

# NIGERIA: RESTRUCTURING FAMILY TIES FOR A BETTER MARITAL LIFE IN A CHANGING WORLD

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# ABSTRACT

- In the past, marriages in Nigeria did not only involve the biological parents of the couple. The extended family of the couple was also involved. That is why a woman is married not just to the husband but “into the family”. The extended family does not only act as educators on marital norms, values and ethics, they also act as arbitrators and counselors in times of disputes. As a result, incidence of divorce, separation and single parenthood that were regarded as a disgrace to the family were minimal.
- With the advent of technology, the discovery of oil and its boom, the move towards westernization, the social lives and values of the people have changed. Family structures have disintegrated. Marital norms and values that held families together have been eroded. There is a move towards individuality. A big gap between generations has been created. The result is lack of proper training of the child, single parenting, high rate of divorce, separation etc.
- The aim of this paper is to induce those norms, values and ethics that formed the bedrock of successful and blissful marital relationship in Nigeria to a cultured society and their relevance to attaining better stability in the family and more fulfilling relationship in a changing world.

# BACKGROUND

- Location and Geography

- ❖ Nigeria is in West Africa, along the eastern coast of the Gulf of Guinea, and just north of the equator. It is bordered on the west by Benin, on the north by Niger and Chad, and on the east by Cameroon. Nigeria covers an area of 356,669 square miles (923,768 square kilometers), or about twice the size of California.

Nigeria has three main environmental regions: savanna, tropical forests, and coastal wetlands. These environmental regions greatly affect the cultures of the people who live there.

- The dry open savannah is found in the northern part of Nigeria and the people are predominantly Fulani's and Hausa's. The religion is mostly Islamic.
- Tropical forest is found in the southern part of Nigeria. The people are predominantly Yoruba's and Igbo. Their Religion is mostly Christianity although before the advent of Christianity, they were mostly pagans.
- The Coastal wetlands is found along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean which runs from the west to the south of Nigeria. Their religion is mostly Christianity.

# DEMOGRAPHY

- Nigeria has the largest population of any African country. In July 2000, the population of Nigeria was estimated at more than 140 million people. The Nigerian population is very young. Nearly 45 percent of its people are under age fourteen
- With regard to ethnic breakdown, the Hausa-Fulani make up 29 percent of the population, followed by the Yoruba with 21 percent, the Igbo with 18 percent, the Ijaw with 10 percent, the Kanuri with 4 percent, the Ibibio with 3.5 percent, and the Tiv with 2.5 percent

# Family, Kinship and Marriage

## Family

- Family is extremely important to Nigerians
- It is an indispensable function expected of every girl and boy to be fulfilled as soon as they reach the age of puberty.
- Marriage therefore is a must for the continuation of the family line with descent Children occupying the central point.
- Parents long for this and the father of the family pray for it every morning in his kolanut prayer. In other words, if you ask the ordinary man or woman why he desires to marry, the spontaneous answer will be: "I want to marry in order to beget my own children, to get a family like my parents".

## Kingship

- The nuclear family in a Nigerian home consists of the father, his wife (or wives in polygamous homes), and their children. The extended family consists of all the relatives which to so many cultures in Nigeria are part of the nuclear family.
- Most extended Nigerian family members are called “brother, sister, uncle, aunt, cousin, mother, father, grandmother” (depending on age, and gender of course). Some of these terms are very loosely used. Your mom's brother, her cousin, her second cousin, their cousin, can all be called ‘brother or uncle’.
- In most families, there is a strong family bond, and the phrase "blood is thicker than water" has a deep meaning.

- While men dominate Igbo society, women play an important role in kinship. All Igbos, men and women, have close ties to their mother's clan, which usually lives in a different village. If an Igbo is disgraced or cast out of his community, his mother's kin will often take him in.
- For the Hausa, however, there is not much of a sense of wide-ranging kinship. Hausa society is based on the nuclear family. There is a sense of a larger extended family, including married siblings and their families, but there is little kinship beyond that. However, the idea of blood being thicker than water is very strong in Hausa society. For this reason, many Hausas will try to stretch familial relationships to the broader idea of clan or tribe to diffuse tensions between or among neighbors.



