

## Exploring the Neglect of African Family Value Systems and its Effects on Sustainable Development

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The study explored the neglect and abandonment of African family value system and its effect on society's development with emphasis on the Efik and Igbo cultures in South - east and South - south Nigeria respectively as references. The study employed the qualitative research design. Data was obtained from community members (both young and old) in Calabar Municipality, who are indigenes of the various Igbo speaking Ethnic groups and Cross River State, Nigeria through focus group discussions (FGDs) and unstructured interview schedules. The findings of the study revealed that acculturation through western Medias, culture contact, Education, religion, westernization etc. have all played different roles in altering and influencing the neglects noticeable in the African family value system and this is further weakening the social development of the larger society. The study therefore recommends that among others, family members especially parents should have some inputs to mate selection of their children. Marriage should not be treated as a social contract for only the young ones, rather, family members should intensify efforts to be involved in mate selection and marriage proper; rites of passage in African traditional culture must be upheld to give meaning and value to those who enter into it in order to avoid careless living, divorce and increased separations among marriage partners.

**Keywords:** African family, neglect, value system, sustainability, development and marriage

### Introduction

Africa has existed as a continent even before the colonial era, with its own distinct cultural beliefs, values, norms and practices despite its multi-ethnic nature. The peculiar nature of the African culture is evidence in their way of life depicted in marriages and family relationships, legal systems, religious, economic and political structures. These value structures or systems were used to ensure and promote order of socialisation and morality in the African society. The traditional culture and value system may not be perfect, but they serve the purpose of which they were meant to serve and kept the society moving without the rancour and disorganization experienced in the modern-day African society. Unfortunately, the eventual contact with western culture and civilization and subsequent upsurge of globalization are threatening to erode these well established values and practices (Madukwe and Madukwe, 2012). Since then, Africa's traditional culture, values and practices have withered and are still withering through well programmed western spells, storms and cultures that have pervaded through almost all facets of human life and activities. This does not imply that the diffusion of western culture spells a bad omen for Africa but, the argument here is that Africa had a culture which shaped the traditional African society economically, socially, legally and morally, and serves to maintain social order. Attempting to completely condemn the western culture and

globalization is not the intent of the researchers, but simply that of encouraging Africans to sift or separate the 'kernel' from the "husk". This is because the place of the family, which marriage is the pivotal foundation for the learning of cultural values is quite necessary. The transformation of African society towards modernity, westernization and globalization and its attendant social changes has greatly altered most African traditional institutions - one of such institutions been marriage and family system. Adinlofu (2009) assert that the African practices, relevance and functions are being, socially disfigured by the intrusion of modern western values. This study therefore explores the cultural, marital and family lifestyles of the traditional Efik people of Calabar Cross River State, with reference to the Igbo neighbours who occupy a major social position in the south-south area of Nigeria and especially their closeness and boundary with Cross River. The sharing of most cultural activities like new yam festivals, dance, marriage rites and practices etc give credence to the choice of these two ethnic groups for analysis.

### Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

#### African Concept of Marriage

Marriage and family are two concepts in one which are at the center of any culture across the globe, especially in Africa. There are seen as the foundation of human existence, honored and

considered to be sacred because it was instituted by God himself which explains the much attention given to it and the celebration that accompanies the final process of marriage. Marriage is a socially approved mating relationship that people expect to be stable and enduring. The family and societal expectations in marriage are high because a breakdown of marriage is associated with a widespread negative effect on the couple, children, extended family members and the society at large. Africans have a high respect for marriage and family values at all times and this creates the sacredness of this institution to the social functioning of individuals and society members. Despite various socio-economic, social, religious, political and cultural changes, the marriage and family institutions remain quite auspicious for society functioning. In the past, marriages conducted are strictly the responsibility of the extended family members as it does not only concern the couples - to - be, outcomes of marriage contract are extended familial members concerns. Marriage is defined simply as the union of a man and woman but more recently in western countries, the union of same sex persons (though quite controversial in most countries because it negates cultural and moral values according to some individuals, it is rather strange in society and seen as a taboo in African cultural value system) is being accepted as a legal marriage. It solidifies relationships that enrich communities and nations by bringing forth new lives, new hopes as well as diffuse ethnic barriers that tend to prevent unity. This perspective of the African marriage underscores the reason for involvement of families and sometimes the entire community in the marriage processes of any intending couple; marriage in Africa is seen as a cherished and most celebrated norm and rite of passage for male and female members of society (Bigombe and Khadiagala, 2003) and a fulfilment of parental obligations and roles as parents give out their children and also expect to receive or receive new members or persons into the family. Some of the basic traditional African concepts in marriage before the influx of western culture are:

