



A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MARRIAGE SYSTEM IN PRE-COLONIAL TRADITIONAL AND POST-COLONIAL MORDERN YORUBA SOCIETY

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Abstract

Almost all facets of life were touched by the intrusion of colonialism into Africa, in which the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria was not exempted. There were noticeable divergences between the pre-colonial and post-colonial life of the Yoruba people. This also reflected in their marriage system. It came with both positive and negative dimensions. This paper therefore underscores Yoruba system of marriage before and after colonial era. The opinions people hold on it are diverse, to some, the pre-colonial marriage system has some good qualities which have gone into oblivion in the contemporary period, while others preferred the innovations of modern marriage. The aim of this study is not to adjudge the better side, but to identifying the good in the two periods and harmonize it for the betterment of marriage experience in this age. The study is qualitative in nature; hence, oral interview method was adopted to collect relevant information, with the use of relevant literatures. The findings of the study revealed that, marriage is pivotal to societal stability of all ages and as such, high premium is placed on it among the Yoruba people. It also revealed that, there are noticeable changes in the concept of marriage in the traditional and the contemporary societies among the Yoruba. These changes were orchestrated by the factors of new cultural influences from the west, the impact of Islam and Christianity and the process of social change. Recommendations were therefore made that, the process and the structure of traditional system of marriage should not be totally jettisoned in this contemporary period. That, useful and

relevant areas in the Yoruba traditional marriage should be embraced to curtail some of the anomalies ravaging homes in our present days.

Key-Words: Marriage, Traditional, Yoruba Society, Pre-Colonial, Post-Colonial

Introduction

There is a general agreement among Sociologists and Psychologists as well as among Moralists and the Theologians that marriage is one of the most basic of all social institutions (Okediji, 2015). Marriage is considered by sociologists to be cultural and universal; that is, it exists in some forms in all societies. Also, the marriage institution is one of the most hallowed and respected institutions in human society. Ashley (2019) opined that marriage provides social stability, strengthened family solidarity and produce children which ultimately was a recipe for continuity of humanity on the surface of the earth. Marriage is a key institution that shapes individuals and society. As a result, high premium is placed on it among the Yoruba people both then and now. If marriage is distorted, so is the whole of society. Marriage as a universal phenomenon has been viewed by different school of thoughts in different perspectives. Hence, marriage has been defined in so many ways, because of the diversities in the system of marriage throughout the world. These include; cultural, religious and personal factors. A commonly accepted and encompassing definition of marriage is given by Bryan (2016) as a formal union and social and legal contract between two individuals that legally, economically and emotionally unites their lives. This paper therefore, delved into the concept of marriage in the traditional Yoruba setting and the present day reality.

Literature Review on Marriage

This section reviewed relevant scholarly works on marriage. Scholarly books and learned journals were reviewed and fittingly appropriated to accomplish the task of the study. The works of scholars such as Samuel W. Kunhiyop, Norman Shields, Omosehin Foluke, A. S. Alaanu, M. A. Yinusa, M. A. Adeoye and S. A. Adeleke, and N. A. Wimalasena are evaluated.

In a comprehensive work of Kunhiyop (2008), titled, he approached marriage from African perspectives. He pointed out the differences between the Western and African understandings of marriage. One area of difference concerns who is involved

in a marriage. Westerners tend to forget that marriage is lived out in society and that the society has an impact on the meaning, expectations and aspirations of this union. Given their individualistic world view, westerners tend to think of marriage only in terms of the man and woman involved. But such a view of marriage is far too narrow for the Africans. Citing the work of Magesa (1997), who asserted that, at an African wedding, it would not be unusual for the pastor to tell the bride:

You are married not to your husband, Paul, but to his family. That means you have to identify completely with all his relatives, look after them, cares for them, go out of you way to make them happy. If you do that, you will have no cause for regret. And to the groom he says, "you, Paul, will have to do likewise with Mapule's relatives". Her people are your people.

