

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHAO-AWON MASS MARRIAGE AND JEWISH MARRIAGE PRACTICES

Samuel Sunday ALAMU

Department of Religious Studies, University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria
ssalamu@unilag.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines the Shao-Awon mass marriage festival in Nigeria and Jewish marriage practices, highlighting their social, spiritual, and communal significance. The Shao-Awon festival, rooted in Yoruba heritage, celebrates the Awon goddess through collective marriage ceremonies that foster unity and reinforce cultural identity. In contrast, Jewish marriage traditions emphasize covenantal bonds between spouses and God, ensuring familial sanctity and adherence to religious obligations. The study addresses the declining role of traditional marriage customs in contemporary society due to globalization and modernization. It aims to analyze the symbolic, social, and religious functions of these practices and their role in preserving cultural identity. Using Durkheim's theory of social solidarity and a comparative methodology, the research employs ethnographic observations, interviews with cultural and religious leaders, and textual analysis of historical and theological sources. Findings reveal shared themes of social cohesion, communal participation, and spiritual identity. While the Shao-Awon festival strengthens community bonds through collective rituals, Jewish marriage maintains family structures through legal and religious commitments. Insights from both traditions suggest that contemporary Christian marriage practices could benefit from a stronger emphasis on community support and cultural integration. This research contributes to global discussions on marriage by demonstrating the resilience of traditional practices in sustaining social and spiritual stability. It recommends further cross-cultural studies on marriage institutions to inform religious and social policies, ensuring the preservation of cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Shao-Awon mass marriage, Jewish marriage, ritual symbolism, comparative study, social cohesion.

Introduction

Marriage, as a deeply rooted social institution, plays a fundamental role in defining communal values, reinforcing cultural identity, and establishing social order across diverse societies (Kirk 2004). It is often more than a union between individuals, acting as a broader communal event with social, cultural, and spiritual significance (Salawu 2010). This study compares the Shao Awon Mass Wedding Festival in Nigeria and Jewish marriage practices, investigating how marriage rituals in these two traditions function to foster social cohesion, cultural continuity, and spiritual identity within their respective communities.

In the Yoruba community of Nigeria, the annual Shao Awon Mass Wedding Festival is a communal celebration in honor of the Awon goddess (Akano 2020). Unlike Western marriage practices focused on personal commitment, the Awon festival involves numerous couples marrying simultaneously in a communal setting. This event serves as both a celebration of cultural heritage and an embodiment of Yoruba values, reinforcing social unity and reverence

for the Awon goddess. The shared experience of marriage strengthens family bonds, promotes cultural pride, and reaffirms Yoruba identity through its elaborate rituals and festive atmosphere. Conversely, Jewish marriage practices are deeply rooted in Halakha (Jewish law), representing a sacred covenant between husband, wife, and God (Washofsky 1992). Jewish marriage rituals include the signing of the *ketubah* (marriage contract), the chuppah (marriage canopy), and the breaking of a glass at the ceremony's conclusion. Each of these rituals holds symbolic meaning; for example, the *ketubah* outlines the responsibilities of each spouse, and the glass-breaking serves as a reminder of the fragility of relationships. These practices emphasize the permanence and sanctity of marriage, shaping Jewish identity through both individual and collective commitment to sacred values.

This study aims to bridge a gap in understanding how marriage operates as both a personal commitment and a communal and spiritual institution across different cultures. While existing studies examine marriage within specific cultural or religious frameworks, few explore how different communities use marriage to promote social solidarity and cultural preservation. To address this, the current research applies Émile Durkheim's theory of social solidarity as a framework to analyze how marriage rituals support social structure, cultural continuity, and collective beliefs within the Yoruba and Jewish communities. The research findings reveal that, despite differences in rituals and religious significance, both traditions use marriage to foster social cohesion, spiritual belonging, and cultural identity. The Shao-Awon festival exemplifies mechanical solidarity through its communal setting, with unity emerging from shared values and collective rituals, while Jewish marriage represents organic solidarity, where unity is maintained through complementary roles and a sacred bond between partners and God. Ultimately, this comparative analysis illustrates that marriage is a powerful social institution with diverse functions across cultures. Both the Shao-Awon and Jewish marriage practices affirm marriage's role in maintaining social harmony, cultural continuity, and spiritual identity. Understanding how different societies celebrate and institutionalize marriage deepens insight into the complex relationship between cultural values and social structures, highlighting marriage's enduring role in both individual lives and communal stability.