- In contracting marriage, it is not just the business of the couple but that of the different extended families involved. Therefore, the consent of family members must be sought and obtained. It was not just a two person affair but the entire family and sometimes the community was involved (Madukwe and Madukwe, 2012).
- Marriage was seen as an aspect of promoting cohesion and cementing of a bond between two extended families, compounds and communities. In most African communities, very close families or friends go into marriage engagement of their children immediately there are born as a sign of bond in their friendship. This was the foundation of

the concept and process of marriage contract and betrothal experienced in different African societies and cultures especially amongst the Igbo and Cross Riverians.

- Polygamy was accepted and seen as a sign of wealth. Burke (2010) assert that, so used were the women to a polygamous marriage that sometimes the marriage of a second wife is provoked by the first wife who urges her husband to take a second wife to help her in the farm work. The resultant effect is a large family with so many children, and each wife performing different task or responsibilities as to sustain her position and secure a future for both herself and the children, indirectly, seeking marriage and family stability.
- Children were highly valued in African marriages. Practically speaking, the birth of a child marked the real consummation of a sustained marriage and crisis free marriage. So much were children valued that a marriage without children was seen as a curse from the gods and it was a very good reason strong enough for divorce or polygyny.
- Sex was treated as a sacred reality. Sex outside marriage was a taboo, hence to play with sex as an unmarried couple or partner, especially the female partners in marriage, merited a curse and brought shame to the family. Virginity in the African tradition was held in high esteem. Virginity attracted an increase bride-wealth and a reward to the mother of the bride. So sacred was the issue of sex that Burke (2010) wrote that, even husband and wife within an African home are reserved in their behaviour before their children. The public expression of any type of sexual familiarity is repugnant in the African value system and practice. This is also witnessed and emphasized among the Christian religious Faith. These value system had however suffered some degree of neglect as individuals no longer trust their partners productivity and libido level, so they are encouraged to secretly or openly engage their partners in sexual activities to be sure of the partners qualitative nature.
- For Africans, marriage is one of the yardsticks for measurement of real men in the society. This explains the rites of passage carried out in some societies for young men and women matured enough for marriage as part of the initiation process into the institution of marriage. Example of one of this most valued aspect of the cultural process is the "fattening room" practiced by the Efiks in Cross River State, for their female members of the family.

### **African Concept of Family**

The family is the most basic trait of social organization in Africa and indeed the globe in terms of socialization, child upbringing, transfer of cultural activities and knowledge embedded in the process of socialization. It is the traditional African

institutions responsibility for the transmission of traditional norms and values, beliefs, knowledge and practical skills to the members of the society for their future survival, because the first point of interaction for any member or child for whatever reason is in the family. It is also the socio-biological unit that ensures orderly reproductive continuity of the human race (Ochalla-Ayayo, 2000). The family in a typical African perspective is the cradle of human values and development. Broadly defined, a family includes all persons existing in an area or a group of people with common ancestors. This definition connotes an extended family system which is the pillar of African support system. However, in a more restrictive term, a family may refer to a smaller group consisting of the husband, wife or wives, the children and probably dependants that form a part of the household. As a result of society growth, development, change and continuity, there are current developments that create a unique picture and differentiation between African and other family systems in the globe today. The traditional African culture does not recognize a nuclear family structure but rather cherish and practice the extended family system whose membership include not only the man, his wife or wives and children but also blood relations of a common descent such as grandchildren, grand mothers and fathers, nephews, nieces, cousins and aunts (Madukwe and Madukwe, 2010).

