender words, such as “*Mukaji’ami*”; “*Mulumu’ami!*” (“My wife!”; “My husband!”).¹⁰ “During the day the wife offered her husband a dish of peanuts and raw manioc so that he might renew his spent energy.”¹¹

Thanks to the traditional schools, Pende husbands of the past were initiated into life in general and into particular practices in particular, which contributed to their ability to maintain a positive marital life. Lacking such schooling, men and women today have not learned these practices.

Recommendations

Our brief study of these traditional practices in marriages of the

Pende people leads us to make the following recommendations in order to improve the quality of marital relationships:

We ask Pende society to reinstate the traditional schools or initiations that trained young boys and girls for life in general and particularly for marriage. We recommend making this education a group experience, in order to train all youth.

We recommend to parents that they help their children in choosing a spouse. We encourage addressing topics of sexuality in the education of children at home. We also recommend that

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parents support their married children by discussing these subjects without complacency or embarrassment.

To the spouses themselves, we recommend adopting certain practices, such as exchanging gifts, going out together, composing love songs for each other, having ongoing dialogue, using tender words with each other (such as “my big baby” to designate the husband; “my wife”; “I love you”; and “sweet-heart”) to evoke affection. The Pende say, “*Ulo mbimbi.*” (“Marriage is words.”) The best

times for affection are at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning and after the sex act.

Couples must also take into consideration the best climate for resolving conflict. When it is difficult to find the source of a conflict in the home, one technique for doing so consists of staring into each other’s eyes for five minutes. The partner who feels at fault will not be able to hold the gaze of the other for long. With a few questions, one can then discover the reason for the opposition between the spouses.

In a marriage, the spouses must apply what Théodor Bovet asks them to do to attain a new life: “See, I am making all things new, yes. All can be renewed truly. No matter how desperate the circumstances, no matter how few hopes we might have for the future, all can become new. All things must be renewed.”¹²

Notes

¹ Groupe de Théologie des Femmes d’Umtata, *Être deux et devenir un: Une étude biblique sur le mariage* (Afrique du Sud: Groupe de théologie des femmes d’Umtata, 1995), 3.

² Masamba ma Mpolo (seventy years old), professor at l'Université Protestante au Congo, Kinshasa; conversation August 5, 1994, on the importance of affection. Masamba ma Mpolo is the author of *Amour, sexualité et mariage: Interrogations des jeunes en Afrique Noire* (Kinshasa: Éditions Cepropaski, 1988).

³ Ndende a Mukelenge (eighty years old); our interview of this rural woman on vacation in Kinshasa took place on May 24, 1995. The interview dealt with traditional Pende daytime maintenance practices of the sex life.

⁴ Ghymalu Kianza (fifty-four years old), pastor of the Communauté Mennonite au Congo (CMCO), Kinshasa; interviewed March 30, 1995, about the types of affectionate Pende songs and about premarital counseling.

⁵ Marthe Mishindo Lusegu (seventy years old), rural woman on vacation in Kinshasa; interviewed April 15, 1995, on Nyoga Tenda and preparation of children for marriage.

⁶ Ghymalu Kianza interview.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. Those interviewed told of specific preparatory practices and described techniques for reaching simultaneous orgasm.

¹⁰ Kimbamba Lubalega (fifty-three years old), married student interviewed in Kinshasa on December 5, 1994, on maintenance and preparation of the sex life of Pende spouses in bed, before and after the sex act.

¹¹ Vie sexuelle après les relations sexuelle.

¹² Théodor Bovet, *Le mariage: Ce grand mystère* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Délauchaux et Niestlé, 1961), 151.

About the author

Married in 1976, Sidonie Swana Tangiza Tenda (Falanga) and Leonard Falanga have raised four daughters, now ages 18 to 28. Mama Swana is chaplain at the Christian University of Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo) secondary school, president of the Congolese Association of Protestant Women Theologians, secretary of the Association of Mennonite Women Theologians of Congo, and chaplain to the Mennonite Women's Federation of Kinshasa. She is a member of the Congo Mennonite Church.

This article was translated from French by Sylvia Shirk Charles, pastor of Manhattan (NY) Mennonite Fellowship, who is Mama Swana's partner in a Sister Link program—coordinated by Mennonite Women USA and Mennonite World Conference—that connects African women theologians with counterparts in the U.S. The article is excerpted from an essay published in the book *La petite fille, la femme, la religion et le VIH-SIDA en Afrique: Théologiennes à l'Épreuve des Beautés Africaines*, by the Cercle des Théologiennes Africaines Engagées.