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Revisiting Family Values: A Pathway towards Societal Stability

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The family can be regarded as society's oldest and most important social institution. Family responsibilities may include providing guidance, support and a sense of belonging to its members. This was basically the case with the traditional family where children learnt the values of discipline, hardwork, respect for elders and constituted authority, responsibility, integrity and credibility. Indeed, a good family guarantees a good society and a good society would guarantee a good and stable nation. With modernity and industrialisation the role of the family seemed to have waned considerably as majority of parents have had less time for their children and seemed to have delegated most of their responsibilities to nannies and househelps due to work commitment. The end result have been an increase in juvenile delinquency, high levels of criminality, drug abuse and addiction, high rate of promiscuity, disregard for elders and constituted authority, the get rich quick syndrome, disregard for hardwork, corruption and a lack of responsibility, integrity and credibility. This paper therefore examines the situation critically and proffers solutions on how best to revert the situation before the society derails completely.

Social institutions are interconnected just the way an organism operates. They contribute to the survival and stability of a system or society. They cease to exist or become relevant if the functions they perform are no longer desired. The functions of a social institution may be transformed or replaced by new ones. Societies constantly undergo change and the forces of change could also reshape the goals of their institutions. Every society has standardized ways of fulfilling its member's basic social needs. Humans fashion their social institutions in accordance with their society's dominant norms and values. Also social institutions mould and channel individual behaviour and values.

The first of the institutions is the family. Why do humans live in families? What functions does the family fulfil? What different forms does the family take? How are families formed? How is the family changing in today's society? These are the

critical issues necessary for evaluation. Although the institution of the family exists in all human societies, its form varies from one society to another. An individual's life revolves around the family at one stage or another during his or her life time. Sociologists therefore, regard the family as the basic social unit in all human societies (Erinosho, 2005). It is pertinent to therefore assert that the smallest unit of analysis for sustainable development is not the household or the individual, but rather the bio-social group-the family with its hereditary, physical, social and material endowments. And inspite of social change, the family still remains one of the oldest institutions that has continued to play a pivotal role in the induction of the child into the culture of the society.

Almost all development strategies now recognize the problems confronted by families. The Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, United

Nations (1987) listed the problems faced by families in developing countries to include poverty, low levels of education, poor health and nutrition, inadequate housing and unwanted children. Without strong families as its foundation, society will gradually disintegrate. It is only by strengthening the family can society be revitalized so as to guarantee the future of humanity. The family is essential in the development of society.

Every social institution involved with education, work, economics, culture, and politics is connected with the family. It is in the family that one first becomes aware of his or her dignity and learns what it means to love and be loved, and what it actually means to be a person. As a community of persons, the family strengthens the social fabric by preventing society from becoming an anonymous and impersonal mass. The family in Nigeria as elsewhere remains an integral and vital component of the society. It is through the family that a child is socialized into the culture of the society.

And as Anderson and Taylor (2006) stated, the family is in a constant state of change, particularly as new social conditions arise and as people in families adapt to the changed conditions of their lives. One common trend today is the new family form – the transnational family, defined as families where one parent (or both) live and work in one country while their children remain in their countries of origin. This is a trend that is becoming evident in Nigeria as more and more people migrate overseas leaving their families behind due to economic reasons. In this situation, most mothers have to develop new concepts of their material role to include breadwinning, traditionally defined as the role of fathers.

The Family and Its Functions

What is the Family?

The family is a group of persons related by kinship, residence, or close emotional attachment and it displays four systemic features – intimate interdependence, selective boundary maintenance, ability to adapt to change and maintain their identity over time (Mattessich & Hill, 1987). Definitions of the family must be flexible

enough to accommodate a wide variety of family forms. According to Horton and Hunt (1983) the family is defined as Kinship grouping which provides for the rearing of children and for certain other human needs. If a society is to survive, people must find some workable and dependable ways of pairing off, conceiving and raising children, caring for the ill and aged, and carrying out certain other functions. These family functions vary considerably from society to society, while the family forms for fulfilling these functions vary even more greatly.

