

AFRICAN SOCIETY, MARRIAGE AND THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative research that attempted to discuss the growing trend of globalization and its effects on the African traditional marriage system. These transitions are driven by factors that are western practices through the concept of Globalization and Modernization. The paper tried to counter the logic put forward by the global community through Western ideology and put forward a superior Afrocentric narrative on the issue of marriage and for the very survival of the African marriage systems and also sustaining the family. The question as to whether the African family is in crisis or not and what the future holds is the prime focus of this discussion. The paper also illustrated the adverse effect of globalization in the context of the African marriage system. Finally, it presented recommendations that will go a long way in preserving and protecting the African marriage system from total collapse.

Keywords: Globalization, Marriage, Traditional, Africa

Introduction

Every society has its own unique stamp of identity characterized by traditions, values and norms that make it distinctive. Over the years, there has been an evolution in the old African traditions causing the gradual fading of the African traditions as we adopt western traditions and slowly conform to western influence, this continues to happen right before our eyes. We are living in an era of globalization where the four corners of the world are brought closer with advancement in technology. This is true with the saying that refers to the world as a global village. The systems and structures of developed societies because of globalization have its influence on less developed societies including Africa. The influxes of foreign practices come with great strength and soon begin to replace the traditional structures and systems of indigenous societies.

The structures of most African Societies have transformed, taking on Western forms. This transformation is seen also in the nature of the social structures and systems of several African societies that are succumbing to Western forms. The wholesale admission of alien concepts puts that of the African in jeopardy of chaos and total extinction. Gradually African values that used to be the pride of many African societies are fast eroding.

African marriage has continued to dwindle because of the introduction of western practices into the African setting. With the passing of time, certain ills have befallen marriage that it has dealt a devastating blow to society. This has produced a myriad of social problems as a result of the introduction of alien practices to African. This paper seeks to address some fundamental issues as it relates to the concept of westernization in the context of African marriages by raising concerns such as; Has Modernism and Postmodernism concepts influenced the

contemporary African Family? If so, to what extent have these influences altered the traditional notions and narratives, values and composition of the typical African Family? Does African societies have values that are worthy of preservation? Is anything and everything “western” superior and better compared to anything African and must they be accepted and taken hook line and sinker without being interrogated?

The Concept of Marriage

The institution of marriage is as old as humanity itself and exists globally with several cultural diversities. Even though marriage is global concept, its meaning and significance are understood among people’s cultural backgrounds and these differ from one culture to another (Baloyi, 2022). However, at the heart of this, every society accepts marriage as a vital force in maintaining and sustaining that society. Marriage remains a fundamental necessity in the sustainability of life in the world. Baloyi added that marriage is a means through which humans are able to create a chain of human existence throughout the world for the sustenance of the human race; yet the same institution exists within the parameters of African indigenous cultural value systems. Corroborating Baloyi’s definition of marriage, Hasting (1973) described marriage as a union of a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation and the rearing of children and mutual assistance”. It is “the approved social pattern whereby two or more persons establish a family” (Waruta 2013, 102). rearing of children and mutual assistance”.

In this regard, the cultural value systems entail a totality of traits which according to Aziza (2001, 98-99):

Includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs.

In the context of African cultural value systems, two families come together for negotiating and legalizing a marriage. While these cultural value systems are considered valuable in the process of establishing a family through marriage. Nevertheless, within the African context, marriage has always been viewed as an inseparable institution from cultural and traditional value systems (Emelone, 2020). While much of African society believes that the core foundations of marriage are primarily about procreation and nurturing children, it is also about the culture of two different families, their tradition and their religion. However, there are certain aspects of these values that are considered unpalatable in a marriage. Some of these aspects include: the domestication of women in marriage in the name of culture; the male-female hierarchical domination; and the patriarchy that goes with masculinity and manhood ideologies.

In light of this practice, Mbiti’s (1969, 133) defined marriage as “a drama in which everyone in marriage becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator” become fulfilled and provide a space where both men and women can create a harmonious play in the theatre of marriage? In this theatre, there exists a sociological construct where roles in marriage exist, freedom and rights become engulfed by those socio-constructs which do not permit freedom to exist.

Labels Tonizek (2008) identifies three types of marriage which are; traditional, court and white marriages. The white marriage is done in the Churches and Mosques under the superintendence of the clergy. 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.