Literature Review

An Overview of Shao Mass Marriage:

Shao, a vibrant Yoruba community in the Oloru District of Moro Local Government Area, Kwara State, Nigeria, has a deep cultural and historical significance. Founded in 1779 A.D. during the reign of Alaafin Abiodun (1774 A.D.–1789 A.D.), the community traces its origins to hunters from Oyo Ile, the political and cultural hub of the Yoruba people. This migration cemented Shao's linguistic and cultural ties to the Yoruba ethnic group (Adetunji and Aja 2008, 87; Emielu 1991, 12; Law 1997, 395). Shao's Yoruba identity is reflected in its traditions, language, and greetings such as *E kaaro* (good morning), *E kaasan* (good afternoon), and *E kaale* (good evening), characteristic of Yoruba culture (Oke 2008, 48).

Shao's strategic location, about ten kilometers from Ilorin, the Kwara State capital, enhances its socio-political and cultural relevance. With a population of approximately fifteen thousand, the community thrives on agriculture, cultivating crops such as yams, cassava, and guinea corn. The town is also renowned for its expertise in traditional herbal medicine

(Adetunji and Aja 2009, 87). Leadership in Shao is symbolized by the *Ohoro*, a monarch tracing lineage to the Alaafin of Oyo. The first *Ohoro*, Olanibo, played a significant role in shaping Shao's traditions (Akano 2020, 5). Historically, Shao has resisted Fulani Emirate influence, identifying strongly with the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria (Akano 2011, 10).

The Awon Goddess and Her Significance

The Awon goddess is central to Shao's spiritual heritage, symbolizing divine intervention and cultural identity. Oral tradition states that she first appeared during the reign of *Ohoro* Olanibo, manifesting as a mysterious one-breasted woman encountered by Omo Larele, a prominent hunter. Her appearance at a sacred stream marked the beginning of her veneration. She was welcomed by the monarch and his chiefs, and her wisdom shaped Shao's cultural identity. The one-breasted symbolism represents fertility, nurturing, and interconnectedness.

Her primary instruction was the establishment of the Shao Mass Wedding Festival, placing marriage at the core of Shao's spiritual and cultural practices. The festival signifies communal unity, with all eligible girls married in a collective ceremony. It embodies the belief that marriage extends beyond individual unions to communal responsibility and spiritual well-being. The goddess's departure was marked by the emergence of the Awon River, symbolizing her blessings. The river remains a sacred site for seeking spiritual guidance and renewal. Her legacy is perpetuated through the annual festival, reinforcing principles of unity, fertility, and cultural continuity.

The Awon goddess continues to influence the community spiritually and culturally. Her directives, enshrined in the festival, ensure adherence to communal values. The annual mass wedding preserves her memory and reinforces the spiritual connection between past and present generations. The festival serves as both a religious observance and a means of sustaining Shao's cultural heritage. The intertwining of mythology, ritual, and communal participation underscores the importance of spiritual forces in African traditional societies.

Rituals and Wedding Celebrations:

The Awon Marriage Festival, held annually in October, spans several days and features intricate rituals. The festival begins with consulting the Ifa Oracle to determine the appropriate date, a responsibility of the Awon priest and titled chiefs (Akano 2020, 5). Days before the wedding, young men gather firewood for communal cooking, symbolizing unity. Two nights before the wedding, *Ina'bi Day* involves the groom's family presenting gifts such as yam baskets to the bride's family. This is followed by the *Gidi-gidi, bomu bomu* procession, a lively town-wide celebration (Akano 2020, 6). The night before the wedding, the bride recites *Ekun Iyawo*, ancestral praise poetry, marking her transition into married life:

Ile onile ni nlo ko si o,
(I am going to settle in another man's home)
Ala'ura bami tun'le baba mi se,
(The Sovereign God, help me take care of my father's home)

Baba mi Akanbi omo Mu-mu-aro.

(My father Akanbi, the son of Mu-mu-aro.)

The *Ekun Iyawo* ritual is both an emotional farewell and an affirmation of the bride's lineage (Akano 2020, 7). The next phase involves the *Kikase Iyawo*, a slow bridal procession to the market square. Brides, adorned in *Aso ofi*, jewelry, and *iyun* beads, hold umbrellas while chanting ancestral praises. The final ritual at the market square symbolizes the community's support for the institution of marriage (Kwara State Government Publication on Shao Awonga Festival, 8).

The Awon Dance, performed by elderly women, is a vibrant cultural display that takes place in front of the Awon shrine. This traditional dance, accompanied by drumming and singing, adds color and excitement to the festival. The *Ohoro* of Shao blesses the brides, marking the formal conclusion of the ceremony. The following day, the *Oko Ewu* (bridegroom's caricature) celebration occurs, during which a proxy appointed by the groom parades the town, closing the year's festival. This ritual highlights the communal essence of marriage, reinforcing marriage as a social and cultural milestone (Kwara State Council for Arts and Culture, 1993).