Walker and Crocker (1988) also stated that, a family system can be defined as any social unit with which an individual is intimately involved, and which is governed by "family rules". One key concept of the family system is recursive causality, in which family members reciprocally influence each other over time. Hughes et al (1999) described the family as "a social group whose members are related by ancestry, marriage or adoption and live together, cooperate economically and care for the young". Anderson and Taylor (2006) also defined the family broadly to refer to a primary group of people usually related by ancestry, marriage or adoption and who form a cooperative economic unit to care for any offspring (and each other) and who are committed to maintaining the group over time.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica (2007) defined the family as a social group of people consisting of a parent or parents and their children, or a husband, wife and their children. Otite and Ogiunwo (2006) affirmed that the family is in many respects a vital unit in social organization and social control as well as an important institution in the process of socialization. Though Sociologists are not unanimous in their definition of the concept and structure of the family, some attempts have been made at a concise definition. The most comprehensive seems to be that of Murdock (1949) quoted in Haralambos and Holborn (2008) who defined the family as a "social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship and one or more

children, own or adopted of the sexually co-habiting adults”.

It is expedient to state that the family system of concern here is the nuclear family involving father, mother and children, predominant in the modern industrial society. Yet, nuclear families have a variety of ties with their extended family. In general, nuclear families maintain close ties with other family units in a kin network as mutual and social interactions are frequent (Sayres, 1992). There is a need to add that in understanding the family, the preponderance of children born out of wedlock, single parenthood and marriages seem to be the exception rather than rule. What must be emphasized therefore is that majority of families centre on residential units comprising parents and their children, a father and his children, a mother and her children, or childless couple or a family setup with a number of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and other kin living a varying distances from the core group.

So the family can either be an extended family or a nuclear family which is becoming more predominant. Also, the reduction of distances by communications technology and other post-modern changes make it increasingly difficult to generalise about actual or desirable family forms or residential arrangements. The family in Nigeria as elsewhere remains an integral and vital component of society. It is through the family that a child is socialised into the culture of the society. It must therefore be viewed as a bulwark from which every person should attempt to cope with the world. It must guarantee an environment where serenity, goodness, love, concern for one another reigns as an ideal.

Family Functions

The family has a number of basic functions that it serves in most if not all societies.

Sexual Regulation: According to Tischler (1999) no society permits random sexual behaviour. All societies have an incest taboo, which forbids intercourse among closely related individuals – although who is considered to be closely related varies widely. Erinosh (2005) further asserted

that most societies do not encourage sexual relationships between two persons who are not married. Marriage therefore legitimizes sexual intercourse. So the principal institution through which societies organize and regulate the satisfaction of sexual desires is the family. In Nigeria, sexual relationship is not permitted between parents and their children and between brothers and their sisters.

Reproduction: Every society must replace its members. It however regulates where and with whom individuals enter into sexual relationships. (Tischler, 1999). This therefore implies that for society to survive and to guarantee continuity of life, reproduction is necessary. This must be within the framework of the family unit. In fact, in most societies, children born out of wedlock are described as illegitimate (Erinosh, 2005).

Socializing Children: The family is the first and most influential setting for socialization. Parents teach children to be well integrated members of society (Maconis, 1997). Not only must a society reproduce itself biologically by producing children, it also must ensure that its children are encouraged to accept the lifestyle it favours, to master the skills it values, and to perform the work it requires. In other words, a society must provide predictable social contexts within which its children are to be socialized. The family provides such a context almost universally, at least during the period where the infant is dependent on the constant attention of others (Tischler, 1999).

The brain of a child at birth is a *tabula rasa* and with the help of the significant others (parents and siblings) the child gradually learns the process of becoming a social being. Erinosh (2005) further asserted that the family transmits values and norms into children. Parents are important role models to their children and must show good examples, for if the foundation is defective, it will generate negative consequences for the children and society at large.

Care and Emotional Support: Every human being needs food and shelter. In addition, we all need to be among people who care for us emotionally, who help us with the problems that arise in daily life, and who backs us up when we come into conflict with others. Most often, the family helps to meet these needs (Tischler, 1999). Parents are expected to show affection to their children and be there always for them. Parental love in turn helps the offspring to develop as normal and useful human beings to their families and society in general (Erinosho, 2005).

Providing Social Status: Simply by being born into a family, each individual inherits both material goods and a socially recognised position defined by ascribed statuses. These statuses include social class or caste membership and ethnic identity. Our inherited social position or family background is probably, the single most important social factor affecting the predictable course of our lives. (Tischler, 1999).

Social Security: According to Erinosho (2005) the family in traditional societies provides the necessary physical, economic and psychological support required by its members. Infact, the family unit protects its members from physical harm and also provides economic support for its needy members. Even in modern societies such duties have not actually waned as the family is still a rallying point in the times of need, joy, sorrow or expectations required by its members. Any form of neglect for a family member may eventually result in high levels of instability and discord within the family.

