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THE FAMILY AS THE BEDROCK OF IGBO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of family life as the hub of Igbo traditional society. Family life emanates from marriage hence the proper upbringing of an individual towards the solidification of the society. However it has been observed that the influence of western culture has affected the Igbo family that the ties and bonds that bind the family are negatively affected. The paper therefore aims at taking insightful look at some of the avenues through which the family brings up an individual both politically, socially, morally and economically for a better, stronger and unified society. To do this, a descriptive survey method was adopted, backed with the review of some related texts. It was found that some ills in the society today are attributable to the neglect of the family life. The paper suggests that there is need to return to the usual family way of life by which the Igbo people are known. It finally concludes that since family life encompasses all that it takes to build a solidified society, Igbo people should have a great regard and respect for their decent families and should inculcate the same in their children.

Introduction

Family life cannot sustain itself without marriage because marriage is a way of creating the family. The family includes the man, his wife/wives, children and every other person that has blood relations or lives with the family. Ogbalu (2006:7) states that family in Igbo context "differs from the English concept of family in the sense that it does not apply only to a husband, his wife, and children but also includes somewhat vaguely other relations such as in-laws, uncles, cousins, nephews distant or near or even maids and servants." For easy conception, these families are grouped into the monogamous family, polygamous family and extended family. According to Mbiti (1982:106) "The joint households together are like one large family." This assertion is correct since each family in Igbo land sees itself as close relatives and share their joys and sorrows with each other.

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The role of family life as the bedrock of Igbo traditional society cannot be overemphasized. Since family life emanates from marriage, once a child is born, the training starts. The training of an individual in Igbo setup is total. It covers all aspects of life (mental, political, social, economic and moral). An individual after going through the family norms and upbringing is well balanced in all aspects of life. In the family, the spirit of individual achievement for which the Igbo is known is gradually inculcated into him. (Olisa,2002:219).

An individual was able to achieve a lot because he follows a rule of law. There are sets of rule and ordered way of life which every individual must abide with. In other words, there are things one is supposed to do and things one is supposed not to do in any given situation. Nnonyelu (2009:13) puts it that "there are guidelines that direct human conduct in different situations." It is believed that whoever follows the right part will be blessed and progress is sure to come. Family life therefore ensures the training of an individual for a better society. Those who do not fit in well in the society due to their evil ways of life were totally frowned at. They were not encouraged even if they were well to do. These groups of people were not recognized in positions of authority and title taken such as "ozo" title. Sound moral life, clean gotten wealth, well socially behaved individuals were cherished in Igbo traditional society. Some sayings as "kama rijuo afo dachie uzo, ka m buru onu", meaning literally that instead of eating too much food and become sick, let me go hungry sums it up.

The family been the foundation of all other Igbo institutions is the bedrock of Igbo society. If the family fails in its way of a child's upbringing, the entire society is marred. On the other hand if sound training is given right from home the society is saved from collapse. An Igbo adage says "a na-esi n'ulo mara mma puta ilo", which means that charity begins at home. No wonder Igbo people take pains in the selection of a life partner. They do not play with marriage because it is a determining factor to a successful family life. This work therefore, will examine the main stream of Igbo man's way of life, the mode of life that is embedded socially, politically, morally and economically that ensures their oneness.

Meaning of Marriage

Marriage is an institution which has continued to have great impact on man's life. Man cannot do without it because of the role it plays in building up a family. The urge to marry becomes evident in man when the right time comes. A lot of research has been carried

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out by different people on marriage, but no research work will be enough because marriage is a broad topic. It is continuous and has come to stay. It is as old as man. Marriage customs of a culture also continue to change as they come in contact with other cultures, including the western. As these marriage customs change, it also affects the family life of the said community.

Obi (1970:2), in his research on the meaning of marriage among the Igbo, says "An old farmer called it a union of a man and a woman leading to that of the two extended families." Another respondent according to him, said that, "It is a lasting union between a man and a woman." This information shows that marriage among the Igbo people involves a male and a female. It also establishes that marriage in Igbo land involves both families and relatives of the male and female that are married.

In support of this Ogbukagu (2008:273) asserts, "In Adazi-Nnukwu and other Igbo Communities marriage is not an affair between a man and a woman, but rather it transcends the whole Ụmụnna (kindred men) and Ụmụokpu (kindred women)."

