

Nigerian Peoples
and
Cultures:
Historical and Socio-structural
Perspectives

CONTRIBUTION
TO
BOOKS
VI

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Chapter Twenty

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE FAMILY INSTITUTION IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

The family is one of the major social institutions of the society. Others are education, religion, polity, and economy. Although societies have social structural elements beside these that can properly be called institutions, these five are certainly universal, no society can exist without them.

A social institution occurs when some set of social organizational relationships becomes so frozen by custom as to become normative the way things are in a particular society. According to Akubukwe (1997), the freezing process is called institutionalization. Sociologists have never reached a consensus on the specific definition of the term, social institution. Several definitions have been offered, each relating to the context of the definition.

According to Duberman and Hartjen (1979), an institution is not a real group but a procedure. Therefore, they defined social institution as "an organized, formal, recognized, stabilized way to doing something, of performing an activity in a society" MacIver and Page (1962) define an institution as "a cluster of established, relatively enduring and organized norms, expectations and

procedures that enable a society to meet one or more of its major needs”.

An activity is institutionalized when a regular set of statuses is developed (when people know their position in the structure) and when this system of statuses has been accepted by the society. A way of doing something is institutionalized when the members of the group agree on the proper procedures involved. Thus, a social institution has normative values attached, not only is it how things are done by a particular people, it is the right, just, moral and proper way to do them.

Most sociologists who analyze social institutions adopt a functional approach to understanding them, perceiving them as existing to fulfil imperative social needs, things that must be accomplished if the society in which they exist is to survive.

The family, then, is the basic social institution from which other institutions have grown as increasing cultural complexity has made necessary. Abraham (1966) categorically states that apart from being the smallest, oldest and most basic social unit, the family is also the most personal, for nothing is more personal than the interaction and relationship between members of a family.

Everyone assumes, as a result of his primary socialization, that he knows what the family is, but the more one studies families in different societies, the more one finds differences from what is commonly accepted as family. Parsons (1959), like other sociologists, notes that there are changes in the family units and functions, probably due to industrialization and urbanization, hence, the need for this work on the changing role of the family institution in Nigeria for better understanding of what is happening in contemporary Nigerian families.

What is a family?

According to Farley (1994:346), “family is a social group of people related by ancestry, marriage or other committed sexual relationship, or adoption and live together, form an economic unit, and rear their children, if any”. Family is attached with associations which consist of small groups of people found in

various forms who are related by blood or law or both, who care for each other and who live together in an economic unit. Smith and Preston (1982:31) define family as "a social group whose members usually are related either through common ancestors or marriage and are bound by moral and economic rights and duties". MacIver and Page (1981) define family as "a group defined by a sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for procreation and upbringing of children.

A married couple without children, though bound by the strongest personal ties, do not constitute a family in Nigerian traditional idea of family for such ties can conceivably exist among people who are not married. According to Okeke (1997), it is only children that can give a family its character. In any family where there is no child, there would be no intimate, personal relationship established by which the family can perform its function of rearing, protecting and educating the children, transmitting to them the social values it has inherited and creating a special bond between all the members.

According to Okafor (1992), in the context of Igbo traditional society, the word "family" has a much wider meaning than it has in Western societies. In Igbo communities, there are no vernacular terms which denote the various categories and depth of social groups unlike in Western societies where such terms abound. This fact makes a working definition of a family in Igbo context even more difficult. Taking many factors into consideration, the definition of family in the Nigerian context given by obi (1966) is quite functional. According to him:

The primary meaning of family as used in Nigeria is a social institution consisting of all persons who are descended through the same line (the male line in a patrilineal, the female line in a matrilineal society) from a common ancestor, and who still owe allegiance to or recognize the over all authority of one of their number as head and legal successor to

the said ancestral founder, together with any persons who though not blood descendants of the founder, are for some reason attached to the households of persons so descended or have otherwise been absorbed into the lineage as a whole.

This is in fact the primary meaning of the word, family, in Igboland in particular for this is what comes to mind when the word family is mentioned. The secondary meaning of the word, family, in the Igbo context is a social unit comprising a man and his wife or wives with their unmarried children and any other dependents such as wards and domestic servants. If we call this elementary family, we have to bear in mind that in Igbo society, the elementary family in the case of a polygynous family, may be composed of two or more sub-divisions or branches corresponding to the number of women by whom the father of the family has children. Furthermore, it is legitimate in some parts of Igbo land for one's unmarried daughter to raise issues in her father's house. In such a case the children are part of the man's elementary family. So whether in its primary or secondary sense, the composition and the organization of Igbo family is complex.