Changing Family Virtues

The family has undergone several changes all over the world including Nigeria. Majority of these changes have been caused by the process of modernization and industrialisation experienced in a changing world. These changes have had both positive and negative implications for society.

Traditional Family Structure

The traditional family structure found in most of our rural communities is often associated with the extended family system. Here, life starts for a newly born in the family unit and the responsibility for nurturing a baby is shared by father, mother and significant others. The child is expected to show appreciation for the widely shared values and the patterns of behaviour of the family and the society at large. The demand to conform to familial and societal norms and patterns of behaviour is made on the child as soon as he or she can communicate. To facilitate this, parents reward their children who behave in accordance with their expectations and reprimand those who deviate from accepted norms and patterns of behaviour.

According to Erinosho (2005) Nigerian parents teach their children to show deference to older persons from infancy. They prostrate if boys/men, or kneel if girls/women in Yoruba society for elders. Plural words are used as mark of respect for persons older than us. Parents are tutored on the right mode of dressing including values that are shared in their society. All of these including other norms, values and patterns of behaviour are transmitted to children from infancy and they become part and parcel of their lives.

In the traditional family structure, the man is regarded as the head of the family. He plays an instrumental role as the bread winner of the family. The wife or wives play expressive role by ensuring that issues relating to the running of the home are properly attended to. Also, in the choice of partners for their children, parents play a vital role as they are fully consulted by their children. The parents are also expected to undertake some form of consultation, sometimes through divinity and people around to ascertain if their child is getting married to the right person. Every child desired the blessing of the parents before undertaking such a venture. Marriage is seen as a union between two families. In addition the chastity and virginity of the girl at marriage is expected to be highly acknowledged as it will guarantee her and her family the highest respect and regard in the eyes of her in-laws.

Modern Family Structure

The family is undergoing several changes all over the world including Nigeria. Majority of these changes have been caused by contacts with western cultures, just as the family has drastically changed from the extended family system to the nuclear family system. In modern societies, divorce and separation have become more rampant and easier to attain, unlike what obtained in our traditional societies, especially in the distant past. As earlier stated, families in the past participated actively in the choice of a spouse for their member. Several acts of consultation and investigation were performed with a view to finding out about the suitability of the person to be married most especially in terms of his character and behavioural disposition.

Today, people involve less of their families in taking marriage decisions and when it does not work, they are also able to run to the courts for divorce or they could easily separate if they were not legally married. All these have untold implications for the offspring, especially now that we have more of couples that are not formally married cohabiting and bearing children.

One of the greatest changes in family life today has been the increase in the number of families headed by women. The two primary causes for growing number of women heading their own households are the high rate of pregnancy among unmarried teens and the high divorce rate, with death of a spouse also contributing. Collins (1979) asserted that single - parent families have increased. Here, children remained either with the father or with the mother. Davis and Strong (1977) also stated that single - person households have increased. Historically, women lived with parents or relatives until married. Any younger woman who wished to live alone was suspected of insincere intentions. While not necessarily an alarming development, the single person is more vulnerable to many life hazards including marital mistakes.

The rise in female-headed households has caused considerable alarm. Many people see this trend as representing a breakdown of the family and a weakening of social values. Many women in this situation

suffer severe financial deprivation and children are raised up without paternal care. Some scholars have therefore claimed that female-headed households are linked to problems such as delinquency, high rate of school dropouts, drug addicts, cultism, armed robbery, prostitution, etc.

Family life has been compounded by the "quiet revolution" women's employment. And this has affected the division of labour and authority in the home. There has gradually been an increase in working wives, especially career women with some becoming bread winners of their families. This has replaced life in the traditional family where the woman depended on the man for all her economic needs and her place was designated as the kitchen including attending to all the domestic needs of her husband and children. The consequent effect has been that in most cases, the role of organising the home has been taken over by house helps and nannies (domestic servants) that are contracted to take care of the home needs such as that of the husband and children. Events have also shown that in the process, some women have lost their husbands to these house maids while the children have gotten so used to their nannies and see their mothers as aunts. Also, some daughters have ended up being sexually abused by male house helps while some sons have been sexually molested by female house helps.

According to Hopkins and White (1977), a growing number of women today 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 necessarily imposed upon the wife. A couple who try seriously to apply this formula will find that many adjustments must be made.