## Marriage

- There are three types of marriage in Nigeria today: religious marriage, civil marriage, and traditional marriage. A Nigerian couple may decide to take part in one or all of these marriages.
  - ❖ Religious marriages, usually Christian or Muslim, are conducted according to the norms of the respective religious teachings and takes place in a church or a mosque. Christian males are allowed only one wife, while Muslim men can take up to four wives but must be treated and loved equally.
  - ❖ Civil official weddings take place in a government registry office. Men are allowed only one wife, regardless of religion.
  - ❖ Traditional marriages usually are held at the wife's house and are performed according to the customs of the ethnic group involved. Most ethnic groups traditionally allow more than one wife.

- While Western ways of courtship and marriage are not unheard of, the power of traditional values and the strong influence of the family mean that traditional ways are usually followed, even in the cities and among the elite.
- Though this is also changing, most men are raised with the expectation that someday they will have a wife (or wives) to take care of them, and most women are raised with the expectation that someday they will have a husband and children to take care of. So, the standards for raising them can differ in some households.

- Many Nigerian ethnic groups follow the practice of offering a bride price for an intended wife. Unlike a dowry, in which the woman would bring something of material value to the marriage, a bride price is some form of compensation the husband must pay before he can marry a wife. A bride price can take the form of money, cattle, wine, or other valuable goods paid to the woman's family.
- Among the Igbo's, the parents of the woman must send her to her husband's house with material things. This is to help her start a trade and be able to fend for herself and her family without depending on the husband even though she must be submissive to him. This is a form of dowry.

# Divorce

- While women who leave their husbands will be welcomed back into their families, they often need a justification for breaking the marriage. Such include inadequate maintenance, cruelty especially physical violence, infertility, quarrelsomeness, pregnancy by another person other than the husband, impotence as it is believed that the essence of marriage is to have children. If the husband is seen as having treated his wife well, he can expect to have the bride price repaid.
- Under the Moslem law, the marriage can be dissolved by the husband pronouncing the “talaq” three times at stated intervals. Divorce can either be revocable or irrevocable. A revocable divorce is not completely final while an irrevocable divorce is completely final. A woman revocable divorced has the right to maintenance for herself and neither type of divorce deprives the children of their right to maintenance.

# Inheritance

- For many Nigerian ethnic groups, inheritance is basically a male affair.
- Among the Igbos, at the death of a man, his properties goes to the sons to the exclusion of the daughters. The reason being that the female would of neccesity marry and transfer the property to her husband's family.
- A widow under the Igbo customary law has a possessory right over her husband's estate and property. She is entitled to use the property in her life time but she cannot alienate it by sale as customarily it belongs to the male children of the husband or to her husband's relation if they are no male children. In Igbo land, a woman cannot own a land in her own right. She is entitled to agricultural holdings, having custody of whatever piece of land her husband permits her to cultivate. With regards to inheritance, the status of women under Igbo customs places a disability on the woman.

- Like the Igbos, the Bini customary law of inheritance is patrilineal. Succession is by the sole heir where the eldest male child succeeds totally to the exclusion of other family members. His inheritance right is contingent upon the performance of all the burial rites of the father. The wife and daughters have no share in the property of a deceased husband or father.
- Yoruba custom recognises the equal right of all children of the deceased irrespective of sex or age to inherit the properties of their parents. However a widow under Yoruba custom cannot inherit the estate of her deceased husband. When a man or woman dies without a will, the properties will be shared on all the male and female children to the exclusion of blood relations which include brothers and sisters, parents or grandparents of the deceased.

