
REFLECTION ON AN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Every nation then and now is bedeviled with societal problems. Among these problems are: disorderliness, robbery, immorality, disrespect, laziness, idleness, poor attitude to work, conflict, indiscipline, selfishness, etc. Attempts are made by nations and her people to ameliorate situations. When one is solved, another occurs. This paper looks at how marriage in the traditional African system contributed to the relative peace in their societies. The objectives of the paper are: to show the relationship between stable families and well-ordered societies. The paper adopts a philosophical method. The scope is on the Yoruba marriage traditional system, though references are made to other societies in Africa. Even at that, it must be said that there are more than one marriage systems among the Yoruba people.

Keywords: *Marriage, Love, Family, Responsibility and Division of Labour.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the state and the family is not difficult to see. We have it on the good authority of Aristotle that the state is a composition of families, in his famous book *The Politics*. According to Aristotle (350 BC: BK. I):

Out of these two relationships between man and woman, masters and slaves, the first thing to arise is the family...But when several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs, the first society to be formed is the village...When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficient, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life.

This organic view of the state is very germane to the discussion of this paper. Any attempt to solve the contemporaneous problems of the society will remain but a fleeting illusion if it does not resort to the root of the societal problems, which is located in the family. The present social crimes facing our societies today are due to sheer neglect of home responsibilities and utter disregard to the traditional values and ways of life. Any step towards finding solutions to these problems must therefore be sought, first at homes because these problems are

themselves “carryovers” from homes and they are only “effects” when they appear outside in the society.

The Concept of Marriage

Like many social terminologies, marriage is an essentially contentious concept. Marriage and the idea of marriage are universal but there is no one generally acceptable definition of marriage. *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* defines marriage/ wedlock/matrimony as:

...a socially or ritually recognized union or legal contract between spouses that establishes rights and obligations between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws.

The import of this definition is that where there are no children, there is no marriage. The same authority traces the origin of marriage to the Middle English, *mariage* which was also a derivative of Old French *marier* which means to marry. *Marier* is also derived from a Latin word *maritare*, meaning, to be provided with a wife or husband. The same authority goes ahead to cite other authorities, among whom are; Edvard Westermarck who defines marriage as: “a more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till the birth of the offspring.” Westermarck was to reject the definition years later and gave another more controversial definition of marriage as: “relation of one or more men to one or more women that is recognized by custom or law.” Our source also quotes from the anthropological handbook *Notes and Queries* that marriage is: “a union between a man and a woman such that children born from the woman are the recognized legitimate offspring of both partners.” None of these definitions meet our curiosity but they have been cited just to show how controversial the concept can be. Ayisi (1997: 7) defines marriage as the process whereby a man and a woman come together to form a union for the purpose of procreation. However, marriage can be seen as an intended temporary or permanent union between a man and a woman that is socially, culturally or legally recognized. In other words, marriage is not just an agreement between a man and a woman to live together without the knowledge of others of the kind of relationship that exists between them. Marriage is a public matter. Labels Tonizek (2008) identifies three different types of marriage which are; traditional, court and white marriages. White marriage is done in the Churches and Mosques where clergies preside over the affairs. The Court marriage is done under the law of the state. The traditional marriage is the local form of marriage. This shall be the focus of our discussion in this paper. However, it is common to see some people taking part in all these forms of marriage.

African Conception on Marriage and Family

Marriage occupies an important position in the affairs of Africans, especially in the past. Without marriage, there is no family, and without a family, one could not bear children. The

connection between marriage and family can hardly be separated among the traditional Africans. In recognition of this, Ayisi (1997: 15) writes:

The family is then the logical outcome of marriage. A family consists of a man, his wife, and child or children. By this definition, a childless marriage is not a family. An individual belongs to at least one family in his lifetime.

Since the family is the basic unit of any political and social organizations, the process of erecting it should and was given serious attention among the traditional African societies. Marriage, for Africans, though is purposely for procreation, is more than that. Marriage serves other purposes. According to Mbiti (1969: 133):

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet unborn. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator.

