



CITIZENSHIP AND PEACE STUDIES



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Chapter 4

MARRIAGE, FAMILY LIFE AND RELATIONSHIP IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Marriage and the family are two related and familiar social concepts among people in every society. They feature prominently in discussions and are considered among the various social institutions that are present in all societies. However, the family is considered as the basic social institution in existence in any society (Murdock, 1949; Charles, 2005). The foregoing view of the family reaffirms its universalistic form and underscores its importance particularly the roles the family play in the society and for its members. However, the structure, functions and social processes in the family as an institution varies across societies and is subject to varying degrees of social change. Interestingly, marriage

that is often taken for granted by scholars and laymen, as denoting a union of the opposite sexes, is a long standing institutionalized process of creating families. It equally varies in content and form and its processes are largely also influenced by social change.

Thus, the major focus of this chapter is to explain marriage as an important institutional process of creating families. It treats the family as a key social institution undergoing changes and attempts to explain family life and the complex social relationships arising out of marital and familial interactions.

4.2 Marriage: Conceptualization, Classification and Significance

Every society attempts to define and regulate marriage. Evidence of this fact could be seen in various indigenous words used in describing marriage. For example in France, the word denoting marriage is literally translated to mean alliance or union (Mair, 1965). No wonder many scholars and laymen define marriage as a union between two consenting adults (of opposite sex). According to Mair (1965), marriage is a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognised as legitimate offspring of both parents.

Defining marriage from the perspective of Mair (see above) is deficient and discounts both African experiences as well as current global trends and practices. In Africa, men culturally and in practice are permitted to marry more than a wife. Therefore, most marriages would be left out if the above definition is taken. Again, one is at a loss considering the reality of same sex marriages that is gradually gaining acceptance in many societies. As witnessed in contemporary times, a significant number of marriages mostly in industrialized societies are described as marriages of convenience. They are contracted for specific purposes other than procreation. Thus, it is imperative to define marriage as a contractual union of

two or more consenting adults that is recognised, tolerated and taken by a group of people. The above view if accepted, embrace African experiences, current practices and realities concerning marriage to the extent that any legally recognised union of two persons of the same sex is also viewed as marriage.

4.2.1 Classification of Marriage

Marriage varies across and within societies. It is to a very large extent influenced by culture and social change (Afonja, 1996). Across societies, culture is responsible but within a given culture it is social change that explains such differences. Therefore, types or forms of marriage are dependent on the factors used as the base for such classification scheme. Thus, when the source conferring legitimacy on marriage is the factor used in classifying marriage, we have three major types of marriage. These include;

- a. Traditional marriage
- b. Religious marriage and
- c. Civil marriage.

a.) Traditional Marriage

This include all marriages that are contracted on the basis of the people's customs and traditions. There are several variants of traditional marriages. According to Ijomah (2008) they include but are not limited to;

Sororate;
Levirate;
ghost marriage;
cross-cousins marriage; and
daughters marriage.

b.) Religious Marriage

This include any marriage that draws its legitimacy from religious doctrines, such as:

Christian wedding;

Islamic Kaffan.

c.) Civil Marriage

In this case, the source conferring legitimacy on the marriage is the civil law operational in the society. This type of marriage is popularly referred to as court marriage. It is normally contracted in the law courts or at the local government designated registry.

When the focus is on the number of persons involved in the marriage, we have;

i.) Monogamy and

ii.) Polygamy

Monogamy refers to a type of marriage which involves one man and one woman (at a time). This type of marriage is common among the Christians, and in industrial societies. While polygamy is of two types;

Polygyny: Marriage between one man and more than one woman. This type is prevalent in Africa and among Moslems.

Polyandry: Referring to a marriage between one woman and more than one man (at the same time). This type of marriage is not common these days. But if the focus of classification is where to marry or where not to marry from, then we have endogamy and exogamy.

4.2.2 Marital Ceremonies and Significance of Marriage

Marital ceremonies vary with the type of marriage, culture and context in which it is celebrated and to a very large extent, the time it is celebrated and the status of the individuals involved. However, in Nigeria it is an elaborate celebration involving drinks, food and other forms of cultural displays. It also involves prayers, advice and marks the formal transfer of rights, privileges and

responsibilities associated with marriage. It tests the capacity of the husband to assume full responsibility of caring for his new wife and in laws. It is a public declaration that the two (husband and wife) have become one and that the woman especially is no longer available. It further signifies adulthood and responsibility and unites two families, clans and sometimes societies together. Marriage creates new social order, roles and relationships and legitimize child bearing and caring. It transfers rights and creates new privileges and expectations as well as regulating sexual relations in the society.