TYPES OF FAMILY

Families are classified according to the number and generations of people involved in the family groups and the family leadership or power holder. Discussed here are the best known types of family.

Nuclear Family

This type of family consists of a husband and a wife and their dependent children living together in a single dwelling (Smith and Preston, 1982:320). For Farley (1994:345), a nuclear family is

made up of two or fewer generations who live together, and it ~~most~~ often includes a husband, a wife and their dependent children.

Nuclear family is common in the Western world but it ~~is~~ gradually being adopted in Nigeria, especially by the educated ones, who live in the cities.

Extended Family

The term, extended family, is often used to refer to the nuclear family plus any other kin with whom important relationships ~~are~~ maintained. The commonest family form in Nigeria is ~~the~~ extended family, which comprises in addition to the nuclear family members, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews, etc. of several remembered generations. Although modernization processes ~~are~~ occurring, the Nigerian family still remains basically extended. Thus, while a few especially urban dwelling educated young people tend to be preoccupied with the nuclear unit, such people still use the networks provided by the extended family to secure employment or other opportunities in society. Many of such people also participate actively in the numerous broad-based extended family associations which are common features of ~~the~~ towns and cities. Most rural communities still retain the extended family and kinship structure. The members of the extended family live in the same compound or adjacent compounds or may be scattered in a few neighbouring villages.

Patriarchal Family

This refers to family pattern in many societies where men are the heads of the families, and they dominate the family decision-making. Any single parent family in any society is also a patriarchal family, if the affected parent is the man (father). In this case, the wife is not living in the family as a result of desertion, separation, divorce, or death. Patriarchal family patterns are common in the south eastern part of Nigeria, especially in Igbo land.

Matriarchal Family:

In this type of family pattern, it is the right of women in the society to dominate family decision-making, living with their husbands notwithstanding. Again a single parent family in any society is also a matriarchal family if the affected parent is the woman (wife). In this case the husband is not living in the family as a result of desertion, separation, divorce, or death. An example is the Yako of Cross River State and Ohafia Igbo.

Egalitarian Family:

This is a type of family pattern where power is jointly shared by both husband and wife. Family decisions are made jointly by the husband and wife in the family. In contemporary Nigerian society, egalitarian family pattern is obtainable in the cities among the working class spouses who live there.

Pediarchal Family

This is a type of family pattern where you have rule by children. This type of family pattern is hardly the case in any known human society.

FUNCTIONS OF THE FAMILY**Sexual Regulation:**

In every society, to control what the society perceives as undesired sexual activities is of universal importance. Marriage is the most approved social setting in which sexual activities are allowed to occur. Families help to regulate or control undesired sexual activities. The family is the principal institution through which Nigerian societies organize and regulate the satisfaction of sexual desires. For example in Igbo land, it is expected that sexual intercourse will occur between persons whom their norms define as legitimately accessible to each other. The Igbo culture does not allow promiscuity, and any sexual relationship between unmarried

ones is seen as a taboo. The young persons are not allowed to have carnal knowledge of each other before marrying. Any premarital sex in Igbo land is seen as a shame and disgrace.

Replacement of Species

When a man and a woman are married, they have become members of a family. Within this family they can reproduce and continue to take care of the young species or children until they are grown. Through this process, members of a generation prepare to replace themselves with their species.

In Nigeria, all the ethnic groups like the Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, etc, depend upon the family for the business of producing children to replace themselves. No part of Nigeria has established a set of norms for producing children except as part of a family. For example, in Enugu Ezike (Igbo), children produced outside a marriage relationship are not accepted into the family and it is a serious case for a married woman to engage in extra-marital relationship. Such an act could lead to madness.

Provision of Affection and Companionship

In every society, the family provides affection and companionship for its members. Children should receive warmth and affection within the family to develop a positive self-image, and adults in the family need intimate companionship to cope with life.

Most Nigerians rely almost entirely upon the family for affectionate response. The companionship need is filled partly by the family and partly by other groups. Whatever else people need, they need intimate human response. Provision of affection and companionship is one of the major functions of the family.