- For the Fulani, if a man dies, his brother inherits his property and his wife. The wife usually returns to live with her family, but she may move in with her husband's brother and become his wife.
- Under the Islamic law, which is prevalent in the Northern part of the country, a female child shares the inheritance with her brothers although she is entitled to half of the portion due to her brothers.

# Socialization and Education.

- Newborns in Nigerian societies are regarded with pride. They represent a community's and a family's future and often are the main reason for many marriages.
- Throughout Nigeria, the bond between mother and child is very strong. During the first few years of a child's life, the mother is never far away. Nigerian women place great importance on breast-feeding and the bond that it creates between mother and child. Children are often not weaned off their mother's milk until they are toddlers.
- Children who are too young to walk or get around on their own are carried on their mother's backs, secured by a broad cloth that is tied around the baby and fastened at the mother's breasts. Women will often carry their children on their backs while they perform their daily chores or work in the fields.



- In many Nigerian ethnic groups, the education of children is a community responsibility. For example,
- In the Igbo culture the training of children is the work of both men and women, within the family and outside it. Neighbors often look after youngsters while parents may be busy with other chores. It is not strange to see a man disciplining a child who is not his own.
- In most neighborhoods, the neighbors take a part in taking care of a child. A lot of people feel like they were 'raised by the neighborhood'
- It is the duty of every mother to visit the daughter immediately she puts to delivers and stays with her for atleast a month. During these period, she teaches the daughter all she has to know about child rearing.
- It is a taboo when one's mother or mother in law does not pay such visit.
- Parents to the couple especially their Mothers often visit to stay with them especially to take care of the young ones. It is seen as their responsibility. When the Mothers cant pay such visit, the younger sisters or brothers or relations can make such visits.

# Marriage: Pre Nigerian Civil War.

- The Nigeria Civil war occurred between 1967 and 1970.
- One of the reasons behind the civil war was due to political rival and unrest between ethnic groups.
- The other is the discovery of oil in the south south region of Nigeria and who controls it.

- Marriage was often an arrangement before parents/families.
- Arbitrators were commonly used during arranged marriages in looking for a spouse for a young man or woman.
- In some cultures, arranged marriages where children were promised in marriage at young ages was also common.
- In Nigeria, it is a believe that a man does not marry a woman but families marry each other.
- No family will accept to give their daughter in marriage to a young man except he comes in with the Elders of his family.
- Most attimes, the presence of the young man is not needed as the Elders can perform the marriage rites on his behalf.

- Before marriage, a young man who loves a girl would speak to his parents about her. The parents will examine not only her physical beauty, but also her mental and moral fitness, then her resourcefulness, graceful temper, smartness and general ability to work well. Her parental background must also be investigated
- Parents inquire very meticulously vices like murder, theft, lying, obstinate disobedience, wanton violence and other undesirable qualities would be introduced into their family. If the girl's mother is known to have been lazy, idle, gossipy, quarrelsome, way-ward, insubordinate to her husband, it may be concluded that the daughter would have these vices. This conclusion is based, for what it is worth, on the assertion that daughters usually take after their mothers. "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his". It is necessary to note that the inquiry is done by both parties - that is, the family of the girl and that of the young man.
- Once the inquiries have been satisfactorily completed, the two families now look forward to the settlement of the bride-price/dowry

## Courtship

- Young people about to marry, may exchange visits, which are regulated by custom and supervised by the parents/guardian of either party. This is for them the occasion to know more and be more interested in each other
- It is a taboo for the husband and wife to be, to meet even on the street before the marriage night. This is predicated on the fact that it is a social and family dishonor and disgrace for a bride not to be found as a virgin on the night of the wedding when the marriage is traditionally consummated. This means that premarital intimacy or intercourse is treated as a social taboo or even an abomination, which no one thinks of committing.
- the period of courtship comprises the first meeting, other meetings of the two people concerned, the mutual inquiries conducted by both extended families and the state of friendship leading into the actual celebration of the marriage

