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Modernization and the Marriage Institution in Post Modern Igbo Society: Issues and Realities.

Agugoesi, Kenneth U.

Department of Theatre Arts
Imo State University. Owerri, Nigeria

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Abstract

Before modernization- in pre-literary Igbo nation, the traditional marriage institution had so much value attached to it that made it sacred among the people. The modern marriage institution conflicted in a number of ways with the traditional system. This researcher is interested in identifying the impact the modern marriage concept has on the traditional marriage ordinances. The researcher used mixed approaches in his research methodology, the historical, as well as the content analysis research methods. Sources of research data included: the library, internet and interviews. The reference style is the Modern Language Association (MLA) 7th edition.

Keywords: Modernization, Marriage Institution, Post Modern Igbo Society, Value, Traditional System

Introduction

Before the vehicles of modernization found their ways to the nooks and crannies of the Igbo nation in pre-colonial Nigeria, strategic challenges were met as modernization had more to it than could be imagined by the average African. Then, the average Igbo man practiced traditional religion. This had a strong influence on the lives and cultural practices of the people.

The marriage institution was not an exception. The Igbo marriage culture of the present era is a shady slice of what it used to be in pre-colonial and pre-literate times. There was remarkable level of social control, not only in the marriage institutions. Even in the post-colonial (modern) era, the Igbos had all the institutions in a wide social setting that could establish stability in the land. Such institutions were religion, politics, agriculture, social justice administration, among others.

As a predominantly patriarchal society, polygamy was a justified feature of the marriage system. The man was a sole hero figure in the marriage because the yardsticks for measuring the reputation of a man included the size of his harem, children and the size of his barn. Women had no objection

being co-wives of a prominent man. Then, there was no form of formal education and informal education based solely on the culture of the people held sway.

Interestingly, domestic violence was at its lowest ebb. A man was in firm control of his family and would not speak without anyone obeying. The Igbos had lived for so many centuries with this cultural model. It is only natural that there could be slight innovations over years considering the fact that culture is dynamic. Yet, the culture of oral tradition was the only way of transmitting cultural information. One thing very exciting was the level of love and peaceful co-existence that existed among the people. In this society, the woman was limited in a number of ways. She could not represent a man anywhere and in any capacity and could not manage or direct any line of thought or policy except in her kitchen. She was also relegated to a sex mate and near slave to the husband because of the dictatorial disposition of the man.

Then the sanctity of the land (Nso-Ala) was preserved and revered. Oath was not administered in vain. The deities and gods of the land were watchful in their prospective super-natural capacities. People were afraid of committing evil such as incest, murder,

among others. The social relations of the people were fostered on the principle of “live and let live”.

Modernization had been the way of life of the western world many centuries before it was sown in the culture of the African people. The Igbo people are an ethnic group of south eastern Nigeria. They speak Igbo, which includes various Igboid languages and dialects. Before colonialism, the Igbos were fragmented politically because of their feudal inclinations. Their democracy was as old as any other in the world.

There is no community on earth that does not have a marriage culture. This is one of the evidences to prove within the context of the Christian faith that it was God who instituted marriage while man established the other institutions. This is made clearer in the Book of Genesis 2: 18: “And the Lord said that it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helpmate for him” (5).

Modern civilization was occasioned by the multiple socio-economic activities of the Igbo people through such social institutions like: religion, commerce, education, health and the justice system. These institutions although already existing in the Igbo traditional society were more advanced-

progressive and logically packaged in quality and content before colonialism. The introduction of modern marriage ideals was the beginning of a dwindling trend in cultural values which affected the Igbo marriage culture.

One thing formal education brought to the consciousness of the “Igbo man” was self-assertion and confidence. The average Igbo man came to realize that he had a lot of untapped potentials. Oracy was giving way gradually to the art of literacy. Ideas could be documented and preserved, and above all, the common man knew he had rights under the law and needed respect. Through modern education, the women folk was liberated from the domination of men that has lasted from the beginning of creation. Education is therefore a panacea for greatness of the individual and development of the society. In his forward to *The Reading Culture* (2007) Agugoesi observes:

The Reading culture... is a dynamic inquest into the problems associated with developing a sound reading culture, and a soothing therapy for those who aspire to improve their reading habit with a

view to achieving greatness (v).

The modern (educated) African couple would see nothing else but understanding the bond of relationship. True marriage is built on love, respect, tolerance, and sacrifice. What suppressed the traditional marriage institution most was the legal backing given to modern marriage which gave each aggrieved party in the union the right to seek redress. Urbanization which is a by-product of modernization helped in destroying certain primitive norms and replaced them with modern ones. According to Pollock (1968), almost everywhere the European invasion of Africa and the subsequent economic and political development and the drift of people from rural areas... (95).

Christianity was one of the strongest vehicles of western indoctrination. The feminist perspective on the issue of marriage was reinforced by formal education. It made the potentials in a woman glaring. Modern education made the woman relevant in the society just like the man. The reading and writing culture replaced the culture of orality. However, informal education was not completely destroyed.