Kunhiypo further pointed out that, as regards the question of what marriage is for, it is possible to argue from scripture that, there are five possible reasons for marriage, these include: unity, companionship, procreation, love and pleasure, and curbing fornication and adultery. These reasons, according to him are not listed in order of importance. Differences in customs, beliefs and core values mean that the priority given to each will vary from culture to culture.

This work is very relevant to the study because it spelt out unequivocally, the relevance of homogeneity of the African society, which is reflected in their communal living. This core value of African plays vital roles in their inter-personal human relation. In this, marriage is not exempted. A newly married wife does not belong to the husband alone; it is our wife, not my wife. It is in the light of this, that Africa society lives and operates. The individual does not just exist alone; he exists because others exist. Anything outside this in a typical Yoruba traditional society is a misnomer and contravenes their social norms. This is in consonance with the thought of Mbiti (1992), when he opined that, in African life, we cannot speak of marriage alone. It is always in terms of marriage and family. One gets married within the context of family life; one gets married in order to enlarge that family life.

Shields (2004) in his book entitled, *Christian Ethics*, observes that, throughout the world marriage unites men and women and bring about the creation of new family units just as the 'creation ordinance' prescribed and envisaged. He reiterates that, every society has customs or rituals through which they recognized a couple as married. Some involved the family of the husband-to-be in paying and agreed bride-

price which would be probably to be refunded if the marriage should happen to break up.

Shields further highlighted six essentials biblical understanding of marriage, which include: (i) Personal commitment or 'troth', "Troth" is an old English word for truth. It was and sometimes still is used of an honest pledge to be faithful. It is at the heart of the word 'betrothal' by this is meant a covenant or a contract, committing husband and wife to live together in wedlock. (ii) Authorization by families and/ or by society, (iii) Cohabitation and consummation, this makes the couple to give themselves unreservedly to each other for sexual pleasure. (iv.) Caring love, this implies Christian love, known as *agape*. (v.) Exclusive monogamy, monogamy is the marriage of one man and one woman, who remain faithful to each other and do not have other spouses. This is the hallmark of Christian marriage (vi) Spiritual harmony, for a truly successful marriage, the partners need to share the same religious faith and basic doctrines. Shields' thought is relevant to this study, especially as he submitted that, societal customs and rituals are essential factors in marriage. Also, the six elements of Christian marriage are also germane to the discussion because, a good and successful marriage must adhere to these essentials. However, the work has failed to juxtapose the African perspective on marriage with the present day reality, which is the gap this study set to fill.

In the work of Omoshin (1998) which she titled; *Social Institutions: A Discourse on Marriage, Family and Kinship*, she opined that marriage as a social institution is an integral part of social structures within the society. Apparently, marriage cannot operate and stand on its own without the symbiotic relationship with other social institutions. She therefore pointed out some of the functions of marriage, which include: sexual expression, child bearing and reproduction, child rearing and economic support. This work is also important to this study in that, it pointed out the social functions of marriage and other related functions. However, no allusion is made to the Yoruba traditional marriage in comparison to the contemporary period, which is the focus of this study.

Alaaanamu, Muhammed and Adekeye (2007) in their work, *Socio-Economic Implications of Polygynous Marriage on the Children* aver that, the implications can be devastating. According to them, polygyny is a marriage of one man to two or more women. This type of marriage tends to breed a climate of domestic tension, jealousy and suspicion, leading in the worst cases to accusations of witchcraft or poisoning.

This can further create the atmosphere of tension and conflict which are harmful to children living in such a hostile home environments. Although, this work discusses a major type of marriage common in African society and in Islamic religion, however, it fails to address the positive dimension and benefits embedded in this form of marriage. This study among other things will delve into reasons why Africans, especially, the traditional Yoruba people practice it.