The family is not just a component of the man, the wife and their children. The departed souls, relatives and the unborn generations are regarded as members of the family. That is why marriage is not the union, or the joining of a man and a woman for the purpose of becoming husband and wife. Marriage is basically a family or even a community affair. The involvement of the departed souls in African traditional marriage makes it a sacred affair. According to William Abraham (1987: 22):

Marriage in African tradition is the joining of two families through the union of one man and one woman and their children, always to the exclusion of all other men as regards the woman, and in monogamous societies, to the exclusion of all other women as regards the man.

African traditional conception of marriage is teleological. It is primarily for procreation. Marriage can be dissolved on the ground of childlessness. The importance attached to children is however without basis. One major reason for that attachment is summed up in what Mbiti (1969: 131) calls 'personal immortality.' When a man dies, he needs somebody to bear his name, so that his name does not die. According to Awolalu and Adelumo (1979: 172):

The Yoruba attach importance to child-bearing. Unfruitful marriage is not only a misfortune but also a curse since the couple have not contributed to the community of the family and therefore, of the society. A barren woman, however rich, famous or prosperous, is a shame to her race.

Importance to children among the traditional Africans can be rationalized. In an agrarian society, especially in the past, the manliness of a man was measured by his farm produce. The higher the produce, the greater the respect accorded a man. Many hands in the farm led to greater output. Also, leadership roles and chieftaincy titles were reserved for men who had many wives and children under them. The reasoning behind this is that, a man who could control many wives and children, if given leadership roles, would be effective. Africans were not taught how not to die, but they believed that if they have many children, some of them would outlive them even if some of them would die.

An Analysis of a Traditional Yoruba Marriage System

There are different marriages traditional systems among the Yoruba people of the South-West of Nigeria. The one discussed below is just one of them. Traditional Africans in general, and the Yoruba in particular, laid much premium on marriage because they know that if the foundation is weak, the entire building (that is, the society) will be negatively affected. They know that nothing can be built on nothing. They know that individuals make up the family and families make up the community. To build a strong and stable society therefore, the family must be well-founded. The Yoruba would say: "*Omo ti a ko ba ko nii gbe ile ti a ba ko ta*" (an untrained child makes nonsense in wealth or inheritance.) Efforts are made to train the child right from birth on how to be responsible and relevant, not only to himself, family but also to the entire community. A child is taught to be hard working, to be moral, and above all, to manage his family in future. Parents, who are convinced that their son is mature to have a wife, make arrangement for a wife for him. This position is a departure from that of Akingbemi (2007: 61) who opines that the decision or intension to marry comes from the man. This is not the original arrangement in Yorubaland. A man does not know when he is ripe for marriage in life. It is the parents, after close observation of some fundamental changes in their sons that would determine when it is time to marry. Awolalu and Adelumo (1979: 178) are definitely right when they submit that:

Among the Yoruba, marriage is the affair of the family and not the concerned individual. This is because the people regard marriage as something that will unite the families of both husband and wife and make them one.

The Yoruba would say: "*Bi omode ba to loko, aa fun loko, bi o ba to l'ada, aa fun l'ada*" (literarily, when a child is ripe for hoe, he is given a hoe, if he is ripe for cutlass, he is given cutlass) When they are convinced that a son is ripe for marriage, they set in motion, sometimes without the knowledge of their son. When they have seen one, they engage the service of **alarina**, (a-go-between) who is usually a trusted member of the family. He conveys the messages of the intending in-laws to the parents of the lady. Gifts are exchanged if the parents of the lady accept the proposal. At the earlier part of the arrangement, the lady might

not even be told. Then, the parents of the young man and the young lady would carry out investigation about both families, making sure that there is no record or trace of serious disease or crime or both. Then, the service of the *Ifa priest* is sought. Yoruba believe that reality is more than appearance, and they also know that things are changing, hence, they would say: "*bi oni se ri, ola ko ri bee lu mu ki babalawo d'ifa ojojumo.*" They would even say: *t'lo mola* (who knows tomorrow?). It was after the results of these investigations are positive that the man and the lady would be told. Immediately, the lady's mother intensifies on her education of her daughter.