An African becomes fulfilled in life only in relation to the fulfilment of other members of the family. Osonwa (2008) in Madukwe and Madukwe (2012:24) gave a vivid description of an African family as: "a system whereby everybody is linked with all the other members living or dead, through a complex network of spiritual relationship into a kind of mystical body. Consequently it is not just being that the African values, being rooted in kinship are an equally important existential characteristic of the Africans" He is never isolated since persons are assimilated into one parental role. A person is an individual to the extent that he is a member of a family, a clan or community.

Africans cherish children and by extension large families which gives individuals a sense of belonging, hence, this serve as the core factor for the sustainability of the extended family system till date, despite the socio-economic challenges in homes. Therefore, an African counts his blessings with regard to the number of children he or she has. This creates an inward satisfaction irrespective of one's social or economical status. The following are the types of African family structures being practiced in different parts of the continent: (a) nuclear family, (b) extended family, (c) single parental family, (d) step family, (e) matrilineal family structure (f) patrilineal family structure (g)

monogamous family and (h) polygamous family structure.

Researchers have variously shown that these categories of the family systems mentioned above do not often exist as exclusive families; they have been influenced by social change and other factors, thus at some point in society, they exist as combined or mixed level.

## Theoretical Orientation

The paper adopts the diffusion of innovation theory propounded by Everett Rogers in 1962, principally to explain the how, why and what new ideas as well as technologies spread through cultures. How are these new ideas, technologies and artefacts integrated into the society with the existing "old" ones without causing social disorder in the society? According to this theory, innovation is communicated through particular channels overtime among the members of a social system. Some of these channels are seen as:

- *Knowledge*: exposure to its existence and understanding of its functions.
- *Persuasion*: forming of a favourable attitude to it
- *Decision*: commitment to its adoption
- *Implementation*: putting it into use
- *Confirmation*: reinforcement based on positive outcome.

The theory proposes that generally those who have early encounters and knowledge are more highly educated, have higher social status and are more open to both mass media and interpersonal channels of communication. The theory further seeks to explain the sources and causes of alteration and neglect of the African marriage and family system to include amongst other things Westernization, globalization, urbanization as well as increase and changes education have been blamed as the major causes of alteration of the African marriage institution.

The early practitioners and receptors of these ideas are those with increase educational status, those who have been exposed to western culture through migration to western countries or movement from the rural area to urban dwellings. Thus, as they gain knowledge of these new values they are persuaded by the simplicity and ease of application of the western marriage values and practice such as ease of contracting marriage, cohabitation before bride wealth of bride price, the ease of separation without family interference etc. They implement these practices thus altering and neglecting the African traditional way of contracting marriage which is supposed to be a gradual process involving families as well as adopting nuclear family structures while abandoning the extended family structures that are associated with the burden of family commitments.

## Method of Data Collection

A qualitative research method was utilized in conducting the study which was carried out in Southern part of Cross River State Nigeria among the Efiks, Quas and Efuts who are the predominant cultural groups that occupy the Calabar Municipality Local Government Area, Southern Nigeria. They are more into farming and fishing while a greater number of the people are engaged in different white collar jobs. They are the first to encounter the colonial masters due to their location in the riverine areas, and have experienced a lot of migratory activities to their present location. The population of the study consisted of all Efiks, Quas and Efuts who reside in Calabar Municipality at the time of the study. A total of 200 respondents from Calabar Municipality participated in the study. The sample was drawn from all sexes and comprised both the young and the old who were selected from 100 households purposefully. Unstructured interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were the two major instruments used for data collection. Unstructured interviews were conducted with the general population which comprised both the young and the old, while focus group discussions (FGD) consisted of homogeneous (male alone and female alone) and heterogeneous (male and female) participants who were identified as youth leaders, and traditional leaders in their various communities. Hence four (4) focus group discussions were held with these youth, community and traditional leaders in an agreed venue which in all cases was the house of a particular leader. The homogenous (male alone and female alone) group which involved traditional and community leaders was made of 8 participants each, hence a total of 16 participants participated, while in the heterogeneous group which was made up of youth

leaders, twelve (12) participant each was involved, thereby totalling 24. In all 40 participants participated in the FGD sessions.