The Global Community

Westernization is understood as the assimilation of the ideas and lifestyle of the western world. Western culture originates from Europe. In a general sense, western culture connotes ethical values, traditional customs, belief system, political system, economic system, social norms, and specific artifacts and technologies of the western world. Virtually all modern cultures have been affected and influenced by western culture. Colonization, education, Christianity, technological revolution among other factors contributed tremendously to the spread of Western culture. The aim of globalization is to make the whole world a smaller village by promoting cultural homogeneity among peoples across the world. It allows for the removal of cultural differences in and attaining convergence of diverse ideologies, cultural identities and behavioural patterns of people to enhance universal uniformity denote globalization. Therefore, globalizing the whole world translates to generating significant alterations in virtually all the social institutions of diverse human societies from their state of being heterogeneous to homogeneous (Imam-Tamim, Zin, & Ibrahim, 2016; Ritzer, 2011). These social institutions include the economy, technology, politics, religion, education, medicine and marriage.

Westernization cannot be divorced from globalization. It has been correctly argued, in some quarters, that Western thought gave birth to globalization which in turn propagates Western culture. Globalization is from the word “Globe” meaning the world. Thus, globalization is a process by which economies, societies, and cultures are being integrated into a globe-spanning network of communication and trade. It is a concerted effort to diminish or eliminate differences among nations of the world and thereby make the entire world a global village. Consequently, it is a cross border phenomenon (Okoro 2009, 191). Globalization is perpetuated by the agency of technological revolution, economic liberalization and democratic system of government. Therefore, to a large extent one can safely submit that westernization and globalization are related especially as regards their impact on the entire international community and their respective cultures. For instance, democracy which is the most widely practiced system of governance globally is of Western origin, so also are capitalism, technologies, and customs such as music, clothing, food, and a host of others.

Westernization or globalization has its advantages, but not without its attendant woes. It is imperative to sift the wheat from the chaff. It is also important to note that since culture is dynamic in nature, our African culture and its values just like the culture of any other society cannot remain the same. However, our argument is that not all western values propagated through globalization are good for Africans as a people. The current problem facing marriage and family today, especially as being championed by Europe and America, has become much more fundamental and profound than that created earlier on by sex-re-assignment or by those who wanted to change their gender through surgery and hormonal treatments.

Marriage in African Traditional Society

Marriage is of great importance among Africans. Without marriage, there is no family, and without a family, one could not bear children. There exists a strong connection between marriage and family among traditional Africans. No wonder Ayisi (1997) opines that 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. African traditional marriage is primarily for procreation and African marriage can be dissolved on the ground of childlessness. The essence of a child in marriage is summed up in what Mbiti (1969) terms ‘personal immortality.’ Mbiti argues that

when a man dies, he needs somebody to bear his name, so that his name does not die. Giving credence to Mbiti's position, Awolalu and Adelumo (1979, 172) opines as thus:

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.

Beyond procreation, the traditional African marriage serves other purposes as asserted by Mbiti (1969, 133) as thus:

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.

Furthermore, William (1987) adds that marriage in African tradition system 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. This makes African traditional marriage a communal and sacred affair.

Effects of Globalization in African Marriage

Before the coming of the whites to Africa, Africans had their ways and systems that ensured communities thrived. Unfortunately, though Africa has been liberated from Western political domination, it is now being dominated by Western and Eastern ideological neo-colonialism. Western prestige, Western know-how, Western technology, Western methods have permeated every aspect of African societies. For instance, the coming of the whites led to undermining of various traditional practices. Today divorce cases are now a common occurrence.

Ogoma (2014) identifies one effect of globalization is the radical departure from the past where parents have a stake in the choice of who their children marry. Ogoma added that today, parents play little or no role in the choice of who their children marry. The decision is now for the individuals involved, and that of the church or mosque. When these two groups or either of them must have made the decision, parents may or may not be informed. Even if they do, and raise any objection to it, even for good reasons, the church and the court are ready to grant their prayers.

Secondly, Ogoma added that westernization also affected the traditional African culture of marriage in terms of the motive for marriage. In the modern time, marriage is contracted on account of love; however, he noted that it was not the core reason for the contracting of marriage with reference to the Yoruba traditional culture where marriage was not based on love but on responsibility. People got 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.

Why love was not enough for marriage but responsibility he said:

In the olden days, two people meet 2 times and got married on the third time- and these marriages lasted a lifetime. Today couples date for 3 years and get divorced 6 months after finally getting married (Shahadah, 2011).

Other effect of globalization on African marriages as captured by Nnabugwu (2014) includes the following:

Cohabitation

Cohabitation in the present-day society has become a pervasive and growing phenomenon with a negative impact on the role of marriage as a foundation of the family. Cohabitation, which can be illicit or matrimonial, also has been defined as the fact or state of living together, especially as partners in life and usually with the suggestion of sexual relations. This is alien to African traditional marriage because *The Customary Law Manual* states:

The bride in her maiden home is handed over by her father to the marriage middleman who in turn hands her over to the bridegroom in the presence of members of both families. The bride is taken home by the bridegroom's people...A man has a right to cohabit with his new wife as soon as the handing over ceremony has been performed. No further ceremonies or payments are necessary to confer on the man the right to cohabit with his wife. (Obi, 1977, 256).