The festival is an expression of African communal values, emphasizing collective participation. Marriage in Shao is not solely an individual affair but a responsibility shared by the community. The festival plays a key role in cultural preservation, ensuring that Shao's traditions remain intact for future generations. It also fosters social cohesion by bringing people together in a shared spiritual and cultural experience. Mbiti (1990) emphasizes the role of such practices in maintaining social stability and cultural continuity.

The Significance of the Shao Mass Marriage Festival:

The Shao Mass Wedding Festival is more than a cultural event; it is a foundational pillar of Shao's identity. Rooted in the directives of the Awon goddess, the festival highlights marriage as both a communal and sacred institution. Marriageable girls are wedded collectively, reinforcing communal values. The tradition reflects broader African customs where marriage is seen as a societal, rather than merely personal, institution (Oke 1996, 92). The festival sustains key values such as procreation, lineage continuity, and social harmony. Marriage arrangements involve extended families and the larger community, demonstrating the interconnectedness of Shao's social structure.

The festival also affirms Shao's spiritual beliefs. The promise of prosperity and fertility made by the Awon goddess is honored through the continued observance of this tradition. The reliance on ancestral and divine guidance reinforces the festival's role as both a religious and cultural institution. By integrating mythology, ritual, and social participation, the festival serves as a powerful reminder of Shao's historical resilience and cultural depth.

In a broader context, the festival showcases how traditional practices contribute to social cohesion. It underscores the resilience of indigenous institutions in preserving cultural identity amid modernization. The Shao Mass Wedding Festival exemplifies how African traditional societies intertwine spirituality with daily life. As Mbiti (1990) noted, cultural

practices play a crucial role in shaping and maintaining societal values. The festival ensures the continuity of these values, strengthening Shao's collective identity.

Ultimately, the Shao Mass Wedding Festival is not merely an event but a profound cultural phenomenon. It encapsulates Shao's history, spirituality, and communal ethos. The continued celebration of the festival reaffirms the importance of marriage as a cornerstone of society, sustaining the legacy of the Awon goddess for generations to come.

An Overview of Jewish Marriage Tradition:

Jewish marriage rituals. The Jewish marriage traditions or rituals have transformed throughout history, from the biblical period to the late twentieth century. These traditions are deeply rooted in history, with customs that date back thousands of years and remain significant within the Jewish community today. Even despite the many changes that have taken place, most Jews continue to follow, to some extent, the tradition that developed during the medieval period. They emphasize the sanctity of marriage and the formation of a strong, covenantal relationship between husband and wife, often perceived as a reflection of the divine relationship between God and Israel (Witte 2012). These rituals include using a *chuppah* (wedding canopy), circling of the groom by the bride, holding separate or combined *kiddushin* (betrothal) and *nisuin* (marriage) ceremonies, reciting a blessing over wine, signing and reading the text of the *ketubah* (Jewish marriage document), exchanging rings and vows, chanting the *sheva b'rachot* (seven blessings traditionally recited at a marriage ceremony or celebratory meal(s) following the wedding), and the breaking of a glass. Each of these shall be discussed briefly.

Betrothal and engagement. The Jewish marriage customs center in betrothal and wedding. The Hebrew word *Kiddushin* (betrothal) is derived from the verb *Kadash*, which means to separate, to be holy, to sanctify (self), to declare holy (Wulandari 2022, 417). The process of a wedding traditionally begins with the *Kiddushin* (betrothal), which is a binding engagement period. It is a period of 'seclusion' when the bride is separated or devoted to one man. According to Lash (2012, 8), betrothal occurred up to twelve months before the actual wedding and involved a covenant. It was like our engagement today, but with a much greater sense of commitment because of the covenant entered into. Covenant in Bible times was serious, final, sealed in blood, and legally binding. Covenants could not be easily broken. Once a couple entered into a covenant at betrothal, they were legally married in all aspects except for the physical consummation of the marriage.

Bride price. Historically, betrothal established a formal agreement between families and a financial transaction known as the *mohar*, a bridal price given to the bride's family (Douglas 1988, 743). In this way, brides were purchased in Bible times just like when Rebecca was betrothed, she was bought by a certain amount of gold-silver and clothes (Genesis 24:52-54). The price was paid to the father of the bride, both to compensate him for the loss of a worker in his household and to show how much the bridegroom loved and valued the bride (Lash 2012, 6). Virgins brought double the price of widows or divorced women. Sometimes the bride price did not include money or goods. In contemporary practices, engagement is seen more as a mutual commitment than a binding contract, but is still considered a serious step leading to marriage (Phiri 2006, 825). Even though the groom has chosen the bride and paid her a certain price. However, the proposal must be approved by the bride (Wulandari 2022, 423). This is

why Rebekah is also given a choice as to whether or not she agrees to be a wife to Isaac (Genesis 24: 57-58).

