

1. Introduction

Traditional African family patterns are slowly but progressively being altered as a result of the process of modernization which is exhibited through trends like urbanization. Family patterns that were the norm in traditional rural African societies are gradually being altered and substituted by modern values. Sub Saharan Africa has one of the fastest annual population growth rate (Merrick 202:41). It has the fastest rate of urbanization presently taking place in the world. The transformation of societies in the sub-continent from rural to urban settings has immensely contributed in triggering changes in family structure. This has triggered the distortion of cultural /traditional norms and values that characterized rural communities in the region. African families are increasingly faced with the challenge and pressure emanating from the competition prevailing between traditional and modern family values. Hence, Contemporary family patterns in the region are increasingly subjected to transform and adapt to changing times. Discussions of family patterns in contemporary Sub Saharan Africa are usually made in reference to the process of acculturation, urbanization (the movement from rural to urban areas), which have helped to shape modern family structures, as well as fostered the prevalence of demographic changes (Kalu 1981:353). Family in sub Saharan Africa is experiencing changes which are felt in fertility rates that is the number of children women give birth to, and age at marriage to name a few.

This article seeks to examine the trends that depict family patterns in most sub Saharan African countries. It aims at examining two key issues connected with African family patterns, that is; marriage and family size, with the goal of illuminating the changes that are characterizing their prevalence. Discussion on the latter will be limited to the discourse of fertility rate which in this paper encapsulates the number of children women in the region give birth to. In essence, it is centred on the discourse of childbirth that is number of children per woman. It is unconceivable to discuss family patterns in the region, without assessing the issue of marriage. The main interest is that of portraying the changes taking place in marriages in region, from which information can be derived on the changes that have so far been encountered in its contraction.

1.2 Overview of family patterns in sub Saharan Africa

Despite the changes taking place in sub Saharan African societies due to the modernization process, the family still remains a prominent nexus in the social life of Africans. In Africa, there is considerable importance attached to the respect for elders and ancestors. African communities are characterized by the prevalence of collectivism as opposed to individuality. Paulina Makinwa-Adebusoye (2001:5) outlined the major characteristic features of African household to be that they are mostly rural, patriarchal and hierarchical, polygamous and open

to kinship networks, and finally they attached substantial importance to lineage continuation. These features in all play a pivotal role in influencing the number of children women give birth to. The social organization of most African families is embedded in a patriarchal and hierarchical system that precludes the possibility of women, who generally have lower status than men in the society to make deliberate choice on the number of children they want to have (Makinwa-adebusoye2001:5). At marriage women tend to have lower status than all the members of their husband's family (Makinwa-adebusoye (20016). In traditional rural societies in most sub Saharan societies, women were voiceless and powerless. According to Göran Therborn (2006) African societies have experienced slight distortion in the patriarchal tradition, following the advent of urbanization, as well as due to the drop in the importance attached to land and cattle in the economy. Male supremacy has also being altered a bit even though it still has a prominent strong hold in the society. There is the existence of substantial cultural importance attributed to fertility and lineage continuation, tight patriarchal traditions, wide rate of polygamy prevalence. These are the prominent features that characterized most traditional African societies.

Contemporary African family patterns are subjected to changes that emanate as a result of the ameliorated economic conditions, education and health opportunities. These factors continuously exert tremendous impact on contemporary family patterns in the sub-continent. Socioeconomic circumstances in the sub-continent are encountering alterations that have to a considerable extent triggered changes in the fundamental cultural values most especially in the domain of the family. The occurrence of competition between traditional and modern family patterns illustrates a dichotomy. There is a rise in the pace towards the abandonment of traditional practices for modern ones (western). However, the most popular trend is that of the prevalence of family patterns that are increasing merging traditional and modern marriage norms, values or practices (Kalu1981:2). The next section provides information on marriage; it is followed by information on family size.

1.3 *Marriage*

Marriage can be perceived from different facets, as an institution, a partnership, a lifecycle phase and as a role. Marriage as an institution is confronted with the process of adapting to the process of modernization which inherently helps to mold modern marriage structure. Wilhelma Kalu (1981) stated that the institution of marriage is considerably subjected to the trend of accommodation to the process of industrialization/modernization. Socioeconomic circumstances are encountering changes which forge alteration of the fundamental values of culture. Marriage constitutes a vital variable that is pivotal for procreation. The distortion of its structure tends to serve as a medium where socioeconomic changes associated with the main values of culture can be measured. Traditional tenets of African marriages are increasingly

subjected to stabilize amidst sporadic societal changes emanating from modernization and globalization. This, Wilhelmina Kalu (1981:350) emphasized inherently brings in to perspective the need for the redefinition of the role and features of marriage unavoidable.