Girls will many times go to schools where women teach them what is involved in marriage, and in some ethnic groups even learn secret codes and languages so that they can communicate with other married women. In the wolof people there is even a time where the elders of the village gather with their bride and give advice and gift.

www.africanmarriage.info

Among the traditional Yoruba people, one lesson they give to their daughters is that: "*Ile oko, ile eko ni*" (*marriage is a school*). They also teach their daughters that: "*obe ti bale ile ko kii je, iyale ile kii se*" (meaning that good wives do not do contrary to what the husband says. Men are not left out in marriage education. Men are taught to be caring to their wives. They are taught to be responsible to them. Above all, they are taught to provide for their home. According to Ogunngbemi, (1997: 3): "To the Africans failure to cater for the needs of their women (children) is morally unjust." What is the need for this Yoruba marriage education? Akingbemi (2007: 62) provides the answer thus:

They believe that before their daughters or sons enter into marriage and build a home, they must know that marriage is not a trial and error affair. Marriage is not the act of trading with man or in (sic) woman... Marriage is not a bed of roses, and it brings a lot of responsibilities on people.

When the parents of the young man and the lady have agreed to on the marriage of their children, and they have told their children about it, after the payment of *owo ibasoro*, the prospective husband and wife are then allowed to pay and exchange visits, talk, eat and walk together. The impression that parents forced whom to marry on their children should not be created by this arrangement. We can imagine some of them protesting initially but their parents know more than they do, so, they could easily convince them. Where they do not protest, it is a sign that the children have been properly brought up to know that their parents know what is good for them and that they love them. Then, the marriage date is fixed. On that day, gifts in cash and kinds will be collected, and there will be a lot of merriments, display and dancing. The high point of the ceremony is the payment and collection of the *bride price* commonly called *idano*. The bride price is divided into two, with

one part going to the mother side and the other to the father side of the families. Bride price is not the money collected for the sale of the girl. As a matter of fact, girls are not sold in marriage among the Yoruba people. In case of divorce, it will be paid back. Also, it is both in cash and in kind. The money paid by the groom side is endless from the time of the marriage to death. Men are always debtors to the family of their wives. The bride price therefore does not amount to the sale of the girl. It is just part of the fun of the tradition. Yet, there is no marriage without the payment of the bride price among the Yoruba people. I think it is just to show how serious the intending in-laws are about their proposal, or a demonstration of love that the family of the lady have for their daughter. According to William Abraham (1987: 22):

As earnest of their good faith, and an expression of the degree of honor and esteem held for the woman's family, they make a series of prestations consisting of items of wealth, however locally expressed- eg. livestock, hunting implements, money. Without such prestations, any eventual liaison is only an irregular union and enjoys no protection.

Prayers are offered by both families. After this event, the bride is handed over to the head or representative of the head of the family of the groom. On arrival at the home of the husband, before entrance, water is used to wash her feet, symbolizing that she is welcome. After five days or thereabout, the husband is allowed to sleep with her. If the lady is a virgin, she becomes a source of pride, not only to her parents but also to her community. If she is not a virgin, she brings shame to them. This is probably one of the reasons parents in the past monitored and trained their daughters very well. Lack of virginity may put an end to the entire marriage. According to Ayisi (1997: 181):

Some African societies regard sex as the most important factor in marriage and, therefore, premium is placed on virginity. Girls on marriage are expected to be virgins and are rewarded for virginity.

This is one of the traditional values that have been neglected today, even among the most religious people. In its place, sex education is being recommended. Parents now teach their children the rudiments of sex. The implication of this is that, young brothers and sisters made fun with one another. Our quest for sustainable development then becomes slimmer on daily basis. Early sex does not only lead to immorality, but also to early pregnancy, abortion and school drop-out.

Traditional Versus Modern Marriage

Westernization, modernization and Christianity have all affected African culture. One area of the impacts of these is on the marriage system in Africa. Today, marriage system has changed significantly, and many are fast forgetting that there was a marriage system in Africa before the coming of Christianity and civilization. The concept of family too has changed drastically. Family is now deemed to be composed of the father, the mother and their children. Other

relatives are seen as foreigners to the family. As a matter of fact, the parents of the wife, those of the husband, their brothers and sisters, are not seen as part of the family. William Abraham (1962: 32) made this point clearer when he says:

The institution of the family too has received some rude shocks. In many cases it is in practice no longer the very closely-knit web that it was... To the extent that the obligations enjoined by this value are ignored; to that extent society is on the way to atomism. The family steadily contracts into man, wife, and children.