Marriage contract (Ketubah). Central to a Jewish marriage is the *Ketubah*, or marriage contract, which delineates the rights and responsibilities of the husband towards the wife. Originating around the first century BCE, the *Ketubah* is a written commitment, which is considered a serious and mandatory agreement. It outlines provisions for the wife in the case of divorce or the husband's death (Greenberg 2001, 432). *Ketubah* (a deed of acquisition) is signed by two witnesses and read aloud at the marriage ceremony, symbolizing the legal and moral commitment the couple is entering (Rosenberg-Friedman 2012, 119). According to Wulandari (2022, 424), the basis of this bond is from the Bible, the relationship between God and His people.

Ritual bath or immersion (Mikveh). Another important tradition the bride is expected to perform before the wedding day is the 'ritual bath.' In Hebrew, it is called *mikvah*, which is a cleansing or purification ritual signifying that she has left her old life to enter a new life with the bridegroom (Wulandari 2022, 430).

Jewish marriage ceremony and bridal canopy:

Huppah refers to both a part of the wedding ceremony and the actual bridal canopy that covers the bridal couple. The original meaning of *huppah* was "room" or "covering." The *huppah* of ancient times was a special room built in the bridegroom's father's home (Lash 2012, 17). In Jewish tradition, the wedding ceremony, or *huppah*, represents the home the couple will build together. In ancient Israeli tradition, the bridegroom goes to prepare the *huppah*, and the bride, standing under a canopy, traditionally circles the groom seven times to signify the creation of a sacred space (Wulandari 2022, 429). Key stages include the signing of the *Ketubah*, the exchange of rings, and the groom's recitation of the *kiddushin* (betrothal formula), declaring, "You are consecrated to me according to the laws of Moses and Israel" (Rosenberg-Friedman 2012, 119). The ceremony is conducted by a rabbi under the *Chuppah* and accompanied by blessings recited by men, further enriching the ritual (Rosenberg-Friedman 2012, 119).

Breaking the glass. One of the most recognizable rituals in Jewish weddings is the breaking of a glass by the groom. It became one of the features of the wedding. Towards the end of a Jewish wedding ceremony, a poignant moment arrives where the groom steps on a glass (or sometimes a light bulb for an easier 'break') enclosed in a cloth bag, effectively shattering it. The crowd erupts in applause and shouts, congratulation *Mazel Tov!* or Good Luck. This marks the joyous conclusion of the ceremony. According to Prashizky (2008, 90), the traditional explanation of this custom is reminding the couple and guests of the Temple's destruction, accompanied by the verse from the Psalms (137:5-6) recited by the groom. This interpretation receives validity from the verse from Psalms (137:5): "If I forget You, O Jerusalem" ... (Prashizky 2008, 96). This interpretation serves as a poignant reminder that even in moments of great joy, one must remember the suffering and the sacrifices of the past.

Post-wedding festivities. After the ceremony, the newlyweds participate in a festive meal known as *Seudat Mitzvah*, and blessings, known as *Sheva Brachot* (Seven Blessings), are recited for seven days post-wedding. These blessings speak to the joy of marriage, the couple's new journey, and the continuity of the Jewish people (Biale 2004). It can therefore be said that Jewish marriage traditions have evolved but still maintain a strong connection to ancient

practices, reflecting values central to Jewish identity and religious life. Through these traditions, marriage is not only a personal milestone but a community celebration, bearing significant religious, cultural, and historical meanings. Likewise, in Jewish tradition, marriage is considered a *mitzvah* (commandment) and an essential aspect of fulfilling God's commandments. Jewish marriage rituals, including the signing of the *ketubah* (marriage contract), stress the legal and spiritual dimensions of the union (Lamm 2000). Marriage is also central to ensuring the survival and continuity of the Jewish people.

Comparison Between the Two Marriage Practices:

The Shao-Awon marriage festival and Jewish marriage practices represent two distinct cultural traditions, yet they share foundational aspects in their approach to marriage. While distinct in their cultural origins, these traditions reveal notable similarities and differences in their approach to marriage, community involvement, and symbolism.

Cultural Background and Purpose.

The Shao-Awon festival, celebrated in Shao, Nigeria, is deeply rooted in indigenous beliefs and is dedicated to the *Awon* goddess, who symbolizes fertility and prosperity (Akano 2020, 45). This tradition emphasizes community unity and the continuity of local customs, reinforcing social ties and collective identity. Similarly, Adamo (2005, 22-25) highlights the significance of African traditional religious practices in fostering communal bonds and preserving cultural heritage. In contrast, Jewish marriage practices are rooted in ancient Jewish culture and religious law, prioritizing family continuity, religious observance, and the legal structure of marriage, which is seen as a covenant with divine and familial implications (Epstein 1968, 78-82). Both traditions view marriage as central to cultural continuity but differ in their primary focus: one on communal celebration, the other on religious covenant.