Marriage in sub Saharan Africa is universal. There is early and universal female marriage (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987:411). The age at first marriage is experiencing slight delay than it was before. Marriage in Africa is subjected to the task of adapting amidst sporadic changes emanating from the society. This in essence set the pace for the redefinition of its role and characteristics (Kalu1981:350). Marriage is still quite important in African communities, the age at first marriage ranges between 17 to 22 years for women (Boogaarts et al 1984). It varies across regions depending on regional and ethnic practices. Göran Therborn (2006:36) portrays the fact that the age of first marriage has experienced a slight increase in most countries. It has risen since the 1950s to 1990s in Guinea from 16 to 19 years, from 15 to 18 years in Niger. In Nigeria it has risen from 19 to 20 years, Ivory Coast from 19 to 21 years and Zimbabwe from 19 to 21 years during the 1980s and early 1990s. Countries like South Africa and Botswana have much later ages of marriage which has rose from 26 to 27 years. The percentage of the female population that is married by age 20 was 82 percent in Mali, and 90 percent in Niger. Both of these countries have relatively high fertility rates (Makinwa-Adebusoye2001:5). Michael Boogarts (1984) remarked that before, the average age of marriage in the sub-continent ranged between 15 years and beyond. Contrary to this, contemporary sub Saharan African countries are gradually experiencing slight changes in the age of marriage at which women get married.

In traditional rural African societies, the contraction of marriage was dominated by arranged marriages whereby parents usually indulged in the selection of marriage partners for their children; this was mostly common for their daughters. This was done without the consent of the children. However, in contemporary African societies this has been altered to the extent that some countries have adopted policies that strive to advocate for the consent of both parties that are to be married as was the case of the Tanzania marriage act of 1971 and the Ivory coast civil code of 1964 (Therborn 2006:29). This does not imply that the involvement of parents in the marriage of their children has been halted. The adoption of these acts has helped to promote the recognition of the consent of the parties to be married, and as well as fostered the existence of the acknowledgment that it is the right of prospective partners to select their partners. Despite this development, the selection of marriage partners is still done with the consent of family members.

In traditional societies in most sub Saharan African countries, there is a high value accorded to marriage; this has been marked by the practice of early marriages and childbearing which in most cases continues till the end of productivity age. At marriage women tend to have lower status than all the members of their husband family (Makinwa-adebusoye (20016). Polygamous

marriages dominated traditional societies. Paulina Makinwa-Adebusoye (2001:5) explained that as of 1999, in Nigeria, 32.7 percent of married women were in polygamous marriages that were made up of two or more wives. This is characterized by the trend of early marriage; most of the women got married quite young, mostly to older men. Polygamy constitutes a prime feature of rural Africa. Africa has the highest rate of polygamy prevalence in the world (Therborn2006:13). Marriage in contemporary sub Saharan Africa is substantially marked by the movement from polygamous marriages to monogamous marriage. This is prominent in urban areas in the region mostly amongst the younger generation. The practice of polygamy was centred on the notion of precluding the situation of husband shortage. Monogamous marriages have become the norm, based on the fact that the contraction of marriage has substantially drifted from polygamy to monogamy. This however does not mean that polygamous marriages do not occur; its scale is smaller nowadays than it was before. The introduction of Christianity in most of the countries, to a certain extent has a great role to play for this as well. The contraction of marriage in the region is increasingly marked by the union of one man and one woman. This in principle has not been the case in rural Sub Sahara African societies, where marriages between one man and two or more wives dominated. Urbanization and modernization as well have been pinpointed to be responsible for these changes.

Wilhemina Kalu (1981:351) study of marriage in Ghana amongst the Ga community in the 1980s illustrated it to be dominated more by polygamy even though there existed the freedom to choose between monogamy and polygamy. According to Wilhemina Kalu (1981:382) marriage was contracted as a partnership rather than an organic union, sustained by reciprocal desires and obligation. The impact of acculturation stemming from the process of urbanization, culminated from the trend of the movement from rural to urban areas, has helped to shape marriage structure. There is the emergence of elements or practices from abroad which did not prevail before such as love, romance, and physical togetherness in most African societies that have helped in altering traditional conceptualization of marital relationship. Wilhemina Kalu (1981) upholds that there is increasingly competition prevailing between western conception of marriage and the traditional African conceptualization. There is mounting pursuit for change mostly amongst the younger generation. The practice of acculturation favours the adjustment to modern times (Kalu1981:358).