4.3 Conceptual Underpinnings of the Family

Consensus among authors and scholars, especially in the social sciences, indicates that the family is the oldest and the most basic of all social institutions ever organized by man throughout history (Murdock, 1949; Charles, 2005; Eteng, 2008). This is probably because there was the necessity for some kind of cooperation and complementarity among human beings to ensure production and socialization, and these ensure reproduction and continuity of human species throughout generations. Basically, the family of human institution is a cluster of social values and norms, as well as activities built around the care of children and old people (Eteng, 2008).

The family, like marriage, has been variously defined. Murdock (1949) defined family as a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction, and includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship and one or more children owned or adopted by the sexually-cohabiting adults. According to Burgess and Locke (1953, cited in Mitchell, 1979 and Anele, 2003), the family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption, constituting a single household, interacting and

communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, brother and sister, and creating a common culture. For Badru (1999p28), the family refers to "the basic unit of social organization in which members are constituted by marriage, blood or other social arrangement (adoption) and which relationships are structured by a dense network of social norms, rules, traditions, customs and conventions".

It is obvious from the foregoing definitions that the family is a group of people related by marriage, blood and adoption and as a result enjoys affinal and consanguinal relationships. Marriage, in particular is seen as the foundation of the family and the pivot of its legitimacy. The question of legitimacy therefore draws a line between marriages as recognized and approved by the society and that which is not. Whether a family is legitimate or not, the whole concept of the family has both the biological content and the social content (Otiite and Ogionwo, 2001). The biological content brings to the fore the need to reproduce and beget children, while the social content concerns the network of rights, privileges and obligations arising from the network of rights, privileges and obligations arising from the relationships established when a family is formed (Charles, 2005).

According to Haralambos and Heald (1980), the structure of the family differs from society to society. The smallest family is called the nuclear or conjugal family. This comprises husband and wife with or without immature children. Units larger than the nuclear family are labeled as extended families. The nuclear family consists of the husband, wife and their dependent children only. It is made up of two or fewer generations who live together. The nuclear family, as Anele (2003) notes, is quite crucial in every society because it is regarded as the cornerstone of other forms of

the family. It exists as a distinct and functional group among Europeans. It is also found among Christians and some other literate communities.

Units larger than the nuclear family are known as extended families. An extended family arises where a marriage involves more than two persons and includes all the spouses, their children and three or more generations functioning as a family unit, namely; grandparents, parents, and grandchildren, including all the offsprings and usually the in-laws from several of these marriages. Members of the extended family typically live together in single household or in adjacent households and function together as an integrated economic unit. The extended family is the most popular basis of kinship organization in African societies (Okereke, 2004). Akubukwe (1997) simply defined the extended family as consisting of several related persons, including a husband, wife, (wives) and their children, as well as aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, all living together in a single dwelling or in close proximity.

Generally, the family performs several functions in the society which include procreation and sustenance of the human race, sexual gratification, emotional and economic support to members, socialization of the young ones, development of the individual personality and self-concept, social security and welfare, conferment of status and name, etc (Nwabueze, 1999; Eteng, 2008; Charles, 2005). Gugler and Flanagan (1979) assert that the family appears to function in a number of ways as an active agent rather than as a passive medium or important in the process of urbanization. Members' needs are supported by the kin network in crises; and though an internal division of labour, the family bridges the gaps between the advantages offered by the urban and the rural sectors of the economy.

4.4 Family Life and Relationships in Nigeria

According to Moore (1994), families are not entities or agents in themselves, but they are made up of social actors who pass through a number of life stages, each one of which is closely connected to ideas about what is expected of them and what is due to them. Consequently, any analysis of the family has to take into account the very different experiences of family life that individuals have. Definitions of parent, husband, wife, mother, brother, sister, son and daughter vary considerably from one context to another. The expectation and experiences of these roles also differ. Families are as adaptable as they are diverse, reconfiguring themselves over their life cycles and evolving to accommodate the myriad pressures and transformation of the external world. Urbanization, industrialization, modernization and globalization are such alterations that have impacted family life in recent times.