Ceremony and Structure.

The Shao-Awon marriage festival features a communal, mass wedding ceremony in which multiple couples marry simultaneously, emphasizing the unity of the community. This collective celebration fosters social bonds and reinforces shared cultural values (Akano 2020, 47-49). Furthermore, Olajubu (2003, 33-36) notes the role of ritual performance in Yoruba cultural festivals, emphasizing their communal and spiritual significance. Jewish marriages, on the other hand, typically occur as individual ceremonies, where couples exchange vows under a *chuppah* (wedding canopy), symbolizing the creation of a new home. Jewish ceremonies vary in scale, but they tend to be more private and focus on religious officiation, reflecting the individuality of each marital union within a sacred framework (Epstein 1968, 84-86). Both traditions, while differing in structure, see marriage as a socially significant event.

Pre-marital Requirements.

Both traditions involve structured pre-marital rituals that ensure the couple's readiness for marriage. In Shao culture, these involve community vetting, cultural rites, and significant parental involvement, reflecting a collective investment in the couple's future. Ajayi (2009, 50-53) underscores the importance of parental and community roles in traditional African marital arrangements. Jewish marriages also include specific preparatory rituals, such as engagement and the signing of the *ketubah*, a marriage contract detailing spousal rights and obligations in accordance with *Halacha* (Jewish law) (Epstein 1968, 90-92). These preparatory

steps in both cultures underscore a shared commitment to cultural and community standards, even as the specifics vary by tradition.

Symbolism and Role of Religion.

The role of religion and symbolism in marriage is crucial in both practices. In Shao, the Awon goddess embodies fertility and prosperity, linking the marriage to a sacred heritage and community identity (Akano 2020, 51-52). As Adamo (2005, 27-29) points out, African religious traditions often integrate spiritual symbolism to reinforce societal norms and values. Jewish marriages similarly emphasize symbolism, such as the *chuppah* and the breaking of the glass, which convey themes of unity, fragility, and the sacred nature of marriage under Jewish law (Epstein 1968, 94-96). While the Shao tradition centers on local spiritual beliefs tied to fertility, Jewish marriage views marriage as a covenant under divine protection, reflecting a shared belief in the sacredness of marriage but with different religious contexts.

Community Involvement. Community participation is integral to both marriage practices. In Shao, the entire community partakes in the festival, contributing to preparations and celebrations that reinforce social cohesion (Akano 2020, 53-55). Awolalu (1976, 11-13) notes that African communal events often involve collective responsibility, enhancing solidarity. Jewish weddings, while often smaller in scale, involve family and friends who offer blessings and witness the union, and the community plays a vital role in supporting the couple's integration into Jewish communal life (Epstein 1968, 98-100). For both cultures, the community's role underscores the social importance of marriage, though the forms of participation and scale differ by tradition.

Legal and Spiritual Recognition. In Shao culture, marriage is traditionally recognized within the community and upheld by local authorities, reflecting a primarily social and spiritual validation. Jewish marriages, however, carry both religious authority and, in many places, legal recognition under secular law, especially where there are formal provisions for religious marriages (Epstein 1968, 102-104). Both systems place marriage within a framework of social responsibility, though Jewish marriages are more widely integrated into secular legal structures. Ogunade (2010, 59-61) highlights the dual nature of traditional African marriages as both spiritual and communal contracts, paralleling the duality in Jewish traditions.

Symbolic Similarities.

Both Jewish marriage and the Awon mass marriage festival emphasize the continuity of lineage and community engagement, despite their distinct religious backgrounds. Jewish marriage is seen as *kiddushin* (a sacred contract) involving God, man, and woman, with marriage as *mitzvah* (a commandment) rooted in religious duty (Epstein 1968, 106-108). Conversely, the Awon Festival celebrates marriage as a community event, honoring the goddess's blessings as a source of prosperity and familial continuity (Akano 2020, 57-58). Both systems thus value marriage as a social and spiritual commitment, with Shao focusing on local deities and Jewish tradition centering on covenantal theology.

Transition and Symbolism of Marriage.

Marriage in both traditions marks a significant life transition, underscored by unique rituals. Jewish marriage transitions from individual identity to family unity, where symbolic acts like breaking the glass emphasize life's fragility and the sanctity of marriage (Epstein 1968, 110-112). In Shao, rituals such as *Ekun Iyawo*, where brides recite family praises, acknowledge the

bride's emotional shift from her family of birth to her new role in marriage (Akano 2020, 59-60). Both practices involve acts of farewell and commitment, symbolizing the profound emotional and social transition marriage entails.