Socialization

The family is the most important agent or institution for socialization. Briefly, socialization means the process of learning the norms, values and other aspects of our culture by interacting or associating with other members (family members, friends, teachers, etc) of our society or group. The process could involve involuntary learning or formal teaching. In all families in Nigeria, parents, especially mothers, play important role in the socialization of their children.

Economic Assistance

The family helps to solve the economic needs of its members at different times, especially the young ones. These needs may include daily feeding, clothing, providing shelter, transportation, etc. In Nigeria, economic assistance is part of the major roles of the man (husband) in the family. The father (husband) is generally the head of the family and the instrumental figure in the family. The father is expected to organize the family's food production, and to solve problems caused by physical environmental factors.

Conferment of Status

Many of the statuses we occupy are ascribed or assigned at birth. These include class position, race, ethnic affiliation, nationality and religion. These statuses are conferred or given to us by our respective families. In Igbo land, as well as other parts of Nigeria, children, by being born into a particular family, acquire the status of their parents. For example, if your father is a king in Igbo land, you are seen as son of king (prince) and you will become a king to replace your father when he dies. This is a case of ascribed status.

Protective Function

In all societies, family offers some degree of physical, economic and psychological protection to its members. In Nigeria, any attack upon a person is an attack upon his entire family. All members are bound to defend the person or to revenge the injury. In the same way, guilt and shame are equally shared by all family members. In many cases, very few persons outside one's family really care what happens to him or her. Parents, especially the father, is expected to provide protection to the family members.

THE FAMILY INSTITUTION AND CHANGE IN NIGERIA

The functions/roles discussed above were played by the family institution, religiously in the traditional society. With bare assistance from outside institutions each traditional family strove to fulfil its obligations not only to the young ones but also to the wider society.

Things have changed, however, and radically too. Due mainly to industrialization and urbanization, the modern family has waned in significance as regards the performance of these functions and many modern social agencies have taken the upper hand.

These changes are discussed below under "changing family structures", and "changing family roles".

Changing Family Structures

Change in Family Size

The size of the Nigerian family has decreased. It is no secret that the twelve-child families of the last century are rare today. The shift from an illiterate agricultural society to urban based society has changed children from an economic asset into an expensive burden. Shifts in patterns of recreation, in aspirations for education and social mobility, and changing concepts of individuals rights have all united to curb indiscriminate childbearing. At present, the traditional idea that raising a large family is a noble

service to the society is rapidly being replaced by the idea that bearing many children is an act of irresponsible self-indulgence. There is also a growing recognition in Nigeria, according to Okeke (1997), that having numerous children is damaging to marital happiness. Thus, changing technology, changing economics, and changing values are all involved in the change in family size and from extended family to nuclear family in Nigeria.

Change in the Status of Divorce

In traditional Nigerian communities, marriage was expected to be for life. Today, in most communities, recent events show that divorce as a social cankerworm, has become a recurring decimal in our experience. Today divorce is no longer a strange thing and husbands and wives end up marriages between them for many reasons. Some causes of divorce in marriage common among Nigerian communities are unsatisfactory sexual relationship, unfulfilled sex roles, spouse abuse, infidelity, impotence, interference by in-laws, decreasing economic dependence of women upon men resulting from women employment, growing individualism, growing social acceptability of divorce, etc. From being a rare example of moral disgrace, divorce has become a fairly common, regrettable but respectable, way of dealing with an intolerable marriage.

Change in Residential Pattern

In the traditional society, residence was mainly either patrilocal or matrilocal, depending on the kinship system operating in the society. The newly married either set up residence with the family of the man (husband) or with the family of the woman (wife).

Today, due mainly to urbanization and change in the economic status of people, neolocal residence dominates. The newlywed set up residence on their own independent of the man's or the woman's family.

Increase in Single Parent Families

In Nigeria, the number of mother-headed families has risen. In the past children remained in the custody of their father in those few families broken by separation rather than by death. Children and young persons law in Nigeria (1958) stipulated that in the case of separation or divorce the under-aged children, those not up to six years old should remain in the custody of their mother while those above six years should be with their father. Recently, the idea that children of separated parents should live with their mother has gained more acceptance in Nigerian communities that it is now seldom questioned. The single parent families are common in Nsukka area of Enugu State. The number of mother-headed families has risen in this area. Today's child has about a fifty-fifty chance of living in a single parent family at some time before the age of eighteen.

