

## Conceptualizations of Family Structure in Nigeria

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Given that social institutions are the basis of any society, they must ideally operate in unison with functional necessities for any society to function and then flourish. The plethora of issues confronting Nigeria as a country may be traced back to weak, incompetent, and dysfunctional social institutions that have failed to alter the status quo. According to Talcott Parsons, society is analogous to the human body, and in order for the body to thrive, all of its elements must collaborate. For Nigeria to advance, all social institutions, including family, school, religion, politics, and the economy, must work together to create repeatable results. It is against this background that this paper sought to examine the role of family structure in Nigeria and their pro-activeness in propelling national development.

Literature was extensively reviewed from relevant publications and journals and it revealed that the family structure in Nigeria is gradually becoming weak and dysfunctional. This is attributed to a lot of changes that are taking place in the institution of family which quite often poses a threat to the very survival of family system universally. It was then concluded that there is need for every family to hold with uttermost importance the place or morals, socialization and regulation of individual member of the family's behaviour.

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## Introduction

Family is a very important social institution of the society. It is one of the basic institutions of the society which breeds actors of other social institutions. No one exists without some form of family. It is only in literature that societies are portrayed without families. An individual's life revolves around the family at one period or the other during his lifetime. The word 'Family' was derived from the Latin word *famulus* which connotes *servant*. Inference taken from this is that family comprises of people who are meant to serve one another. And in a typical African family which consists of a man, woman with their children (and extended family members in most situations), people are interdependent on one another.

Every human society has adopted the family system. It is the lowest unit of social organization. This has attracted several disciplines such as Anthropology, Archeology, History, Medicine, Law, Psychology, Sociology and Social studies among others to give special attention to the study of the institution which Erinoshio (2005) described as the bedrock of value. The institution of the family formed the basis of social relations and was essential to the survival of the individual in the African traditional societies. But it is important to note that as industrialization set in and new institutions came to limelight, family roles and relevance were taken up by these emerging institutions. Although family still remains the basic unit of social organizations but the complexities of societies and the current era of globalization has ushered in several changes and altered the originality of the family structure.

### *Family Defined*

Family is a universal institution and as a result, it will be very difficult to give a universally acceptable and applicable definition in the face of diversities in structure and varying cultural practices of societies. As such, within the context of this chapter, family will be defined based on its applicability to African society and easy understanding of students.

Family can be defined as a group of people related by blood or marriage, who live together, co-operate economically and care for their young ones (Adisa, 2009). According to Giddens (2006), a family is a group of people who are intimately related by kinship and whose adult members are responsible for caring for children. A family may also be defined as a small collection of individuals who have face-to-face interactions and are linked through kinship or marriage. The concept of family exists in society. It may also be thought of as a social structure that has impact over society. A civilization cannot exist without family. Murdock (1949) defines family as a social group defined by shared housing, financial integration, and procreation. Implicit from these definitions given is that the concept of family has something to do blood relation, marriage, and household. Overtime with the presence of the threat of divorce, single parents, unmarried cohabitation and gay marriages, several definitions of family have lost their originality and are being threatened by the changing trends.

### **Functions of family in the society**

**1. Socialization:** Every individual's initial point of interaction in society is with his or her family. Socialization is the process through which a person becomes an accepted member of society. It is frequently stated that "home" is the first school, and the mother is the first instructor. An infant learns conventions such as hygiene, eating habits, and so on from his family members. The family, via its parents, guardians, and older relatives, assists children in becoming well-integrated and productive members of society. From childhood, the children are indoctrinated with societal standards and values in order for the child to fit into anticipated roles and behaviors in society.

**2. Regulation of sexual behaviour:** Each society controls sexual behavior in order to preserve familial organization and personal liberty (Macionis, 2004). Family systems define standards that govern sexual behavior. These norms may forbid premarital sex or describe the qualities of suitable sexual marital partners. Laws forbidding marriage and sexual interactions between relatives are examples of such standards.