For Obi (1970:3), marriage in Igboland is "union between a man and a woman for the duration of the woman's life, being normally the gist of a wider association between two families or sets of families." He agrees that his definition and the lay man's idea above are the same except for its length of time and social importance for the woman. He goes further to say,

> For the ordinary Igbo, marriage is the lawful living together of man and woman of different families after some rites have been performed. It is regarded as a mile-stone in the life of a man and a woman, which will enable them to immortalize their children.

From the above, we see the idea of begetting children who will take after their parents. Marriage produces the children that form the family, and it is the starting point for all the trainings, and what the child will be in the future for a better society. In the olden days Igbo man's marriage without a child was seen as valueless and unsuccessful. When such a thing happens an alternative arrangement must be made for children to be born into the

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family. The man can marry another wife or the woman can also give money to her husband to marry a wife on her behalf.

Kenez (nd.3) in his work sees marriage as, "a religious event that marks the end of youthful exuberance." Kenez is actually pointing out the human life cycle which makes it that after the adolescent stage, the youth ascends to adulthood stage of life. This ascension, according to him, makes a young girl from after answering whose daughter is she? The question transforms into; whose wife is she? For an Igbo man "nwaanyi toffee onye muru o zawa onye na-alu". Girls are identified through their parents but when a girl reaches the stage of marriage and fully grown up, people that will want to know her will be asking whose wife is she? This is because she has passed the age which she is expected to marry. The girl and boy, have as a result of marriage, ascended to another social status in the society. This new social status gives them certain rights and privileges in the society. These are rights to raise their own children, rights to inheritance and ownership of properties. Others include right to title taking and right to join in kindred and women's union meetings. It should be noted that whatever attitude or opinion that has been formed in the family at this stage is difficult to change. Nnokwa (2009:14), discovers that,

> Marriage was believed to make an individual achieve completeness. Marriage is one experience without which a person is not considered to be complete, "perfect" and truly a man or woman. It makes a person really " somebody". It was part of the definition of who a person is, according to African view about man. Without marriage, a person is looked upon as an incomplete human being.

This assertion points out that man usually feels incomplete when the need to have his own children and family is not met through marriage. In Igbo land, a man who fails to marry is regarded as incomplete. He cannot speak freely among his age groups; he is not accorded respect as he cannot take any title in the society. A woman who fails to marry is looked down upon. She is seen to have a very bad character and as unmarriageable. For this reason Basden (1983:58) states concerning the Igbo people that,

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> Celibacy is an impossible prospect. Unmarried persons of either sex, except in special cases, are objects of derision, and to be childless is the greatest calamity that can befall a woman. Hence a very high value is set upon marriage.

The value of marriage to an Igbo man cannot be over emphasized because of what it can offer to the society. In view of this, Ukaegbu (2002:124) in a quest into the meaning of marriage constructed a rating of the responses of his respondents:

What is marriage?		
Sacred companionship	Yes	20%
Love making	Yes	10%
Reasoning together and sharing	Yes	15%
Having and raising children	Yes	17%
Living together	Yes	12%
Tolerating one another	Yes	13%
Coping with changes	Yes	13%

He therefore defines marriage as "a union of a man and a woman to make one body of humanity." The rating and definition in essence propagates commitment and total submission to each other. It also emphasizes the joining of hands together in the upbringing of their children for the pride of their family and the wider society. According to Ezenweke (2012:134) marriage "represents the joining of two persons, their life, missions, families and the entire lineages."

Based on all these opinions and definitions, we can conclusively say that for an Igbo man, marriage is a lawful living together of a man with his wife or wives with the aim of begetting children who will be trained in an acceptable manner as required by the customs, children who will take after their parents for immortalization. It is a sacred and religious obligation which involves everybody that is related to the married and the entire community.

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Family Life

According to the Igbo view on marriage, procreation is the main purpose of marriage. Children are highly valued. It is through marriage that children are begotten and with the man, his wife/wives and children a new family is formed. Obi (1970:1) states that, "Since the Igbo are a patriarchal people, marriage is deemed an indispensable factor for the continuation of the family line of descent; children occupy the central point in Igbo marriage." In other words, if there is no marriage, there will be no family and consequent termination of family lineage and extinction of the society.