In a traditional or typical Nigerian context, the nuclear family is not given much prominence unlike the extended family. In essence, the extended family system is the basis of family life in Nigeria. Family life in Nigeria is so broad that about four or more generations of a lineage sees and accept themselves as a single family unit. In families where one member is incapable of reproduction, children may be fostered out or adopted, new wives may be married, and divorce may occur with the woman marrying a proven potent husband (Badru, 2004). Thus, the most prevailing family system in Nigeria is the extended family system which includes a large or small number of blood relatives and affinal relatives living together within a single household. It spans three or more generations of relatives. Leadership or authority may be shared between the head of the household usually the eldest male and the other adults. The elders in the family give counsel and nurture to the child and in return, the child is expected to give respect and regards to their positions of authority. Nigerians had

always valued the extended family system and children reared in this type of family structure grow to value communal life, cooperation and oneness. Everyone regards oneself as his/her brother's/sister's keeper (Uyoata, 2006). However, there is a growing tendency toward the nuclear family system currently, owing to a weakening of polygamous and extended family system due largely to modernization agents. Such agents include urbanization, industrialization, and globalization.

With urbanization, the socialization function is shared and sometimes taken over by other agents like nannies, nursemaids, crèches, and motherless babies' homes. The result is that childcare support provided by grandparents is no longer available. There is increasing single motherhood, female-headed households, and divorce rates. The function of co-residentiality, which provides protection and succor, has been dismantled as husbands and wives have to work, sometimes at different locations, several kilometers apart. The traditional support from extended families has continued to weaken. There is deterioration in informal social support systems based on community and kinship that in the past helped to reduce poverty (Rodney, 1994; Obi, 1999).

Family size and family support networks are decreasing as a result of declining fertility and dispersal of family members. Marriage and child-bearing are being postponed to later ages. Women increasingly take up paid employment outside homes. These tend to produce some role strain for the career women. They rely on house helps whose members are thinning out. Many children do not live out their childhood years in residence with their parents. Some do not receive adequate emotional attention and proper or adequate socialization (Badru, 2004).

In spite of the current growing tendency of nuclear family system, relationships in Nigeria are largely influenced or determined by extended family system. Family members still care for their

children and relatives, feed them, send them to school, buy them clothes and find them jobs, among others. Loss of traditional extended kin ties because of urban residence has been found to be a myth. Otite (1975 cited in Afonja and Pearce 1986) posits that the extended family kin bond has not broken. He argues that it is the commitment to one's extended kin that provide the incentive to retain a worker status. The Yorubas are known to be urban-based and the Igbos are found in almost all big cities in Nigeria, and yet kin bond has not waned. Regular meetings are held with different age-grade associations, marital knots are tied, burial rites are performed, and new yam festivals are conducted, among others, thereby fostering kin ties.

In spite of urbanization, families still send their children to relatives, sometimes married. The children could be fed, clothed and sent to schools. The urbanization influence has not been entirely negative. It has brought improved life expectancy, enhanced quality of life for the citizens, changed household composition, as some people have to care for their aged ones either by themselves or have them sent to the old people's homes (Badru, 2004).

Conclusion

Marriage is a union of two or more consenting adults that is approved by the society through its norms. Its practice and celebrations are defined by the culture of the society and forces of changes. It marks the beginning of adulthood, new sets of responsibilities, rights and expectations. Marriage is the foundation upon which families are built. While the family is a bio-social entity; it is made up of a group of persons with consanguinal and affinal relationships and a network of responsibilities and obligations. Relationships in a society are influenced by the types and nature of the family prevalent in such a society. Family life and

relationships in Nigeria are largely extended in nature. Modernization agents such as urbanization, industrialization and globalization have affected extended family system in Nigeria. In particular, as noted by Olurode and Olusanya (1994), urbanization has led to urban congestion, accommodation problems and family dispersal, and inadequate accommodation restricts the number of family members that can live in the same house with the resultant conjugal unit. In spite of this, the extended family still persists in the Nigerian modern society and performs important functions. It is obvious that in both rural and urban societies in Nigeria, family life and relationships are largely centred on extended family system. On the strength of this, people should join forces and resources together and fight poverty and unemployment at the family levels. The extended family ties should be strengthened and used for the development of families and the Nigerian society.

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