3. **Reproduction function:** For there to be continuity, members of society who die must be replaced. Family offers a culturally and legally authorized setting for new members to be born and raised in (Ferrante, 2011).

4. **Provision of emotional support:** one of the functions of the family is taking care of the emotional and physical needs of its members. Irrespective of how old a member of a household is, such a member still craves for meaningful social ties to others. The human life cycle is such that there is always a stage to be extremely dependent on others (infancy and old age). In Africa, people are not only dependent on one another but very interdependent and as such come to one another's aid when assistance is required.

5. **Social security:** Family provides a sense of security to its members. An individual feels secured when he is with his family members. In many societies especially in the rural communities, any attack upon a person is considered an attack on the entire family and as such all family members stand to defend the person. Although most families are now nuclear in structure but the ties with other members of the family who are heterogeneously scattered in different communities are still maintained especially in Nigeria.

6. **Ascription of status:** Since individuals cannot choose their parents before birth, the family into which a child is born confers a genetic and social status. On the genetic or biological status, a child whose father is a king automatically qualifies to be in the lineage of royalty and as such can become a king also for the achieved status, a child who is born into a wealthy family also enjoy the wealthy status of the parents which can serve as a determinant of the child's aid to attain wealth without having to engage in much hard work.

7. **Religious function:** Most times, the religious practice of the family into who one is born is always the religious group one belongs until maturity or marriage sets in. Since the infancy will be socialized by the family into which he/she is born, the family has a strong influence in determining the religious practice of an individual.

8. **Economic function:** Since the family is the interphase between an individual and the society, the economic aspect of the family is also catered for from infancy. Family in the traditional societies engaged in joint effort of working and sharing i.e. every member of the household was an economic asset because the needs and aspirations of every member was jointly provided. Although the situation has changed and a large number of families now are not engaged in agriculture-based occupation that requires the services of every member but even with white collar jobs, several families that reside in the urban jointly cater for the family needs.

### 9. **Marriage**

Marriage is an institution that results into family. Marriage is a societal institution that allows individuals to form family system with one another. Marriage can take one of three forms: monogamy, polygamy (polygyny and polyandry), or group marriage.

#### **Marriage practices**

**Endogamy:** This is a practice which requires that mates be selected within certain groups. The groups are commonly socio-economic, socio-religious and ethnic based. According to Oyeneye (1999) the practice is prevalent all over the world but some cultures emphasize it more than others. In India, the Indian caste system is an example and in Nigeria, the Osu caste system also exists in the eastern Nigeria. There are some other instances such as the case of some marriages contracted within relatives among royal families in Northern Nigeria in order for the royal blood not to be contaminated by marrying from outside the clan.

**Exogamy:** In this practice, there is prohibition against the selection of a spouse within certain groups. When close relations have sexual intercourse with one another it is regarded as *incest taboo*. This incest taboo prohibits individuals from selecting spouses amongst members of the family and close blood relations. According to and Shankar Rao, (2015), the rule of exogamy is that individual should look for spouse(s) from another family, clan, tribe or village.

#### **Types of Contemporary marriage**

Oyeneye (1999) identified different types of marriage being practiced in Africa. These include:

**Marriage by mutual consent:** This is an association between man and a woman living together as husband and wife without a formal bond such as approved by any religious institution or family members. And because such association exists without the acknowledgement of parents, this marriage is usually not stable (St Abraham, 2006). Any of the couple may decide to break the relationship. This practice is common among some career conscious individuals in the urban areas such as Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Abuja among others in Nigeria.

**Trial marriage:** This is a contracted kind of marriage which is bound to expire at the sight of growing incompatibility. It is somewhat similar to marriage by mutual consent but trial marriage is common among students of tertiary institutions and middle class clerical workers in Nigeria. Although this type of marriage is not yet approved in Nigeria but it has become a common practice among people to start living together and use the opportunity to closely observe each other if their character can match one another for the relationship to be further cemented. People who engage in this practice are referred to as *live-in-lovers*.