Free Unions and Single Parenthood

Similar to cohabitation is what is termed 'free union'. This practice is fast gaining stand in the world today. 'Free union' is an intimate sexual relationship without any long-term or permanent commitment. The expression 'free union' however appears fallacious in the sense that where the partners make no commitment to one another, but rather show a lack of trust in oneself, on the other and in the future, it seems inappropriate to call such a relationship 'a union'. However, 'in a so called "free union", a man and a woman refuse to give judicial or public form to a liaison involving sexual intimacy'(CCC, 1994).

In the contemporary society, as a result of globalization and the explosion of the information technology, the idea of single parenthood is also gradually enveloping the whole world. Single parenthood is a situation where parent do not live with a spouse or partner. Arinze-Umobi (2009, 63) described it as thus;

The man or the woman decides to stay alone, chooses a partner for his/her sexual enjoyment, and begetting of children. This relationship fizzles out as soon as the aim is achieved and he/she goes about looking after his/her child/children. This forges a new idea of union constituted only by a man or woman with his or her children. This move seeks to legalize permissiveness and irresponsibility as one school of thought has argued, because they maintain that the noncommittal quality ostensibly exalts freedom of the single parent to live as he or she wants without accountability.

Surrogate Motherhood

Traditionally, a child is seen as an independent and autonomously produced individual and the result of a biological process, and depends for its initial existence in its parents. Due to globalization, new reproductive technologies such as In vitro Fertilization (IVF) and Donor Insemination (DI), surrogacy arrangement is made where someone carries pregnancy for intended parents. Assisted reproduction has contributed to the fragmentation of motherhood and the legal system is currently faced with the challenge of defining motherhood.

Same-Sex Marriages

Marriage is natural right and finds its rooted in the natural moral law. This implies that the thing which fulfils the natural teleology is good, and that which deviates from the natural teleology is bad. Several countries in the western world including Netherlands, United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and part of South Africa have approved the legislation on same sex marriage which defiles the law of nature. This practice raises concerns on the stands of marriage and procreation since 'procreation involves, potentially, three elements: conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. There is a huge advocacy on the passage of the same sex marriage law in some countries of Africa and this is an aberration to the African tradition system of marriage.

Hermaphroditism and Transsexualism

The "abnormal" situations of hermaphroditism, the condition of having both male and female sex organs, and transsexualism, a condition of a person thinking that he or she is member of the opposite sex clearly pose substantial questions with regard to the unity and inviolability of marriage as a revered institution. There is no doubt that the paradigm shift in the hermeneutics of 'sex' and 'gender' leading to opposite findings and decisions by the English and the American Courts shows the degree of problem associated with the redefinition of marriage in the modern times to suite same sex marriage.

Trial Marriages' and Contract Marriages

In the world today, the African marriage institution is threatened by what is known as 'trial marriages' and contract marriages, given that 'true marriage' is a permanent institution. According to Arinze-Umobi and Ikpeze (2006), such short-term marriages are nevertheless valid, even though the couple may go their separate ways as soon as their objectives are achieved.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, this paper has revealed that the African values and by extension culture and their expressions are tailored towards the stability of institution, family system, and communalism and social security system. The African traditional marriage structure was potent before it came in contact with westernization. The paper has highlighted the implication of westernization on the African traditional marriage systems. However, the western world has contributed tremendously in helping man to conquer and enjoy the earth to its fullest through western civilization but not without its attendant woes particularly to marriage.

There is a need to Africans to address the inferiority complex concerning African values when compared with Western values. They may appear primitive in the light of globalization but must be preserved to maintain the uniqueness of Africa and promote the rich system that has proven over the years to maintain marital union.

Way Forward

Firstly, the current western influence that is invading the African traditional marriage system should be checked else the values of the African tradition risk a total extinction of what is unique to Africa, to assume an alien marriage culture.

Secondly, the problems associated with globalization on the African marriage pattern are so enormous and the concern is that the negatives impact will destroy the very unique traditional system that has survived over the ages. The African government, traditional and social institutions, have a role to play in maintaining the values and norms of the African tradition on marriage.

To preserve the African traditional marriage system, the following recommendations are important

1. There should be a firm legislation against alien western practices that do not conform with the African marriage system.
2. Parents should be encouraged to educate their children on the values of the African traditional system.
3. Institutions of learning should introduce African traditional studies into their curriculum.
4. The traditional institutions which are the custodian of the African values should be given a huge stake in the formulation of laws in a bid to recover our traditional values in marriages.
5. The religious institutions must not arbitrarily solemnize marriages without full background check if all traditional rites of the contract are fulfilled.

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