Single-Person Households Have Increased

It was historically difficult for a person to live comfortably alone. Only by joining a family or by setting up a household complete with servants could one live in comfort. Today in Nigeria, the physical accommodations are more furnished with house helps, wash-and-wear clothes, and catering services of many kinds and these make it easier for the singles.

Traditionally in Nigeria, especially in Igbo land like in Amokwe Udi, women lived with parents or relatives until marriage. Any younger woman who wished to live alone was suspected of evil intentions. Today, one's own apartment and set of wheels have become almost a symbol of passing into adult status. Single-person households have increased in Nigeria as easily seen in Awka, Ibadan and Cross River States. This is a highly significant change in Nigerian family patterns. For example, the single person is more vulnerable to many of life's hazards (such as illness or unemployment), and more susceptible to deviation than are members of families.

The Division of Labour and Authority Has Changed

The traditional Nigerian family was highly patriarchal. But as women started earning wages, they began to gain power. This illustrates the "resource theory" which states that family authority is held by those who "bring home the bacon" (Blood and Wolfe: 1960, Fox:1973). In Nigerian families, there are now the issues of women empowerment and slogans such as "what a man can do, a woman can do it even better". All these have brought change in the authority pattern in the Nigerian families. The Nigerian social welfare offices especially in the cities are now filled with cases of role conflicts which was not the case before in the Nigerian culture.

The "Quiet Revolution" in Women's Employment

Perhaps the greatest change of all has been the increase in "working wives". Women workers today form over two-fifths of our labour force. Forty-five percent of all married women living with their husbands are in the labour force and over nine out of ten married women work for some part of their married lives. Married women with children are now more likely to be employed than married women without children. obviously, it has become normal for the Nigerian wife to work for a major part of her lifetime. The majority of the readers of this work will be either working wives or the husbands of working wives. This quiet revolution has transformed the household division of labour. The work time of housewives has not been reduced and today's housewives work as many hours as men" (Ekong: 1988).

The Dual-Career Family is Becoming Common

For some years, many wives have worked, but few have had careers. Most working wives viewed their jobs as temporary, supplemental or supportive, and subordinate to their husbands' careers.

A growing number of women today in Nigeria are asserting their equal right to a career, not just a job. They insist that any necessary sacrifices of career goals to family life should be joint and equal, not unequally imposed upon the wife. A couple who try seriously to apply this formula will find that many adjustments must be made. These range from who stays home when someone is ill to what happens when a career move beneficial to one career would damage the other career. One study found that a majority of the dual-career couples were either childless or have past child-rearing age (Ikoku: 1979). Dual-career couples with children usually employ domestic help in the families.

CHANGING FAMILY ROLES

Structure and role are two aspects of the same thing. Changes in one are both cause and effect of changes in the other. What changes in functions accompany changes in family structure? The changes in functions are:

The Economic Functions Have Changed Most Greatly

A century ago, the Nigerian family was a unit of economic production, united by shared work on the farm. Today only few families are farm families in the rural areas and even the farm family is not the self-sufficient unit of the past. Except on the farm, the family is no longer a basic unit of economic production; this has shifted to the shop, the factory, the office, etc. The Nigerian family is no longer united by shared work, for its members work separately. Instead, the Nigerian family is a unit of economic consumption, united by companionship, affection, and recreation. Agriculture is no longer the main occupation of the Nigerian families in all parts of the country.

The Sexual Regulation Functions Have Diminished:

Although most sexual intercourse is still marital, the proportion has probably fallen below. A recent survey finds well over 90 percent college students approving of sexual intercourse among persons who are engaged, in love, or with "strong affection", while over two-thirds even approved of intercourse among those who are "not particularly affectionate" (Onuigbo 2002). Virgin-marriage has become relatively uncommon and may virtually disappear in the near future in Nigeria.

Today in Nigeria there are cases of wide spread of AIDS as a result of diminished sexual regulation functions. Many cases of incest abound in every Nigerian community unlike before when there was sexual regulation carried out by the various families and communities.

The Reproduction Function Has Declined In Importance

True, birth rates are much lower than a century ago in Nigeria. At present, the birth rate in Nigeria has been falling and may fall still further as a result of decline in extended family in Nigeria which has given way to nuclear family pattern. A further decline in family size may be expected to increase family harmony. There is research evidence that the smaller families are less stressful, more comfortable and more satisfactory to spouses, parents and children are happier and better adjusted (Nwosu and Kalu: 1978).