**Marriage by ordinance:** This is a marriage contracted in a court of law before a court registrar, magistrate or any designated government official who has authority to contract marriages. At the end of the marriage, certificate is usually issued to the couple but with emphasis that it should be handled by the wife. Marriage under the ordinance cannot be dissolved until after five years of its contraction and such dissolution can only take place in a court of law. Marriage by ordinance only permits both couple to have a spouse at a time and because of this clause; a lot of couples have dodged contracting their marriages in a court of law. Some men for the tendency of infidelity, few ones for the fear of infertility or inability to produce a male child usually reject this type of marriage.

**Christian/Muslim marriage:** In a religious solemnization, the families of the bride and groom are represented or present to serve as witness(es) and show approval for the consummation of two consenting adults. Most Christian marriages take place in the church and it is usually referred to as white wedding while the Muslim marriage usually referred to as Nikhai is mostly done outside the mosque. Both Christian and Muslim marriages are mostly combined with the ordinance and as such, the dissolution requires that both parties be present or represented in a court of law.

**Customary marriage:** This is a traditional marriage system which permits the groom to perform all necessary rites and dues before being betrothed to his wife. Under this practice, the families of both bride and groom must come into agreement to allow their children marry one another. History of sicknesses and diseases, moral and social qualities of either family as well as the hard working nature of the groom are factors always considered before the marriage is consummated. Among the Yorubas, there is usually provision for an intermediary (middle man) who sees it all from both families point of view and report any anomaly or foul play noticed in the course of his visitations. If nothing is detected in the course of his findings then both families can be united in the bond of marriage. Among the Yorubas, once two families are married it is believed that they have become one single family and hence no two members of either family can have any strange feelings of love for themselves, it is a forbidden act. In the Fulani tradition, there is a marriage custom called the Sharo (public flogging). The purpose is to prove a young man's courage and ability to endure the rigors of a married life. If the young man cannot endure the pain of flogging then he is not ready to marry. Today, this system is going fast into extinction.

**Escape marriage:** This type of marriage happens when a woman leaves her husband to marry another man, without any formal divorce or payment of compensation to the former husband Onwuejeogwu (1975). The new husband takes the wife to his house, slaughters a cow which symbolizes the validity of the marriage. If a woman involved in escape marriage gets tired of her new husband, she may decide to return to her former husband or be married to another husband. In this type of marriage, there is no limit to the number of husbands a woman may take. This type of marriage is common among the Fulani tribe of Nigeria.

**Child marriage:** It is referred to as the *Koggal-Pibol*, it is also common among the Fulani tribe of Nigeria. Under this arrangement, a girl is betrothed to a boy when they are both still very young or to a much older man. In some Fulani resident communities, the girls father gives her to the father of the boy who in turn

takes care of her till she is old enough for marriage. This practice is valued because it enhances group integration. Although this has been negatively interpreted as a lot of families who are into this practice are reported to have jettisoned the place of keeping the young girl for a young boy or at least permitting her to attain maturity before sexual intercourse is introduced. Infact, a lot of old and wealthy men have resulted into capitalizing on this practice to find virgins for themselves in the young girls whom the culture described that they should be nurtured till the level of maturity and the problem associated with the recent arrangement is that should the husband (a wealthy old man) of this young wife die, life may become miserable for the woman as there may be no one to cater for her and the kids.

**Woman marriage:** In this case, a woman marries another woman, pays her bride price and acquires the rights of a husband with respect to wife. After the marriage, the woman who paid the bride price can betroth the new wife to her husband, brother, son or close relations. Although, the most popular of all this practice is the one that sees the woman marrying on behalf of her husband to neutralize the effects of the harsh ethnic system which prevents women who have no male children from inheriting part of their deceased husband's property and being part of his agnatic lineage. This practice is peculiar to the Igbo in Nigeria.