- For the Nigeiran, love is much deeper, more important than the emotional feigns. For -them love is not merely motivated by physical beauty. They accept completely the saying that: "Marriage, the happiest bond of love might be, if hearts were only joined, when hearts agree". Love is the sum total of the physical, psychological, economical, social and moral attraction which exercises a magnetic influence on the young man and the young lady, on the one hand and on their extended families on the other. Their attraction as we see here is not merely physical. There is in their love mutual trust, confidence and mutual self-giving. Each feels proud of and satisfied with having the other as partner in the difficult but noble task of raising a family.
- Since the people live their lives together and since families are closely knit, courtship is not a private affair. The family of the young man invites the girl several times to stay a native week at time with them. During this time, she studies the man and his family while they in their turn observe and admire her ways.

## Preparation for Marriage

- From all we have seen so far, it is evident that the Nigerian does not step into marriage without preparation. It is a step which must be taken with the eyes wide open
- The young man does not enter into marriage without preparation. All through his childhood, he must pass through one stage of preparation or the other. These include
  - Initiation into manhood in some Nigerian cultures. The stages of initiation is the ability to withstand hardship, pains, testing of manhood through wrestling matches, and the ability to keep secrets.
  - The ability to distinguish himself in competitive activities such as wrestling, hunting, fighting, work or skill.

- The ability to learn a trade or the cultivation of one's farmland
- The ability to build his own house
- The ability to become a member of his age grade by paying the required registration fees and dues and performing the ceremonial rites
- The ability to think his thoughts and keep them to himself. Reasons must govern his emotions.



- The young woman must also make preparations before marriage.
- The ability to perform all her womanly functions creditably such as fetching of water, firewood, sweeping of the house, and most importantly the preparation of food.
- This is the initiation of the girl into household duties and her success in this field counts very much in winning her a suitable husband. The way she went about her duties will recommend her as a suitable and capable housewife
- Her family background and the character of the mother have a lot to add or to subtract as the case may be. Since in the past, practically all girls were meant for marriage, parents usually their daughters as future house-wives. They have their age-grades and dance groups
- Girls usually take pride in their physical features, especially where they have been fully developed and well-formed without natural defects

- No girl would go to the public assembly without first carefully adorning herself. "Wristlets, ear-rings, necklaces and rolls of *jigida* on the waist were the prominent and coveted ornaments
- Also in most Nigerian cultures, a prospective wife was set aside in a hut and fed and instructed without much exercise until she was well prepared physically and psychologically to assume the role of house wife and after a short time, that of a mother. This is called the fattening period. This practice no longer exists today
- A huge woman (not necessarily a fat one) is the choice of most people. This has many obvious advantages, for not only that she commands respect and is the pride of her husband, also she will be able to do farm work and in childbearing, she would generate her kind. Furthermore, it has an added social advantage. Such a woman because of her size is easily recognisable in the assembly of women. Given the average skill and intelligence she usually becomes the leader of her dance-group or the president of the women's council.
- Just like the Nigerian man revel in wrestling or other competitive events to show their powerress and attract the most beautiful girls for marriage, the nigerian girls revel in dancing etc to display their charm.

## Arbitrators and Counsellors

- The settling of family issues is done first by the parents of either the man or the woman. When it becomes such a big issue, the extended families of both couple comes to settle the matter.
- The settling of quarells between a husband and wife is not seen as intrusion by the society but as a means to preserve the institution of marriage. It is not unusual to see a man reporting the wife to her mother or the woman reporting the man to his father. This is because it is believed that a man will continue to remain under the tutulage of the parents and the woman under the tutelage of her parents as far as their are alive. If any of the parents are dead, then the most senior member of the family steps into the shoes of the either the father or Mother.
- To disobey your father or mother or other close relations of your family can attract a fine or even being ostracize from the community.