Shared and Unique Aspects of Spiritual and Ancestral Ties. In both traditions, spiritual observances and ancestral ties play a significant role. Jewish marriage rituals invoke God's blessing through symbolic elements like the *chuppah*, aligning marriage with broader theological views of family and community (Epstein 1968, 114-116). The Shao tradition centers on reverence for the *Awon* goddess, who promises fertility and prosperity in exchange for community adherence to her guidance, symbolized by the sacred *Awon* River (Akano 2020, 62-63). Both practices incorporate divine or spiritual elements to reinforce the significance of marriage, albeit through different deities and religious frameworks.

It could be summarized thus: while the Shao-Awon and Jewish marriage traditions each draw on unique cultural and spiritual contexts, they reveal universal values regarding the commitment, continuity, and sacredness of marriage. Both traditions emphasize the role of community, the importance of symbolism, and the belief that marriage is a binding covenant, highlighting marriage as a cornerstone of both personal and communal identity.

Lessons for the Church

The comparative analysis of the Shao-Awon mass marriage festival and Jewish wedding traditions offers profound lessons for the church, particularly in community involvement, the sanctity of marriage, cultural integration, and spiritual significance. Drawing insights from biblical scholars and cultural analysts, this section explores potential applications for contemporary Christian communities.

Embrace Communal Values and Support Systems

The Shao-Awon mass marriage festival exemplifies how communal involvement transforms marriage into a collective responsibility. The festival's elaborate preparations and societal participation underscore the importance of strong support systems for young couples (Akano 2020, 5). Churches can establish mentorship programs where seasoned couples guide newlyweds, offering wisdom on navigating marital challenges (Adeyemo 2006, 35). This aligns with Galatians 6:2: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Furthermore, Shao's communal participation highlights the necessity of shared values in sustaining marriages. Churches can foster deeper connections within congregations, strengthening marital bonds against external pressures (Olupona 1991, 42).

Honour Marriage as a Sacred Covenant

Jewish wedding traditions emphasize marriage as a sacred covenant. The ketubah (marriage contract) and covenantal vows reflect deep responsibility and commitment (Epstein 1968, 23-25). This aligns with Christian views of marriage as a divine institution, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 19:6: "Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Churches can reinforce this by teaching couples about the covenantal nature of marriage, emphasizing lifelong commitment. Pre-marital counseling programs should stress the sacredness of vows, drawing from biblical teachings and cultural practices that reinforce commitment. Mugambi (1989, 78) suggests integrating cultural elements into Christian marriage teachings to enhance relevance.

Incorporate Cultural Elements Respectfully

Both the Shao-Awon festival and Jewish marriage traditions integrate cultural elements. The Awon festival's Kikase Iyawo procession and Ekun Iyawo (bride's lamentation) mark the transition to marital life (Akano 2020, 6-7). Similarly, Jewish weddings feature the chuppah and breaking of the glass, symbolizing unity and life's fragility (Epstein 1968, 45).

The church can encourage couples to incorporate meaningful cultural traditions into Christian weddings, provided they align with biblical principles. Mbiti (1969, 128) argues that Christianity must engage with African cultural contexts to remain relevant. Symbolic acts like exchanging traditional gifts or reciting family praises can enrich Christian ceremonies, connecting marriage to cultural roots.

Celebrate Milestones and Rites of Passage

Both traditions emphasize marking life's milestones. The Awon Festival's communal feasting and processions serve as rites of passage that strengthen social bonds (Akano 2020, 8). Similarly, Jewish weddings include the sheva brachot (seven blessings), reinforcing community support (Epstein 1968, 34).

Churches can celebrate marital milestones by recognizing anniversaries, offering blessings during services, or organizing family life conferences. Karkkainen (2004, 112) advocates integrating communal celebrations in church life to foster unity.

Strengthen Youth and Pre-Marital Education

Both the Shao and Jewish traditions highlight the importance of marriage preparation. In Shao culture, pre-marital rites involve family and community vetting, ensuring readiness for marital responsibilities (Akano 2020, 5). Jewish betrothal customs and the ketubah similarly emphasize preparation (Epstein 1968, 18-19).

The church can develop comprehensive pre-marital counseling programs addressing emotional, spiritual, and practical aspects of marriage. Topics like conflict resolution, financial stewardship, and spiritual partnership can be covered. Nyende (2011, 49) stresses the value of such programs in fostering stable, faith-based marriages.

Recognize and Support Marriage as Part of Social Well-Being

Both traditions demonstrate how marriage contributes to societal stability. The Shao festival reinforces cultural identity and social cohesion, while Jewish marriages uphold

theological and communal values (Akano 2020, 9; Epstein 1968, 20). The church can view marriage not only as a personal commitment but as foundational to community health.