**Marriage by inheritance:** This is common in traditional African societies where when a man dies, his wife can be inherited by his kinsmen most especially the siblings of the deceased. This is mainly to cater for the woman and raise children in the name of the deceased. Also, because marriages in the traditional African societies were usually conducted between families, most families see it as a loss when a man dies and his wife is allowed to married outside the family. Hence, one of the kinsmen is chosen to marry the widow in order to cater for her and probably the children of the deceased most especially when the woman is still very young.

**Surrogate:** This involves one woman carrying a foetus produced from the egg of another woman. Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman and Moore (2013) stated that surrogate is more of a mutual agreement between a woman and a couple or a single parent. The surrogate mother is usually contracted to carry the baby from foetus stage to the level of delivery and once the child is delivered, it is delivered to the contracted party which may be couple, single parent or willing parties. Smart (2007) also noted that this practice is becoming a common phenomenon among same sex partners such as gays and lesbians who also crave to have children in their union without adoption. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2012) described that this can be referred to as levirate

### **Family and Social Change**

A lot of changes are taking place in the institution of family which quite often poses a threat to the very survival of family system universally. Giddens (2006), Henslin (2010), Ferrante (2011) and Haralambos, Holboln, Chapman and Moore (2013) stated that the following trends have been observed in the institution of family:

1. **Unwed mothers:** It is gradually becoming a universal culture for some women to voluntarily choose not to marry but have children. Although some are victims of circumstances such as rape, rejected pregnancy, teenage pregnancy, and children accidentally born out of prostitution. These set of women chose not to marry for several reasons. Some out of the fear of being maltreated, past sexual abuse experiences, fear of unknown, and quest for fame.

2. **Live in relationship between couple without the ceremony of marriage:** This is often referred to as *living lovers or trial marriage*. This is common among young adults who want to observe one another for a period of time before deciding on marriage. It is often practised by students of tertiary institutions. Although this practice has been on for long because a lot of people who live together as couple and give birth to children without the ceremony of marriage also fall under this category. This practice is not only restricted to the youth but also some elderly persons in the society who find the ceremony of marriage very rigorous to undertake. A lot of people run from being implicated legally in case they engage in infidelity.

**3. *Extra marital affairs:*** This is almost a universal practice. In Nigeria when a woman engages in this act she is often condemned instantly but the case is not so for the male counterpart who sometimes boast publicly of his potency. Although, the legal marriage system negates this attitude but infidelity is almost normalized in most African countries except for the developed countries that take legal actions against persons (especially men) who are found guilty in this phenomenon.

**4. *Increased rate of divorce:*** This practice is said to be a product of industrialization and the quest for gender equality. Although most African families curb growing intolerance which may lead to divorce, it is important to note that some educated young wives are beginning to develop a new profit making venture in their claim for divorce. In most divorce cases reported, infidelity, growing incompatibility and wife battering among others are factors responsible. Calhoun, Light and Keller (1994) stated that the likelihood of divorce is highest when:

- a. The couple lives in a city.
- b. They both work, but their earnings are low.
- c. They got married young.
- c. They haven't been married for a long time.
- c. The wife has egalitarian beliefs on household labor division, but the husband does not.
- f. Neither the husband nor the wife possesses religious beliefs.
- g. Both the husband and the wife have liberal attitudes.
- h. Both husband and wife have a negative outlook on life.
- i. Either one or both parents are divorced or single parents.

**5. *Boarding school for children:*** Boarding school education for children from a very young age which makes them lose their attachment with the family. Moreso, a lot of caregivers have risen to the occasion. People now take it as a job to raise other peoples children at the absence of the mother.

**6. *Decision not to procreate:*** This tendency is particularly observed among the highly educated couples who feel that they have no time to bring up children or can adopt because of the rigors of child bearing and child rearing. This is also common among artists and people who are too dedicated to their profession.

**7.** Decision of youngsters to remain unmarried on account of high degree of dedication to profession.

**8. *Increasing rate of domestic violence:*** such as child abuse, wife abuse and abuse of the elderly.

**9. *Increase in employment opportunities for women:*** Presently there is a universal agitation for the incorporation of women in organizations because of the perceived level of social inequality, more women now have jobs unlike before and as a result of their new status, they have lesser time for the family.