Interviews and discussions were conducted in English language and auto-recorded. All the researchers were involved in data gathering, translation and coding of key variables in relation to the issues and themes covered by the research instruments. Thereafter, results were written from translated texts, coded master sheets, and researchers' memos to ensure that reported responses were contextual. Some of the findings with contextual connotations were reported verbatim, most were summarized and others that were not so relevant to the study objective were left out. Reported findings were then compared with those of previous studies on similar issues and discussed.

## Findings and Discussion

The table above revealed the socio-demographic information of the respondents. Those within the age bracket of 30 to 39 were more in number as they have the highest percentage of 28 and 24.5 respectively. The study population have more people with tertiary school certificates as well as secondary school leavers or graduates, which reveal that it is an enlightened sampled population with adequate knowledge for the purpose of the study. Furthermore, the table shows different occupation of the respondents, with civil servants having the highest number 55 and 27.5%, while trading is 53 (26.5%), farming is 41(20.5%), the unemployed are 36 (18%) respectively. The demographic information shows an active population as the sample of the study and can correctly represent and provide needed data for the research.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Information of Respondents

	Study Variables	Frequency	Percentages %
Age Group	15-19 years	5	2.5
	20-24 years	21	10.5
	25-29 years	27	13.5
	30-34 years	56	28
	35-39 years	49	24.5
	40-44 years	27	13.5
	45-49 years	35	17.5
Marital status	Single	50	25
	Married	140	70
	Separated/Divorced	-	-
	Widowed	10	5
Educational Qualification	No formal education	-	-
	Primary school	50	25
	Secondary school	73	36.5
	Tertiary	77	38.5
Occupation	Farming	41	20.5
	Trading	53	26.5
	Artisans	15	7.5
	Civil Servants	55	27.5
	Unemployed/Housewife	36	18

### Neglect and Alterations in Family Value Systems

All respondents agreed that there are enormous changes in the rites of passage among residents of Calabar Municipality. These rites are carried out in order to prepare individuals to assume other higher roles in the community or society, which are seen as normal in the socialisation process aimed at initiating young boys and girls who are matured into adulthood. Majority of the respondents further stated that the rituals that are usually associated with the rites have been removed as a result of contact with the West. Of recent therefore, the 'Kernel' of these rites can be taken and the 'husk' discarded. For example, one of the elders during the interview cited the fattening process (called "Nkuho" – in Efik language) practiced by the Efiks of Southern Nigeria, which have been eroded as a result of contact with the West. The traditional way of fattening is associated with the training of young women in secluded places in preparation for marriage and womanhood. This elder aptly captured the practice during his time thus:

*In our growing up days, young girls are taken to particular houses which are labelled fattening houses and during this period, the young girl is massaged three times, fed well and gets plenty of sleep in order to increase the waistline. Most importantly, the girl goes through domestic training of home economics, like cooking, housekeeping, childcare and she is thought how to respect and make her husband to be and his family happy. The older women give advice base on their experiences in marriage to ensure that the young lady succeeds in her own. This period is accompanied with celebration and well wishers are invited to come and rejoice with the family over her successful graduation to adulthood (Interview, traditional leader, aged 75 years).*

Today, the fattening room practice has been neglected and abandoned, thus, making it more difficult for the younger generation to learn this aspect of the society culture. The neglect and abandonment of such rites of passage for young girls and boys who are matured for marriage deprive the young ones from learning practical lessons from experienced elders of the community. Furthermore, it leaves them ignorant and ill-prepared for entrance into marriage. All respondents agreed that the neglect of this cultural practice is associated with the current upsurge in separation and divorce issues which are not part of African understanding of marriage. Some of these rites of passage have been hijacked by the different churches (in the name of modernity and Christianity) who in most cases do not teach the values of the African marriage that has sustained this institution. All participants agreed that prior to colonial contact; divorce was a rare issue in traditional African society, which is also

corroborated by Burke (2010). This finding is further corroborated by Ojua and Omono (2012), who associated the rareness of divorce issues in traditional African society prior to colonial contact to these rites of passage as well as parents spending ample time with their children and instilled in them the virtues of perseverance, hard work and submissiveness.