Unmarried teen-aged parenthood, teen pregnancies, and abandonment of babies have increased. With an increase in illegitimate babies which in most cases condemns the mother to a life of economic deprivation, and the baby to a life of emotional deprivation, lacking perhaps in paternal care. The long run implications is that it generates a system where individuals grow up with high levels of deprivation,

emotional and in some cases financial, with a desire to get back at the society through all kinds of vices detrimental to the system.

It is important to add that domestic violence such as wife battery that was muted in the past is now brought into the open and vigorously challenged with commendable results. Efforts are being made to protect the rights of women that had been the victims of vicissitudes of patriarchy for centuries. In addition, children born out of wedlock do not necessarily carry the stigma any longer; while marriage across ethnic and religious divide is now widespread in the society.

Due to the process of modernization, rational bureaucratic authority and impersonal markets have gradually come to dominate social life. Ties of kin weaken, face to face interdependences are reduced, and impersonal markets and agencies of the state increasingly mediate between individuals and between small families. As affirmed by Dizard and Gadlin (1990), the break from the past is never clean as the old either persists or evolves into the new. Moreover, the order in which these changes occur and the forms they take vary greatly from one society to another.

Theoretical Framework (Theory of Acculturation)

In one sense, culture is a conservative force in society; it tends to be based on tradition and is passed on through generations, conserving and regenerating the values and beliefs of society (Anderson & Taylor, 2006). Acculturation involves the process of change in artefacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of societies with different cultural traditions.

Acculturation implies external pressure usually from a more powerful or dominant group (Oke, 2004). It involves contact between people with different cultures, usually leading to change in one or both systems. Such change affects material culture, traditional practices, and beliefs that occurs when one group interferes in the cultural system of another, directly or indirectly challenging the latter to adopt to the ways of the former. Such change has characterised most political conquests and

expansions over the centuries (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2007).

The process of acculturation is not a simple one. It is very complex. It depends on the size of the population involved; who dominates and who submits; the adaptability and the flexibility exhibited by the cultures involved. The term acculturation was first used to refer to the changes that take place in cultural groups as a result of contact between them: "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936).

Acculturation is different from both enculturation and socialization. The latter terms refer to the process of initial incorporation into one's primary cultural group through an informal enfolding of the individual (enculturation), or by more formal and deliberate teaching (socialization). The former refers to a later involvement with a second culture, which may or may not lead to the incorporation of individuals into it.

Historically, the process of acculturation involves changes that continue over generations, starting with those first in contact, and continuing for their children and later generations. Cultural groups often do maintain themselves by way of the process of enculturation, and then continue to adapt to the ongoing intercultural contact, by way of acculturation.

This basically is the situation in Nigeria where changes in our family values must be examined historically, based on our contact with the West which resulted in the discard of most of our cultural values due to colonial conquest; which has continued till date through the process of neo-colonialism and which is today manifested in the global process of globalization for which the Western world are the profiteers and third world nations like Nigeria the losers.

The Way Forward

From the forgoing, it is necessary to state that due to modernization and industrialization, several changes have

affected our traditional family values. These changes have been both positive and negative. However, there is need for concern on the necessity to guarantee family stability due to the increase in all kinds of vices in the society. This is crucial bearing in mind the fact that a good family will lead to a good society.

One may ask: who suffers the consequences of job mobility and career conflict of both husband and wife? Experiences today show that it is the child especially as the family is tending towards the nuclear family and responsibility for children upbringing is delegated to nannies and house helps.

In present day society such as in Nigeria, the rate of divorce is on the increase, just as single-parent families have also increased, majority of which are headed by women. In addition, child delinquency and various forms of deviant acts including armed robbery, cultism, prostitution, teenage pregnancy, rape, and drug addiction are becoming alarming in the society, thereby raising questions about the possibility of a breakdown of the family and a weakening of family and social values.

There is therefore the need to inculcate in our families the traditional family structure in which the man played the instrumental role of a breadwinner and the woman played the expressive role of running the home as a helpmate. Family members must create time to be together no matter how tough the pressure of work may be. Only through constant interaction can parents understand themselves, and go on to understand their children including their needs, their fears and their aspirations.

Parents must show love and care to their children and be good role models for them. If they are hardly available, then the children have the possibility of learning the issues of life from other persons they see or come in contact with and the long term effects may be very damaging.

The values of respect for elders and constituted authority; sense of integrity and responsibility, of hard work and diligence must first be inculcated in the children from home before they are confronted by the larger society. Only then would the

importance of the family be adequately justified.

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