Today in Nigeria parents have seen that children in smaller families are more healthy, creative and intelligent and almost every Nigerian parent wants small family size. This has led to increase in adoption of family planning by couples in Nigeria and reproduction function has declined in importance. Adoption service which is not part of Nigerian culture has now gained ground as some parents now adopt children from motherless babies homes.

Unmarried Teen-Age Parenthood Has Increased

Although overall reproduction has declined, births to unmarried teen-agers have skyrocketed in Nigeria. Many of these teen-agers become premaritally pregnant each year, even though the use of contraception by unmarried teen-agers has rapidly increased. About one-fourth of these girls marry the putative father of their babies and half of these marriages usually result to divorce within a few years. There is some tendency for the girls either to marry or have abortion, rather than try to care for the children themselves. Girls who have kept the children tend to lack the maturity, stability and the love-giving capacity needed to cultivate the desired love response from the babies, who then become abused and neglected children as the mothers strike out in frustration and anger. There are many cases of unmarried teenage pregnancy nowadays in Nigerian communities. Our culture is becoming weak as a result of contact with foreign culture.

Declining Socializing Function

The family was the major socializing institution of the traditional society. Of course, the family in the traditional setting was not limited to the nuclear family, but included such other extended relations as grandfathers/mothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, etc. As Silberman (1970:119) rightly observes:

For most of man's history, most children have received most of their education informally and incidentally. Family and community, were the primary educating institutions shaping young people's attitudes, forming their behaviour, endowing them with morals and manners, and teaching them the vocational and other skills needed to get along in their physical and social environments.

Today, however, some institutions outside the family are playing a greater role than the family in some aspects of the socializing function. The school and the church, for instance, are

today playing a greater role than the family in the vocational and spiritual socialization of young ones respectively.

Decline in the Affectional and Companionship Functions

The primary community, extended family systems, the small group of neighbours who know one another well and have much in common, have disappeared from the lives of most Nigerians. Urbanization and specialisation have destroyed it. In an increasingly impersonal, and ruthless world, the immediate family becomes the bulwark of emotional support. Outside one's family there are very few people who really care what happens to one. Only within the family can one hope to find enduring sympathy when troubled, or an unjealous joy at one's success leading to increased hardship and competition in Nigeria today. The affectional and companionship functions of the family have waned significantly.

The Protective Functions have Declined

The traditional Nigerian family performed most of the functions of organised social work such as nursing the sick, giving haven to the handicapped and shelter to the aged. Family care of the aged was a practical arrangement when the aging couple stayed on the farm, joined by a married child and mate. The parents could retire gradually, shifting to less strenuous tasks but remaining useful and appreciated. The aged then was respected for his wisdom. Today's Nigerian family is an impractical place in which to care for the sick, the aged and many kinds of handicapped people. Many elderly people are unappreciated and treated with disrespect in the homes of their children. Today's Nigerian family cannot adequately cater or help to solve the economic needs of some of its members. Marital disruptions abound as can be found in our social welfare offices and couples are exposed to dangers. The Nigerian traditional system of one being his brother's keeper is now a thing of the past in every community. Many of the protective functions

of the traditional family have been shifted to other institutions and these functions will continue to decline with modernization in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION:

The present Nigerian family is in the midst of sweeping changes. Today, according to Ekong (1988), "the world is not what it used to be any longer. The Nigerian Family structure, relationships and roles have been unwittingly affected by social change in the recent times. Modifications in the Nigerian family relationships manifest themselves in the alternations noticeable in the roles and authorities of the kinship structure. Marriage rules and residency patterns have adopted the trails of modern trends. In economic function, the production activities of the family have been largely absorbed by separate economic institutions, leaving the family mainly a unit of economic consumption. The protective functions have been largely shifted to other institutions. The problems and effects of social change in the Nigerian family could be attributed to the weakness of our culture, decline of the powers and authorities of the kingship group. This may be further linked to colonial influences and capitalist mode of social orientations. The family as a corporate and basic unit of economic production in Nigeria no longer prevails. Individualism and self consciousness operate at the expense of collective conscience. Farley (1994) notes that despite all the changes in the modern family system, the family will remain a viable unit in our society. Although families must change to adapt to changes in other social institutions, they will continue to play a crucial role in modern Nigerian society.

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