The Concept of Marriage in Yoruba Society

This section provides a detailed account of traditional Yoruba marriage customs and rituals, highlighting the significance of family involvement, thorough investigation, and adherence to cultural practices. The Yoruba people attached much importance to marriage because to them, it is a long life affair (Andrew, 20016). The process includes the followings:

Family Involvement: The Yoruba place great importance on family involvement in the marriage process. One of my respondents, mama Abosede Olayiwola asserted that, a thorough search and findings is done by the family of the man and vice versa. Parents play a significant role in selecting suitable partners for their children, ensuring compatibility and the absence of any undesirable traits or circumstances.

Investigation and Consultation: Before proceeding with marriage arrangements, families conduct thorough investigations into the backgrounds of the prospective spouses. This includes verifying their histories to ensure they are free from criminal activities or diseases. Another respondent, Elder Ogunniyi of *Apaara* compound, further lends credence to this. According to him, his parents did same while preparing for marriage. Additionally, consultation with a diviner, typically through the *Ifa* Oracle, is sought to determine the suitability and success of the union.

Betrothal and Purity: Following favorable outcomes from investigations and consultations, the betrothal period begins. During this time, the couple is expected to maintain purity and sanctity, refraining from any sexual relations until after marriage. This is because failure to do this can spelt doom for them later.

Marriage Ceremonies: Yoruba marriage ceremonies are elaborate affairs, marked by the payment of bridal price by the groom's family and the performance of subsequent rites. The festivities include dining, dancing, and celebration, reflecting the joyous occasion.

Bride's Arrival: On the day of marriage, the bride is escorted to the groom's house, where she is received with a symbolic gesture of pouring cold water on her feet. This act signifies her smooth entry into her new family.

Virginity Verification: The bride's virginity is a matter of significance, as it determines the nature of gifts exchanged between families. If she is found to be a virgin, the husband's family offers full gifts to the bride's family, while a lack of virginity results in reduced gifts and potential shame for the bride and her family.

Overall, the passage illustrates the cultural richness and intricacies of traditional Yoruba marriage practices, emphasizing the importance of family, purity, and adherence to customs and rituals.

The Concept of Marriage in Yoruba Contemporary Society

It is important to note that human society is dynamic; also, culture itself is not static. The same scenario is applicable to the concept of marriage in among the Yoruba. There are many things which have taken new dimensions in respect of marriage as being practiced in the past. These are as a result of some factors which facilitated these changes, these include: advent of new religions into Africa, the wave of cultural flow from the western world, civilization and modern technology. All these have serious and attendant impact on the traditional pattern of marriage among the Yoruba.

In Yoruba contemporary society, Christian and Islamic types of marriage are predominant. And as such, polygamous form of marriage in the traditional society is gradually disappearing into the oblivion as a result of Christian monogamous belief. Although, in the Islamic community, polygamous marriage is embraced, this is because of their belief. It is equally note worthy that, most of the rites and rituals associated with the traditional mode of marriage are gradually fading out. Emphasis is not as much placed on custom of retaining virginity by the would-be wives unlike the olden days. More also, the matter of marriage is becoming a personal issue, compared with the traditional practice where the entire family was involved in the choice of marriage partner.

It should also be mentioned that, there are a lots of new concepts of marriage in the contemporary society, which are: same sex marriage- lesbian and gay, trial marriage and dating. All these and others are modern influences on what used to be in the traditional society.

Challenges in Marriage

The aim of this work is not to be judgmental on which side is preferable between the old and new order of marriage among the Yoruba people, however, the truth is that, both have advantages and disadvantages. The challenges confronting marriage irrespective of dispensation or period are almost the same, nonetheless, the way or manner at which the challenges are handled differ. Some of these are discussed in this section.

Crisis and Conflict in Marriage

Crisis and conflict are inevitable in human life, especially in marriage. This is borne of the fact that marriage involves the coming together of two different individuals in order to share life with each other. Their differences are quite unavoidable. Norman H. Wright builds on this when he says, "This does not happen even with identical twins. So, the couples have differences of opinion and of choice and these differences lead to disagreement. The couple may be quite willing to do the same thing in the same way, but at different times; or to do same thing at the same time, but in different ways. So, they are dead locked, and now we have a conflict"

In the light of the foregoing, it should be added that unresolved crisis do not diminish but continue to grow and grow. Fairfield (1977) highlighted the progression of unresolved conflicts as indicated in the following chart.