According to Naegele (1965), there is this sharp contrast between generations of

traditional marriage and modern marriage.

According to him:

With us, rebellion-by which an independence is wrought and the newness of a new generation or at least the oldness of a previous one, is proclaimed-often takes the form of a quietistic emphasis on personal experience and exploration rather than of outward political radicalism (63).

Although the Igbo society has maintained the tradition of marriage in accordance with the norms and ordinance (conventions) of history, the average Igbo couple are Christians who are not ready to defy their faith. A woman in a marriage relationship like this cannot afford to compromise her faith after taking an oath of fidelity although it is no longer the case today.

Suffice this to say that the modern marriage culture strongly influenced the traditional marriage institution which has liberated the woman from a biased cultural conception that women are inferior. It actually brought about

a radical change in cultural values as perceived by what has become a parallel belief in marriage practices in Igboland.

One thing that needs to be pointed out in contrasting the traditional and modern marriage institutions in Igboland is that modern marriage is based on mutual love and both parties work towards achieving this in modern Igbo homes. It has equally experienced a reduction in Polygamism.

One of the purposes of marriage is to encourage growth in mutual love. According to Umunnakwe et al (2015), “it offers companionship and increase mutual love and respect. Marriage is indeed a union of two who becomes one in mutual love” (140).

This is an indictment on polygamous marriage practice. In pre-colonial times, the whole essence of marriage from the perspective of men was to procreate and generate enough laborers for their farms. The Christian religion and the modern social environment indicted the Igbo traditional marriage institution from being structured in the favour of the menfolk. Women were relegated to the status of “baby industries”, sex objects and slaves to their husbands. This gave men the impetus to marry as many women as they wanted. Men did not see their

wives as precious and adorable possessions. The Igbo woman like every other African woman came to realize that she had lived in ignorance. A woman would devote all her life in serving and loving her husband even against her wish. This is aptly captured in her notes in the play “Adaugo”. According to Ezenwanebe (2011), “what then becomes of filial relation? Can the old social roles and responsibility be upheld? It is clear that social role differentiation in traditional society is incapable of sustaining healthy gender relation in modern life” (7-8).

Modern marriage is a revolt from the traditional marriage. Although the rights of women were stepped on there were virtually no cases of domestic violence. There is remarkable degree of progress in the family institution of the modern era. Education and Christianity have tempered with the minds of many. Modern families are better planned and happier than families that are polygamous. However, there is a higher rate of separation and divorce in the modern era.

In Christian circles, marriage is seen as a reflection of the relationship (marriage) between Christ and the Church. As the Church looks up to Christ, so does the Christian woman look up to her husband. As

a result of the lower standard of love at which couples operate in recent times, we hear about marital crisis- domestic violence. According to Roger Daniel (2003)

Our place is not to
be fooling around
with the world,
but to be faithful
to Christ, our
future
bridegroom.
Today, people
often break
engagements or
even date others
during the
engagement, but
in the Lord's time
on earth, a Jewish
engagement was
considered very
serious and
binding on both
parties (13).

Modern marriage has given the woman some right in the matrimonial home. As she has these rights, she also has responsibilities- to submit to the husband by respecting him, among other honors she accords him. The rise of women to fight for their marital rights was felt by men in many circles as having their pride (ego) punctured. Sometimes, it makes some men become violent.

Ironically, the average African man does not believe in equality when it comes to sharing marital rights in the family. In certain

quarters, it has become a critical yard-stick for most African traditional worshippers to condemn the Christian religion claiming it has eroded a lot of values in the African marriage traditions. They are of the view that the rebellion of women against the ignoble ancient practices are motivated by the church, the legal system and the educational institutions.

Modern marriage is pro-feminine in the sense that it gives women the opportunity to express themselves as free moral agents and partners in the marital union. From a feminine point of inquiry, the question as to the rationality of the uncurbed rights of men in a marital relationship arises. It all boils down to the insatiability of the African man over women for which polygamism became the order of the day. It has equally been observed that parent- children bond is stronger in nuclear families. It is in modern marriage that love and understanding could be said to be the foundation of marriage. The couple take some time to engage in courtship to determine their compatibility. Each party has the right to remain or walk out of the relationship. This was not a feature of traditional courtship and marriage. A Christian woman confessed how things changed drastically for good in her marriage

the moment she took to prayers and stopped breaking her head over her husband's love for sports- a hobby she hated with passion. Stormie Omartian (1997) in "The Power of a Praying Wife", posits:

Lord, I pray you would protect our marriage from anything that would harm or destroy it. Shield it from our own selfishness and neglect, from the evil plans and desires of others, and from unhealthy or dangerous situations (155).

This kind of mindset is not found in all women of the traditional and modern era. The feminist movement is a modern movement that has given a say to women especially in marital issues and human rights.