# Marriage: Post Civil War

- During the Nigerian civil war that lasted for three years (1967 – 1970), Many families were separated from each other.
- Most families lost their young ones. Many never found their way home. Others died at war while lots of girls got attached to soldiers or civilians who had rescued them, got pregnant for them and decided not to return home as they now have a new home.
- Many because they couldn't remember the location of their village, others because they believed that every member of their family was dead while others simply because they have a new identity and a new life.
- Therefore, in the villages for those that found their way back, it was a period of rebuilding, reconstruction and reintegration.

- The youths who were the major work force had been greatly reduced. Those who were left lacked the strength and zeal to continue due to hunger and stress.
- Farm work, which was the main economy of most Nigerians, suffered. The result was more hunger and poverty.
- The discovery of oil and the oil boom at this period did not help matters. Everybody wanted a share of this new found wealth.
- The urban towns were developing rapidly. There was electricity, good roads, water and some other basic social amenities. There was mass exodus to urban towns in search of jobs. Many who were not educated settled for menial jobs. Those who were educated found white collar jobs. Others who became so lazy went into crime.
- Having found a means of making quick money, a lot of girls went into prostitution. Others became mistress to rich men while others, who due to lack of accommodation, with good intentions decided to live with distant cousins or men from their villages with the intention of finding their own accommodation immediately they find something doing. The result was pregnancy and live-in girlfriends. To avoid the shame, many committed abortion.

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- For the men who left for the city, some succeeded while others didn't. Those who succeeded returned to the village as heroes while to those who failed, it became a shame. They found it difficult to return to the village and join their age grade.
- To many, they found an outlet in western novels, films etc.
- The results indicate that the social organization of infidelity is shaped by economic inequality, aspirations for modern lifestyles, gender disparities, and contradictory moralities.
- In spite of these marriage remains the single most important social duty and marker of adulthood in Nigeria. The dramatic change in society transformed the institution of marriage. Modern marriage is becoming increasingly common in urban centres.

- Young couples today see their marriages as a life project in which they, as a couple, are the primary actors, whereas their parents' marriages were more obviously embedded in the structures of the extended family.
- The differences are most pronounced in narratives about courtship, in the way husbands and wives describe how they resolve marital quarrels and in the way they make decisions about and contribute to their children's education.
- In each of these arenas, people in more modern marriages tend to emphasize the primacy of the individual couple, often in conscious opposition to the constraints imposed by ties to kinship and community.

- It is important not to exaggerate these trends. Even in the most modern marriages, ties to kin and community remain strong, and marriage and child rearing continue to be strongly embedded in the values and social networks of the extended-family system.
- Indeed, the continued importance of ties to family and community and ongoing concerns about the collective expectations of wider social networks permeate people's stories of modern courtship, the resolution of marital disputes, and decisions about child rearing.
- The choice of a spouse based on love is, in almost all cases, still subjected to the advice and consent of families.
- The fact that modern marriage in Nigeria remains a resolutely social endeavor creates contradictions for younger couples, who must navigate not only their individual relationships but also the outward representation of their marriages to kin and community



# What We Lost

## Proper Investigation:

- The lack of proper investigation nowadays have ruined many marriages. A lot of young ones today believe that all that matters is Love. Many have realised that just as it is easy to fall in love it is also easy to fall out of love. Character traits, family traits, and good names have all been forgotten. What we hear nowadays is regret “Had I known”. Due to lack of proper investigation, some have realised that they have married into families where the attitude of the in Laws is a thorn in the flesh.

## Preparation Before Marriage:

A lot of young ones only begin preparations when they are ready to marry. As such they only prepare for the wedding and are unprepared for marriage. The Nigerian culture of old is such that there is a gradual intergration of the young ones into adulthood and thus into marriage. Families, relations and the entire community help in preparing the young one for marriage. No wonder there was a small percentage of separation and divorce.