**10. *Decline of the breadwinner system:*** Since the society is encouraging that both spouses work to sustain the family in the face of industrial reality, there is decrease in continual dependence on the man as the sole bread winner of the family. Rather, there exists joint effort on the part of the couple to cater for the needs of the family. St. Abraham (2006) noted that the breadwinner system is mostly common in the traditional African societies and in an urban area it will not thrive.

**11. *Increased Life Expectancy:*** More members of the family are now conscious of the health status of pregnant women, nursing mothers and infants as well as the physically challenged individuals. This has helped to save a lot of lives in the family. This is partly due to the increasing efforts of the government to improve the lives of every individual.

**12. *Decline of arranged marriages:*** A lot of marriages conducted now are based on mutual consent between the couple rather than imposition by the family. More people first meet themselves, fall in love and then agree to marry one another. The involvement of family in marriage is no longer in the area of finding suitable partner for their wards but to only perform ceremonial functions

**13. *Decline in parental authority:*** Due to the growing rate of civilization and the increasing number of graduates and elites, more youth crave to be personally independent and find their source of survival away from their families. Their quest for survival has separated them from authority and control of the elderly members of the family. And in some cases where the parents have little or no time for their wards

who have been conscripted to the boarding schools, these wards come back into the family with a separate culture of their own part of which is self dependence and decline in parental control because they have not been consistently in contact with their parents to understand their dos and donts.

**14. Teenage pregnancy and parenthood:** More teenagers are being put in the family way in recent times. Some through abuse and others via ignorance or exuberance. Though teenage marriage is a permissive practice in some part of Northern Nigeria. It must also be emphasized that because most of these teenagers did not prepare for induction into motherhood, a lot of them struggle to cater for the children born especially if the child is born out of wedlock. Also, most teenage mothers have some health challenges which might have emanated in the course of the child bearing and such complications threaten either or both the lives of the mother and child.

### *Structure of the Contemporary family*

According to Giddens (2006), families in the world are in transition. Several pluralities have been witnessed and other structures of the society have overtaken the responsibilities of the family. For the procreation function of the society, the health institution has engineered the establishment of breeding and cloning of the human species. Animals and laboratory-made (cloned) materials can incubate premature babies ejected at early stage from their mother. Sexual gratification is also gotten from commercial sex workers and people nowadays derive pleasure from well defined contractual marital arrangements with expiration periods as well as with multiple sexual partners even though these are not legitimate.

On the socialization function of the family, schools and religious organizations have replaced the family. Children spend much time with their counterparts and teachers in school than with their parents. And as a result of the busy schedules of parents mostly in the urban areas, the level of attention mothers give to their children is on the decrease coupled with single parenting, and the death of one or both parents. In this vein, several educational instructions and religious organizations have taken up the task of instilling the norms and values of the society in the children since complexities is beginning to set in into the family. The level of closeness of members of the family is also being threatened by industrialization and urbanization. The level of ascribed status has reduced because of the economic conditions of most developing society. Hence, a lot of children fend for themselves and learn from their peers instead of being initiated into the societal norms by their family members. This partly explains why a lot of social problems have increasingly become part and parcel of so many societies in the world.

### **Conclusion**

The primary school of citizenship is the family. Every person is born into a family, grows up in it, works for it, and dies in it. The individual becomes emotionally attached to it. The first lesson in social responsibility and acceptance of self-discipline is imparted to the kid through parental care. The family is the foundation of societal organization. It holds a nuclear power status in society. However, despite the relevance of the family in the society, if proper care of the young ones is not taken as priority, the family can become an active institution which breeds delinquents and destitute as a lot of functions are neglected by the modern day family and the efforts of other institutions at managing the lapses of the family has not been a perfect job done. Hence, there is need for every family to hold with uttermost importance the place or morals, socialization and regulation of individual member of the family's behaviour.

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