Modernization brought a lot of changes in many cultures including the Igbo culture. Although it has not completely eroded core marriage customs in Igboland, it has placed women on a better pedestal compared to the era of total ignorance in pre-missionary and colonial era. Now the consciousness of women is at par with that of men. This is one of the advantages of education- women

knowing their rights and defending such. The clamor for gender equality has been one of the aftermaths of modernism. The phenomenon (modernization) has a lot of interrelated consequences and gains.

Among social philosophers who have reacted to the significance and impact of modernization are Barnett and Muller (1975) and Smith, (1980). In the views of the former, the transfer of culture through the electronic media- film, radio and television has had a lot of influence on the cultural perception of individuals and societies. On the side of Smith, he reasons that there is the possibility of permanent personality change. This is quite evident in what could be said to be social empowerment of the Igbo woman in particular and all women in a nutshell. Under the charter of human rights, the woman has equal rights as the man but in traditional times, a woman had no such rights and could not speak up to be heard.

The standardization of the modern social institutions including the Igbo marriage system could not be said to have destroyed the traditional marriage institution but has impacted seriously on it. Marriage is no longer contracted on the premise that women should play the second fiddle. To a

reasonable extent, the Igbo woman has a say in the home unlike what it used to be. Many world and national associations like Amnesty International, Federation of women lawyers, Nigeria Bar Association and the National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), among others, are all solicitors and advocates for the protection of the rights of the woman in marriage.

Prospects of the Traditional Marriage Institution

The problem of infidelity in marriage on the part of the Igbo woman seem to be more observable modern times unlike in traditional times. In those days when they were not given room to express themselves, infidelity was not heard of. The idea of the man marrying many wives was not seen as infidelity but as worthwhile.

Ideally, education, exposure and the rights of women in marriage which the modern marriage institution has restored to them should have helped in curbing marital problems, rather the reverse is the case. It should be noted clearly that there are women who perfectly respect the sanctity of marriage. With the fusion of western marriage traditions such as church and court weddings and the traditional culture, the

traditional marriage institution can still thrive even better. The Igbos are known to even combine the two wedding traditions- western and African the same day. The couple would go to the church and after the marital vows and blessings they retire to the home of the bride for traditional rites. It is all a matter of choice. Some Igbos too do not believe in church wedding.

What actually has helped the traditional marriage institution is the recognition of the traditional marriage ordinance by the church. No one can wed in any of the known orthodox or Pentecostal churches without first presenting evidence to prove that the bridegroom has fulfilled all the marriage rites according to local custom. This is to prove that the church and the traditional marriage institution work in agreement.

Apart from Polygamism which is a common practice in the Igbo traditional marriage system, the views of both the church and the Igbo traditional marriage institution are almost the same. The church as a moral institution has helped in shaping the characters of people by imparting the tenets of faith and morality in them. The church through the word of the gospel has taught African women to respect the sanctity of their

marriages by not breaking their vows. This they can do by respecting their husbands and remaining fidel. This is equally applicable to the men.

So long as the Igbos still strongly believe in traditional marriage no matter how highly placed anyone may be in the community, that aspect of the people's culture remains preserved. In this age of literacy, many documents have been raised on Igbo traditional marriage customs. Modern marriage institutions could therefore be said to be complementary to the traditional institution. At least, through researches and counselling marital qualities that enhance the success of marriages could be imbibed. According to Ewuruigwe (2018):

Marital quality is the CenterPoint of researches in marriage. Every couple focuses attention to attain marital quality while researchers focus their energies to identify the conditions under which it is likely to be attained (46).

Although there is cultural infiltration, there are aspects of Igbo traditional marriage

customs that have not been compromised. For instance, the payment of dowry and the fulfilment of the demands of the kindred and community of the woman. This leaves lasting memories in the present generation of young Igbo sons and daughters. The church and the traditional institution can co-exist amicably.

There is no doubt the fact that marriage in the modern era brings out the best in a family. Though there are marital crisis everywhere, a peaceful family (home) is a great inspiration to social co-existence and harmony. The quality of every society could be measured by the quality of families that make up such society. With the help of the church and other social institutions, the marriage institution can be a better agent of socialization and development.

Conclusion

Modernization has done a lot in the advancement of the society. The technological and scientific breakthroughs of this era would not have been possible but for modernization. The world has become a global village where families are linked on multiple platforms. The social institutions which the western world used to penetrate the Igbo culture included the church, formal

education, among others. In fact, they are the most prominent now.

The western culture conflicted with the African cultures and the way westerners do things is what the Igbos are emulating today including the English language at the expense of the Igbo Language. The Igbo marriage institution is a victim of this cultural influence. The church introduced a strange religion as well as a strange language through formal education. One is not regarded a full devotee of Christ if the person is not baptized, confirmed and wedded in the church. Traditional marriages started to lose its glamor as it cannot qualify anyone to be a follower of the Christian faith.

This dispensation also weakened certain traditional norms and practices. Women have more say in their homes and public places compared to pre-colonial times. This has equally raised their consciousness to fight for their rights. That is why there are patches of domestic violence in many families, most of which lead to divorce or infidelity. Yet, no matter how deeply threatened, the traditional marriage institution cannot be completely eroded.

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