# Education:

Due to the economic situation in the country, both parents must work. The children must be taken care of. These is now left in the hand of housemaids since both couple's are at work. The morality, honesty, intergrity of these maids are questionable. These are the ones who are left to take care of the emotions, physical, moral, psychological state of the children. They are therefore, moulded according to the upbringing of the maid. Neighbours hardly get involved in the education, or discipling of children unless the two families are very close. It is normal nowadays to see parents bring in law enforcement agency because their neighbour has disciplined their child. The role of parents is hardly felt. Most couple's will ask their parents, did i invite you to my home or why didn't you call to let me know you were coming. So education is left in the hands of the maids, or school teachers who are mostly concerned about their pay or when it's time for them to close than the welfare of the children.

## Arbitration:

It is normal for couple's to have misunderstandings but the question is who helps them to settle these misunderstandings. The role of the family as arbitrators is gone. They is this believe that we can solve it by ourselves yet it degenarates to a point where the end is litigation, separation, divorce and even in some cases murder.

## Marriage Without The Consent Of The Family.

When a young man goes to the family of a young girl to seek for her hand in marriage, he is simply saying I have a family while I recognise that you are coming from a family. It reduces maltreatment, intimidation, oppression, knowing that the family members of the opposite person are there to fight for him/her. Today a lot of young couple marry without the consent of their parents nor even that of their family. It is called “Love”. The result is that during periods of trials or misunderstanding, there is no one to run to. Whatever befalls one is left for him to bear alone. The Nigerian culture is such that no matter how bad things are, you always have a family to run to.

# Courtship

Courtship in the old was closely monitored by Parents and families. It was a shame for young couples to indulge in pre-marital sex talkless of being pregnant. What we call courtship today is live-in couples and this is done without shame. Pregnancy out of wedlock is no more a taboo. Parents even do encourage their daughters to get pregnant for a man probably to trap him into marriage. It is becoming difficult to marry a girl without her getting pregnant first.

# What We Gained

## Inheritance:

Women today acquire properties and no one interferes on it. They have the right to bequeath their property to whomever they choose. The era when the property of a man is taken away from a widow leaving her with nothing has past. A man today shares his property either by will or through oral agreement before he dies and it becomes binding.

## Closer Affinity To Children

Marriage today has drawn lots of parents closer to their children. The knowledge that no one can train your child better than you has helped parents realise that they have to give the best to their children. It was not unusual to see a household filled with members of the extended family and as far as they are concerned, it is their right. A man can end up training most of his relations to the detriment of his biological children especially if he dies young. Children enjoy greater relations with their parents more than it was before.



# More Respect for Women.

Men now give more to their wives. They express their feelings, emotions without fear of molestation. They contribute their ideas and quota to the running of the home and are really appreciated by their husbands, families and the society in generation. They are seen as wives, mothers and not like any property acquired by the man. The era of divorcing a woman because she has no child or a male child has greatly decreased.

- **Closer Affinity between Couples**

While acknowledging that the rate of divorce, separation has increased due to individualism, we will also acknowledge the determination some couples are making to stand on their own and wade the storm. This we can see by the closeness between the couples, in narrating how they were able to resolve their differences and how through discussions among themselves, they have been able to build their homes. Many have resolved that no third party will come into their home to help either in resolving misunderstanding or in helping them run their family.

# What Do We Do.

- **Training:**

Train more marriage counsellors, youth workers and children workers.

- **Educate:**

Educate the young ones on the role of parents in marriage and parents on the need to prepare the young ones for marriage.

- **Teachings:**

Teach both parents and the children on the menace of AIDS and its consequences. Sex education which was a taboo should be made part of the school curriculum.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no place where marriage can be said to be 100%. We are all striving to achieve the best and we will continue to. While the world is dynamic and changing, we also must be dynamic and change with the world. While we drop those norms and values that have hindered our progress, we should also adopt those that will help us have a better marital life.

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