Churches can support policies and programs that strengthen family life, such as marriage enrichment seminars and community outreach initiatives. Orobator (2008, 93) notes that the church's involvement in societal issues enhances its role as a moral and spiritual guide, promoting values that benefit the wider community.

Continuity and Spiritual Commitment

Jewish marriage and the Shao-Awon festival emphasize continuity and spirituality. Jewish marriage, rooted in covenantal theology, sees marriage as a divine commandment (Epstein 1968, 15). The Awon festival similarly honors the Awon goddess as a source of fertility and prosperity (Akano 2020, 10). These shared symbolic values highlight the necessity of grounding marriage in faith and community.

Origin and Significance

The Shao-Awon festival and Jewish marriage originate from deeply spiritual contexts. The Awon Festival's genesis during the reign of Ohoro Olanibo reflects the community's divine connection (Oke 1996, 67). Similarly, Jewish marriage, rooted in the Torah, aligns with theological understandings of family as a covenantal institution (Epstein 1968, 12-14). The church can draw from these origins to reinforce marriage as a God-ordained institution, emphasizing its significance in God's plan.

By adopting lessons from the Shao-Awon Festival and Jewish wedding traditions, the church can enrich its approach to marriage, emphasizing communal values, sacredness, and cultural relevance. Integrating these lessons into church teachings and practices can strengthen marriage as a cornerstone of faith and community life.

Methods

This study employs a comparative methodology to analyze the symbolic and ritualistic elements embedded in Shao-Awon and Jewish marriage traditions. It utilizes primary and secondary sources, including historical records, ethnographic observations, and scholarly interpretations of marriage practices within both cultures. Interviews with cultural and religious leaders were conducted to provide firsthand insights into the significance and evolution of these marriage traditions. The study also engaged in participant observations of wedding ceremonies to document ritual performances and symbolic expressions. Durkheim's theory of social solidarity provides a theoretical framework for understanding how these marriage traditions contribute to social structure and cultural continuity. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and differences across both traditions.

Results

The result analysis is presented in the table below.

Aspect	Shao-Awon Marriage Practice	Jewish Marriage Practice
Social Cohesion	Marriage is a communal affair, reinforcing collective identity through shared rituals and communal involvement.	Marriage strengthens community bonds through collective participation in rituals and traditions.
Spiritual Significance	Seen as a sacred covenant with the Awon goddess, ensuring moral and spiritual commitment.	Considered a divine covenant with God, emphasizing religious and spiritual commitment.
Cultural Continuity	Rituals serve to pass down cultural values, reinforce generational ties, and preserve societal norms.	Marriage rituals help transmit Jewish cultural and religious traditions across generations.
Community Participation	Family, elders, and religious leaders play key roles in facilitating and witnessing marriages.	Family, elders, and religious authorities are actively involved in the marriage process.

Discussion

The examination of Shao-Awon and Jewish marriages reveals profound similarities that illuminate the importance of community, spirituality, cultural continuity, and participation in both traditions. These aspects enhance our understanding of how marriage functions not merely as a personal union but as a cornerstone of societal structure and identity.

Social Cohesion is a significant element in both Shao-Awon and Jewish marriages. In the Shao-Awon tradition, marriage is treated as a communal affair, where rituals and celebrations bring families and communities together. This shared involvement fosters a strong collective identity, reinforcing the notion that marriage is not only the joining of two individuals but also of two families and their respective communities. Similarly, Jewish marriages are recognized as significant communal events, which contribute to a sense of belonging and solidarity among community members. The participation of family and friends in these celebrations enhances social ties and upholds the societal fabric, illustrating the universal importance of marriage as a shared human experience.

Both traditions also place a great spiritual significance on marriage. In the Shao-Awon context, marriages are considered pivotal sacred covenants with the Awon goddess, which underscores the importance of moral and spiritual responsibilities within the union. This perspective ensures that individuals approach marriage with a sense of purpose and divine commitment. In Jewish tradition, marriage is interpreted as a holy covenant with God, emphasizing the sacred nature of the union and the ethical obligations that arise from it. In both cases, marriage is viewed as an avenue for spiritual growth and community-bound values, guiding the lives of couples within their respective beliefs.

Cultural continuity is another critical aspect reflected in both marriage traditions. Wedding rituals serve as effective mechanisms for passing down cultural values, ensuring that traditions are preserved and promoted across generations. In the Shao-Awon tradition, specific rituals help reinforce generational ties and societal norms, ensuring the maintenance of cultural identity. Similarly, Jewish marriage customs incorporate elements that educate and connect

younger generations to their heritage, firmly rooting them in their history while shaping their future as a community.