Table 1: Progression of Unresolved Crisis

Difference of opinion	"Spat"	Confrontation
Heated debate and Disagreement	"Quarrel"	Division
Intense physical Anger	"Fight"	Rejection
Hostility confirmed	"War/Battle"	Separation

The above table shows that conflict or crisis usually starts with differences of opinions, and if not carefully and wisely handled, it will degenerate to a hot debate. The final is hostility with the devastating consequences of war and separation.

These crises are diversified and they are in various dimensions. The average Yoruba society is communal in nature. The inseparability of the individual from the whole that make up the community has greatly helped the traditional Yoruba society in regulating and promoting peaceful existence. Although, conflict and challenges are

inescapable, but because the couple stayed within the purview of the family; the crisis were nipped in the bud before it escalates. This is unlikely in the present day situation, where the couples are isolated from the reach of the extended family. Most of the crisis between the couple which would have been resolved at the early stage became fully blown because of “*me and my spouse*” syndrome in the modern day system of marriage. Most of the upheavals between the wives, widows and in-laws in the contemporary period are attributed to the new ideologies engendered by modernization and new religion orientations. It is noted that, most wives before the demise of their husbands keep distance from their families’ husbands. Hence, there is rift between the in-laws and the widows.

Divorce

The rate of divorce and separated couple is alarming in this present dispensation. As pointed earlier, any crisis in marriage not timely, wisely and appropriately handled can degenerate into divorce. Divorce has been defined as a legal process in which a judge or other authority dissolves the bond of matrimony existing between two persons, thus restoring them to the status of being single and permitting them to marry other individuals (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher & Abma, 2005). The following factors according to Okediji (2015) have been attributed to be the causes of divorce, among others: i. Irresponsibility of the spouse, ii. Third Party Intruders, iii. Race and ethnicity, iv. Religious factor, v. Delay in child bearing/childlessness, vi. Spouses with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, vii. Economic factor.

However, in the olden days, among the Yoruba, divorce was not as prevalent as we have it today. One of my respondents, Madam Abeo Okunlola lent credence to this when she pointed out that the major reasons is as a result of the manner in which marriage was conducted with active involvement of the families from both sides. Therefore, should in case of any misunderstanding among any couple within the compound, the family will immediately put up modality to settle the dispute. In most cases, in the recent time, this is not always visible due to the nature of modern structure of marriage system.

Conclusion

This study so far has dealt extensively on the concept of marriage in the traditional Yoruba setting and the present day realities. The findings of the study revealed that.

Also, marriage is regarded as a divine institution with specific purposes. The type of marriage adopted varies from one locality to another, and it is being influenced by factors of religion, culture and state law. The study also revealed that there are noticeable changes in the concept of marriage in the traditional and the contemporary societies. Moreover, the study equally delved into the stages of crisis in marriage. It is noted that, conflict is inevitable in human society, especially in marriage, but the management of it is what is needed. This crisis can aggravate to divorce if not properly handled. It is equally noted that, there are some good sides in the Yoruba traditional marriage system, if well blended into the modern system of marriage will make it more interesting and harmonious.

Recommendations

As fallout from the study, it is recommended that the process and the structure of traditional system of marriage should not be totally jettisoned in this contemporary period. It has been discovered from the study that, most of the problems ensued in the contemporary marriage system can be traceable to the total deviation from the traditional marriage pattern.

Also, useful and relevant areas in the Yoruba traditional marriage should be embraced to curtail some of the anomalies ravaging homes in our present days. For example, the culture of searching and finding out vital information meticulously about would-be couple, in respect of their families' antecedents, history and possible health challenge should be revisited.

The study equally recommended that Yoruba cultural heritage and social values should be sustained and utilized, especially the good ones. These can be synchronized with the present day pattern, the synergy will definitely produce vibrant and splendid matrimonial experience.

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