Today, parents play little or no role in the choice of whom to marry. The decision is now for the individuals involved, and that of the church or mosque that they belong to. When these two groups or either of them must have made the decision, parents may or may not be informed. When they do, if they raise any objection and refuse to participate in it, even for good reasons, the church and the court are ready to grant their prayers. Marriage is thus seen as the union of a man and a woman, with or without the support of their parents. In some cases where the church and the court demand the consent of the parents, parents are rented or hired for the purpose of the marriage. What is lost? What is lost is the place of investigation which played a significant role in the success and stability of marriage in the past. The outcome of this neglect is instability at home, and marriage that was meant to be enjoyed becomes what people endure.

Another area of departure today from the traditional African culture of marriage is the motive for marriage. An essential ingredient of marriage is love. A look at wedding cards reveals that a man and a woman decide to marry each other because they love or claim to love each other. The foundation of their marriage is therefore love. This is a good foundation but what do people call love? A deep look into the traditional marriage in Yoruba in the past reveal that marriage was not based on love but on responsibility. The people loved but their marriage was not found on love. A man who gets to know his wife-to-be few days to their marriage cannot claim to make a choice of his wife based on his love for her. The same can be said of the lady. People married in the past because they wanted to shoulder responsibilities. The man had been taught what it takes to be a husband and a father. The wife has learnt the roles of a wife and a mother at home, and both of them prepared for the task ahead of them. For the lady, returning to live with her parents after marriage was like a taboo. For the man, failure to live up to responsibility at home was a great shame. Comparing marriage in the past with the modern one, a writer writes:

In the olden days, two people meet 2 times and got married on the third 3rd time- and these marriages lasted a lifetime. Today couples date for 3 years and get divorced 6 months after finally getting married. (www.africanmarriage.info)

Traditionally, people accept their places at home. No competition, no supremacy and no struggle. Yoruba women were taught that: "*oko ni olori aya*" (the husband is the head of the wife) before getting married, women had known this and they are prepared to accept this position. Then, there was no feminist to advocate the equality of man and woman. Then one to preach that when the woman is grinding pepper, the man should be making *eba* after all they love each other, after all, they will both eat the food. The writer referred to above wonders what African women are fighting for. He queries:

What were African women fighting for before 1950's, before Europeans coined a term to articulate their specific Eurocentric struggle within the cultural borders of European socio-cultural milieu?...Feminism rotates in the west and is exported to infest, and attach themselves to the broader woman's struggle for justice and equality in a male dominated world...The form of African women's rights emerging in various parts of the continent do not grow out of individualism within the context of industrial societies, as did Western feminism.

Most of our women today are Christians or Muslims; at least, they go to churches and mosques. What they learn is one man one wife. What they learn is that men should love their wives and not be harsh with them for they are weaker vessels. They never learn that in all things, women should submit to their own husbands. They never learn the example of Sarah. An interesting aspect of Yoruba traditional marriage is division of labour. It is the sole responsibility of the man to make provision for the needs of the family. This responsibility he does not share with any member of the family. Because the family never desire more than what was required or essential, it was easy for the man to live up to his responsibilities. Anytime the woman rendered help in this area, it is acknowledged as a help but not as a responsibility.

The woman was in charge of home management. Cooking for the husband until her children are able to cook was a thing of pride. I once live in village where women quarreled with their husband for not eating their food. Where the couple lived in the same compound with the parents of the husband, it was common for the mother of the man to give food to her son, now the husband. If the man should eat the food to excess that he could not eat the one prepared by the wife, offence is taken. The point being made here is that, Yoruba women in the past never thought that it was a burden, or unfair treatment for them to cook for their husbands, even if they returned home at the same time. I have heard it being said that the wife should slap her husband with soup spoon if she meets him in the kitchen because that is not his area of jurisdiction. An important role of the wife was the moral education of the children. They inculcate good behaviour in their children teach them what is socially and morally acceptable. According to William Abraham (1987: 21):

To wives is entrusted the initial training of a children and the transmission of the traditions, religion, morals, manners, taste of the society. A wife enshrines the moral force of the society; a being more mysterious than a man, she is more sacral, and is the object of many taboos and rites, and is often revealed as the innermost secret of male religious societies.