1.4 Family Size

The advent of modernity has inherently fostered a progressive transformation of African family organization marked by the drift from larger family size to small size households. Demographers often identify the changes taking place in family patterns such as changes in family size to be a characteristic of the second demographic transition process (Perelli-Harris 2005:57). It is marked by the reorientation of family values from extended families to smaller family sizes. According to Brienna Perelli-Harris (2005) the shift in society is inevitable and is

part of the process of modernization. One major area that has encountered or is experiencing alteration is the size of family that is the number of children that married women give birth to. Discussion of family size here is made in reference to the number of children that are born in a family. It is imperative to highlight that family size discussions in the region is renown to be dominated by the extended family settings whereby a family is not made up only of a married couple and their children but also include uncles, aunties, grandparents to name a few. Extended families still has quite a strong hold in Africa despite the advent of modernization. The main reason for this has been linked to the role that extended family plays as social security in the society (Therborn 2006:13).

Family structures in sub Saharan Africa are experiencing changes which are felt in childbirth rate that is the number of children, and age at first marriage. John Caldwell and Pat Caldwell (1987:411) emphasized that in order to comprehend contemporary African fertility, one needs to understand that there has not been any traditional fertility control in the light of limiting family size, and also that the practice of female abstinence has been a vital feature of societies in the region. This, they identified as been the reason for the resistance and apprehension mounted by most people in the region to modern methods of fertility control which were perceived as being unnecessary in the region. The number of children women in the region are averagely giving birth to is progressively declining even though the rate is not quite significant. The locus of most traditional African countries is centred on the perception of large families as an asset especially in rural subsistence agricultural societies (Makinwa-adebusoye 2001:5). John Caldwell and Pat Caldwell (1987:412.413) stated that the ideal family size in the region stood around 6 to 8 children. There were no interests in reducing the family size beyond these numbers of births in rural communities. Limiting family sizes to four or five children was viewed to increase the potential of extinction in the face of high mortality rates. In Nigeria as John Caldwell and Pat Caldwell (1987:413) pointed, women had as much as twelve children and still had the desire to give birth to more children. A world fertility survey report on the proportion of women who had on average seven surviving children and who did not want to have more children, showed that the proportion was 33 percent in Kenya, 10 in Cameroon, 3 percent in Ghana. High fertility was perceived as a source of joy (Caldwell &Caldwel1987:413).

The factors that have been identified to be responsible for high fertility rates are extensive, they range from high infant and child mortality, low contraceptive use, early marriage to cite a few. This is plagued with variation amongst Sub Saharan African countries, with the total fertility rates in the region noted to have fallen from 6 to 5 children per woman. The number is estimated to fall to 2.45 children by 2050. According to Cheihk Mbacke (1994: 189) arguments have been put forth that economic hardship plays a pivotal role in the reduction of family sizes in contemporary sub Saharan African societies. Decision making pertaining to childbearing to a considerable extent lies on family status, and concerns surrounding the preservation of the lineage and respect for ancestors. This mode of reasoning rest on the belief, that ancestors are

reincarnated through the birth of additional children (Makinwa-adebusoye 2001: 5). The locus of high fertility is perceived as a means of prolonging the lineage with the replacement of older members with new ones.

Conclusion

African family patterns are increasingly faced with the challenge and pressure between traditional and modern family values and structure. There is the steady increase in the pace towards the abandonment of traditional practices for modern ones (western). However, the most popular trend is that of the prevalence of family patterns that are increasing merging traditional and modern marriage norms or practices (Kalu 1981:2). This paper has presented a short description of the changes that are characterizing marriage and family size in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. There are other practices taking place such as non-marital childbearing, single parenthood, non-marital unions that were not discussed that are as well gradually gaining momentum in the region. It can be inferred from the information provided in this paper that practices that depicted rural sub-Saharan African societies are progressively being transformed, this is marked by the shift from polygamy marriages that dominated rural sub-Saharan African communities to monogamous marriage and the movement from large household to small ones.

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