There was also the choosing of marriage partners by parents and relations for their children. This was a common practice among most individuals in the traditional African societies. Parents used this in order to ensure that children have someone to marry at a due time in life and also prior to that understand themselves as they grow together (Kyalo, 2012), and further reduces issues and incidents of separation and divorce. Majority of participants cited some examples of traditions in Nigeria particularly the Hausas of Northern Nigeria who are still practicing this rites and hence have been able to sustain minimal divorce rates. Furthermore, this practice was anchored on the traditional African belief that marriage is not an affair between two individuals only but instead an alliance between two families and in some small and close villages, it was a village affair. This position is in consonance with the findings of Iroegbu (2011), among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria that when a male is ready to marry, his family initiates the search for a bride and emphasis is placed on the would be bride's family social and illness background as a major yardstick for determining the suitability of a girl and likewise a boy.

Family involvement was very conspicuous right from declaration of intention to the ceremony. The process of marriage span through a long period of time accompanied with exchanging of several visits to the bride's home for negotiation. Also the bride to be visits her husband family several times where she relates with her husband family. This process enhances acceptability and understanding thus preventing the common in-law spouse conflict or rancour that has destroyed a lot of families. Respondents also agreed that family involvements in marriage arrangement act as a social support and security for African marriages. During periods of material crisis that threaten to break such marriages, the family intervenes in an effort to save the marriage. This is in consonance with the view of Burke (2010) that the survival and stability associated with African families and marriages is linked to the concern and social support received from other family members.

All respondents agreed to the fact that in most societies particularly in the study setting, this concept had been altered. The western culture of personal arrangement (of man meets a woman in a bus and love begins) with the concept that marriage is a union of two people join together by love has

over thrown the communal arrangement. This trend has resulted to break down in marriages with high rate of divorce as most families would not want to interfere for fear of being seen as intruders. Also, the long processes of negotiations have been taken over by the one day negotiation found among urban dwellers that are always in a hurry to return back to the town. There is also an economic connotation attached to this, as parents are in a hurry to give out their daughters to collect the cash handed down and to further relieve themselves of the burden of catering for the child they are giving out for marriage.

Corroborating the views held by majority of the participants, an elder stated that the norms of marriage in the study area are experiencing severe erosion as formal marriages are also giving way for informal marriages. This indicated that there was a high level of cohabitation in Calabar municipality. This finding corroborates that of Mawere (2010), who associated the commonality of this kind of arrangements with the educated and urban segments of the population and hence sex which was cherish and upheld value is lost.

Male respondents stated that sex was particularly chastised outside wedlock because it was seen as sacred only to be practiced in marriage. Furthermore, the African conception of sex was geared towards procreation, religious and social uses and it is expected that sex is limited to married couples only. To ensure the sustenance of this deified arena, taboos were sounded and violation attracted family shame and penalties. In fact, the genitals and buttocks are parts of the body most carefully covered, lack of coverage constituted nakedness and moral violation (Kyalo, 2012). Findings however, indicated that this cherished norms and values have been neglected today due to the influx of contrary values due to culture contact through the media and learned values from western world. Of recent therefore, nudity has become the new norm among young girls as indicated by respondents in the study area.

All respondents agreed to the fact that virginity in traditional African society was held in high esteem so much that if a girl went into marriage as a virgin, the bride wealth that her suitor's family paid would be increased, and in some ethnic groups, the would-be bride's mother receives gifts of cash and cows as tributes to her successful upbringing of the would-be bride and further earned her respect from her in-laws. Today, such values and virtues are criticized and mocked at with the popular slogan of "women's right". This has further weakened the cultural methods of placing restrictions on growing teenagers in terms of morality and sexuality as part of familial integrity and cultural discipline of African societies. Women are of recent also given the right to freely express their sexuality like men.

