

'The Levirate Custom of Inheriting Widows among the Supyire People of Mali: Theological pointers for Christian marriage'

Michael William Thomas Jemphrey

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ABSTRACT

The Supyire people of Mali practise levirate: when a woman is married, she permanently joins her husband's family, and the marriage is not terminated by his death. Rather, it continues, with one of the husband's younger brothers or cousins inheriting her and acting as a substitute levirate husband. The thesis describes how levirate is an integral part of the Supyire institution of marriage, how it gives marriage permanence, supporting the social structure, linking descent groups, determining access to land and providing a milieu for socializing children. The thesis highlights the experiences, positive and negative, that Supyire men and women have had of levirate, as related in interviews. It then begins to construct a practical theology of Supyire marriage by reflecting on it through four metaphors applied to Christ and his mission (redeemer, bridegroom, head of the church and the image of God) and the qualities particularly associated with these four metaphors (mercy, joyful love, permanent unity and respect for human dignity respectively). Despite its imperfections, the Supyire system of levirate gives security to widows and the fatherless, allows them continued access to farmland and thus to a livelihood, and can be a channel for Christ to mediate and teach about his faithful love. On these bases it is argued that levirate should be recognized by the church as a valid stage of marriage rather than treated as adultery or fornication. The thesis also reflects on the negative impact of sin on Supyire levirate and how marriage and levirate could be redeemed, with God at its centre rather than on the periphery. There are concluding reflections on lessons that might be learnt or relearnt that could be fed into a theology of marriage for the global church. An appendix outlines a possible Christian service of blessing for a Supyire levirate union.