CONCLUSION

The quest for order in the society cannot be fruitful until the foundation of the society is revisited. Our nation would probably not have had so much problems confronting it today if the various families had lived up to expectation, because, as it has been shown in this paper, everyone on the street is a product of a family. If the father has actually fathered and the mother mothered, the chance of the children misbehaving in the society would have been reduced to the barest minimal. All these cannot be because our society has been disconnected from its roots. For instance, how can the mothers of today live up to her duties at home when she wants to be to be a socialite? Women want to be everywhere, competing with men not for equality but for supremacy. They want to oppress other women and men. Women want to put on the best clothes, have the latest car, and get to the highest peak of education. Anyone who expect them to achieve these they desires and still have time to perform their domestic duties expect too much from them. Yet, this is not the fault of women, it is one of the evils done to the cultural values of Africa by Christianity (or the way it is interpreted in Africa), and westernization. One wonders aloud the basis of women liberation in Africa.

Liberation from what? By far, traditional Africa provided a better way for strong and stable society. Efforts are made to see that there is orderliness in the society by building homes. There are cases of divorce today even among our clergies who claimed to have seen their wives and husbands in the visions that were revealed to them. Months after those who claimed that they love each other got wedded in the churches, mosques and courts, they get divorced, and one is tempted to ask where is the place of love in marriage, my mother never told my father once that she loved him, neither did I heard my father telling my mother that he loved her, yet, they lived in love and peace. What helped them was the background provided for them by the traditional African setting. They were taught that marriage is a responsibility and they were well prepared for it. In spite of the challenges in marriage, divorce was never considered as an option in the past, unlike today where marriage has become: "for better for stay for worse for go." Parents, for the reasons best known for them, retain the apartment of their daughters getting married and give her the impression that if the place is not favaourable to her, she is free to come back to them, after all, her apartment has not been leased out. Cases of broken homes abound in our society today. Single mothers are common, courtesy of the feminists or the so-called women liberators. Unfortunately,

some of these women liberators face more challenges at home more than the people they are liberating but endure them. Children from broken homes suffer unless where solid arrangement and absolute commitment is made to come to their aid. This portends danger for the much desired sustainable development in Africa. Everything about the past is not glorious, and so, one is not calling for a return to it, however, it must be said that everything about the past was not bad. One of the good things about the past is the traditional marriage system, and it is believed that something good can be taken from it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore recommended that: married men and women should see marriage as a responsibility and not a matter of fun. Husband and wife should make up their minds to live up to their responsibilities at home. The husband owes it as a duty to his family to provide for them, not because he loves them but more importantly, because it is his family. A man who cannot provide for the needs of his family destroys the essence of having one. Any assistance rendered by the wife should be acknowledged by the man, and must not be turned into a responsibility. The primary duty of the wife is home management. This includes; caring for the husband and the children, cooking for them at the right time, and other domestic work. Wives should feel happy doing all these, and peradventure there is the need for the husband to do any of these, it should not be seen as his duty. Intending couples should also know that marriage is not for the immature, but for those who are ready to carry out responsibilities. Efforts should be made to know the background of the wife or –husband-to-be. For the ladies, a man who does not take care of his parents is not likely to take care of any lady. For the young boys, a lady who shows any form of disrespect for her parents is not likely going to respect her in-laws. The place of investigation cannot be overemphasized in marriage and should be revisited in our modern days. It is also recommended that family members should limit their desires. Experience has shown that there are many things we desire that we do not actually need. One way we can maximize our happiness is by limiting our desires. Unlimited or uncontrolled desires have spelt doom for many people and families. The roles of the Churches should also be limited in marriage. Marriage should be primarily family affair. The Church has two major roles to play in marriage; to pray for the couple and to advise them. Also, couples should not beget children when they are not prepared for them. A look at many of the children around us gives the impression that their parents do not want them or prepared for them. Children should be properly taken care of. Single parents are not likely able to bring up children in proper way. Efforts must therefore be made to avoid broken homes, if not for anything but for the future of the children. Finally, it is recommended that courts should only dissolve marriage except on extreme cases, especially when it is established that the couples can no longer live together as husband and wives. Where children are involved in marriages, special arrangement should be made to ensure that they do not suffer for the offences they did not commit.

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