Respondents attributed this risky and free expression of sexuality behaviour on the part of women to women's inability to conceive because of the various abortions they may have carried out during their adolescent stage and in some cases the different types of untreated sexuality transmitted infections they may have contacted and unable to treat. This risky and free expression of sexuality behaviour have contributed in reducing the fertility rate of African families and children are no longer seen as important and the primary reason for marriage in Africa.

Majority of male respondents stated that polygamy is most cherished by Africans in African society. Respondents indicated that the reason associated with this is that multiple wives and by extension many children are valued because they form a readily available workforce that provide labour for farm work. This is also a sign of wealth as it demonstrates the power and status of the head of the household. These practices have become a rare practice particularly among African urban dwellers due principally to the difficult socio-economic conditions face by the younger generations to meet pressing needs. This corroborates the findings of Bigombe & Khadiagala (2003) in a comparative study in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Tanzania which showed that monogamous families or households have taken a greater hold on society. Though, some elements of its existence can be found here and there particularly in rural settings. This is associated with the already established sexual division of labour that characterize the sphere of agriculture which is prevalent in rural communities.

Another change in family structure is the prevalence of single family structures caused by factors outside the death of a spouse. Respondents stated that this have become a common scenery both among young urban females and rural young girls. Respondents associated this to the prevalence of sexual decadence perpetuated by negligence of the African sexual values, increasing number of women who have joined the labour force, secular changes in educational status, occupational mobility of women and in some cases the decline of marriageable men and increase rate of separation and divorce as a result of acculturation from western medias. These western ideologies have increase in the autonomy and status of women; hence, the trends of female headed households have escalated tremendously especially in Efik land that operates the matrilineal descent. This is in line with the position of Ocholla-Ayayo (2000), who stated that most patrilineal societies in Africa seem to be changing to matrilineal system, which was previously not the case. Thus, the phenomenon of many single mothers heading large households is now accepted as normal. This has created a new

movement of change called democratization and gender sensitivity, meaning women supremacy. The alteration and neglect of the African system of marriage and family has produced a myriad of social problems which rapidly increasing on a daily basis such as:

- Single parenthood
- Separation and divorce
- Rape and HIV/AIDS
- Homosexuality and lesbianism
- Prostitution and crime
- Child trafficking, child labour and child abuse.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study discussed the African traditional perspective of the neglect of marriage and family values from an ethnographic point of view, and by extension refers to other family systems across the globe. It identified some basic areas where the African marriage and family values, culture and practices have been altered or neglected as a result of acculturation through western Medias. The argument in this paper is not to disregard the western culture and some of the benefits inherent in them nor does the paper attempt to claim that the African concept, values or practices as regards marriage and family are better but rather it argues that the traditional cultural African marriage remain the best on the basis of the settings in which Africans found themselves because it posses all the ingredients and practices that can make marriages and families successful and hence its total alteration and neglect may spell doom for African societies. Therefore, just like Kyalo (2012) had argued, Africans should not be in a hurry to give up their culture, rather, we should take only the "kernel" from the influx of ideas associated with marriage and family from the western world and gladly throw away the "husk". It is worthy of note to explain in this study that the concept of acculturation is a dual contextualization, so Western and African family systems must interface each other to create a conducive platform for operation and interaction. The study therefore recommends the following:

- The process of mate, seeking and contracting of marriage should be taken seriously by Africans, communities and societies so as to add value and credibility to the institution of marriage.
- Parents should insist on a gradual and steady but inquisitive process of courtship and mate seeking or selection during which time the seriousness of the lover's intention can be affirmed.
- The sacredness of marriage and sex should be upheld right from the early child rearing stage with parents as models to curb sexual indecency.
- The practice of rites of passage should be restored to prepare the young men and women

transiting to adulthood. This will reduce the unpreparedness syndrome in our society that has made marriage a temporal union rather than a life time union.

- Extended family structure should be strengthened to help the unprivileged young ones from poor homes the opportunity to be supported in their education.
- The value and cultural respect for child rearing pattern and upbringing should be given quality attention and consideration as family morals inculcated in the children will determine the continuous upholding of marriage values and practices.

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