Lastly, community participation in marriage ceremonies is a cornerstone of both traditions. The roles of family, elders, and religious leaders are pivotal in facilitating and witnessing these important events. In Shao-Awon marriages, these individuals are not only participants but vital sponsors of the union, affirming its communal significance. Likewise, in Jewish weddings, community engagement emphasizes that the marriage is not merely an individual choice but a shared life journey that reflects collective values and support. This communal approach nurtures a sense of accountability and a network of support for the couple.

In summary, both Shao-Awon and Jewish marriage traditions encapsulate essential societal elements, emphasizing community, spirituality, cultural heritage, and collective participation, illustrating how deeply intertwined marriage is with the social and cultural fabric of each community.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that marriage is not only a personal commitment but also a communal and often divine institution that serves as a cornerstone for social cohesion, cultural preservation, and spiritual connection. Through the comparative examination of the Shao-Awon mass marriage festival and Jewish marriage traditions, it becomes evident that both practices embody unique yet overlapping values, revealing marriage's multifaceted significance across cultures.

The Shao-Awon festival in Yoruba culture illustrates marriage as a communal affair that strengthens collective identity and ancestral ties. Celebrating marriage as a communal responsibility, it fosters unity and continuity within the community. The festival's emphasis on ancestral blessings and fertility reflects the interconnectedness of the spiritual, familial, and social dimensions of life in Yoruba tradition.

On the other hand, Jewish marriage traditions emphasize the sacred covenant between the couple and God, underscoring values such as fidelity, mutual responsibility, and theological continuity. The structured nature of Jewish weddings, with elements like the **ketubah** (marriage contract) and **chuppah** (wedding canopy), reinforces the spiritual and legal aspects of marriage, highlighting its role as both a divine ordinance and a familial institution.

Both traditions affirm that marriage serves as a mechanism for cultural preservation, ensuring the transmission of values, beliefs, and identity across generations. The insights derived from these practices have significant implications for contemporary institutions, particularly the church. As marriage faces challenges from modern individualism, shifting cultural norms, and economic pressures, there is a pressing need to reimagine marriage as both a personal commitment and a collective endeavor.

The church can draw valuable lessons from these traditions by incorporating communal support structures and emphasizing marriage as a covenant with spiritual dimensions. Programs that integrate cultural heritage, mentorship, and spiritual preparation can enrich Christian marriage ceremonies, ensuring that they resonate with the diverse cultural backgrounds of congregants while upholding biblical principles.

Finally, this study suggests that exploring diverse marriage practices from different cultures and religious traditions can deepen our understanding of marriage as a resilient and adaptable institution. As globalization and modernization reshape societal norms, preserving the social and spiritual essence of marriage becomes increasingly important. By fostering a balance between cultural diversity and social unity, marriage can continue to serve as a vital institution that upholds the values of love, commitment, and communal solidarity.

Recommendations

1. Foster community support in marriage: Inspired by Shao's communal approach to marriage, churches can build supportive communities around young couples. Mentorship programs and community involvement can provide guidance, foster accountability, and encourage a collective commitment to marital success, which may reduce isolation and strengthen relationships.
2. Honour marriage as a sacred covenant: The Jewish focus on marriage as a covenant before God can remind churches to emphasize the spiritual depth of marriage vows. By highlighting the sacred responsibility that marriage entails, the church can reinforce the value of commitment and fidelity in relationships, promoting stronger, more resilient unions.
3. Incorporate meaningful cultural practices: Both Shao and Jewish traditions incorporate culturally resonant elements in marriage ceremonies. Churches and society could encourage couples to include meaningful aspects of their heritage in their weddings. This would help preserve cultural identity and enhance the personal significance of marriage, fostering a connection between tradition and faith.
4. Celebrate marriage and family milestones: Shao-Awon festival celebrates marriage as a rite of passage within the community. Churches could benefit from similar practices by celebrating anniversaries, family achievements, and other milestones. Special blessings or services for married couples can serve as community reminders of the spiritual and social importance of marriage.
5. Strengthen youth and pre-marital education: The collective involvement in Shao's marriage arrangements highlights the value of preparation. Churches could improve youth and pre-marital counseling programs to include topics on commitment, conflict resolution, and partnership. This early investment in relationship skills can help future couples build solid foundations.
6. Recognize marriage as a pillar of social stability: Both the Shao and Jewish practices demonstrate that marriage is central to cultural continuity and societal well-being. The church can support this view by framing marriage not only as a personal commitment but as part of building a thriving, values-based society. This focus on marriage's social role could encourage communities to actively support and celebrate healthy family structures.

By drawing from these insights, the church and broader society can support marriage as a cornerstone of spiritual and cultural identity, blending traditional values with contemporary understanding for a more resilient and unified community.

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