In his findings, Kenez (nd:1) notes that "a family comprises those members who share their lives together within a household located in a compound." He also summarizes the role of a man in the family in a traditional Igbo setting as:

(a) A responsible man that builds a home
(b) At least a man and a woman with their children
(c) The wife or wives are dependent on him
(d) He is the mechanic, the plumber and doctor of the family
(e) He shoulders the good, the bad and the ugly in his home
(f) His failure to take good care of the wife spells divorce and a broken home.

In Igbo land, the man is the head of the family, all others depend on him. There are roles for the wife/wives and children. Everybody plays his/her role for a peaceful family life. It therefore means that if the family is good the entire society progresses.

Women's role includes cooking, taking care of her husband and children and other members of the family. Keeping the home, and ensuring the neatness of children and compound also lie under her domain. Both parents train the children in obedience, good manners, hard work, farm work etc. If however, these basic trainings are not given in the family the society is bound to suffer. Consequently the society will be filled with disobedient, ill mannered, lazy and never do well kind of people.

Children wash plates, sweep the house and compound, they fetch water, attend to the domestic animals. Both boys and girls have different roles they perform which will

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eventually help them in their marital lives. They learn, mostly by staying close to their parents and older people and siblings. According to Ogbalu (2006:19),

> Children learn from their parents or senior brothers and sisters by watching them and doing what and how they observe them do … girls were expected to learn simple virtues, laws of hygiene, simple marketing and trading, preparation of various types of food, cultivation of crops particularly, coco-yam, cassava and care of children … boys on the other hand learnt directly from their fathers with whom they were always.

Fathers train the boys in farm work, cutting the palm, staking yams, making barns and all forms of masculine endeavors. They also learn crafts such as blacksmithing, carpentry etc. as a means of livelihood. Girls on the other hand, learn basket weaving, pottery etc., all these are geared towards preparing them for a future adaptability in the society.

Family Life for a Better society

Training of an individual begins at home .The home as the first port of call in the child's upbringing, starts early in life to train the child in the right direction. In the traditional Igbo society, this type of training is informal and transmitted from generation to generation. In actual sense, Igbo people see the training of a child as every body's responsibility (nwa bu nwa ora). In the light of this, whenever an adult sees a child misbehaving, instant correction is given. The adult may go to the extent of letting the parents of the child know about the child's misconduct. According to Ogbalu (2006:19) "The training of children is everybody's responsibility and every person is expected to correct a child whether they are related or not." When a child knows that his activities do not concern only himself and members of his family, he will be trying at every point in time to behave well. This avenue, in Igbo traditional society, is a way of maintaining a clean society. Recently due to western civilization and the tendency to belong to a certain class, children behave as they like without outsiders giving them instructions to avoid exchanging words with their parents.

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Through the use of songs, folktales, proverbs, dances etc the child socializes and fits in well in the society. The stories also help them in developing both morally and physically. Chukwu (2013:15) asserts that 'This form of education of the child brings him close to the elders whom he tends to appreciate, respect and tolerate in the society. It also equips the child to live in harmony with one another in the society." People living harmoniously in the society were no longer as it used to be in the past. The type of socialization seen in the past used to bind people together and that was the secret of one Igbo nation.

Politically, children start from the family to relate with each other and then with non members of the family. A strong bond develops among them. The family history and that of the clan was learnt. In course of this development, the individual also learns the relationship between his kindred and other kindred and those between his village and other villages at the town level (Olisa,2002:220). The individual develops great respect, and the spirit of patriotism, and is ready to defend his people in any given situation. According to Ejiofor (1981:207)"The strongest guarantee of stability in their political system is the concept of brotherhood." Although family in itself is not a political unit, it is the tap root of all other institutions in Igbo land.

The family life of every Igbo family which is embedded in social, political, religious, moral and economic life were handed over to individual from generation to generation and was the source of influence in everything he does. If however a very bad impression were created by the family, the individual carries it along to the wider society. The family therefore is the foundation of the society.

Recommendations

The place of family life in the society cannot be neglected. The role played by the family in the upbringing of a child cannot be allowed to elude humanity. The totality of what one will be in life is gradually nurtured in the family. There were family norms and also there were things which each family was known for. Igbo people should go back to their origin and train their children in line with their family lifestyle.

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Emphasis should be placed on vocational education. Many families were known for different crafts, the influence of western culture has led to the discarding of such crafts. This could be part of the cause of unemployment in the society.

The act of coming together in brother hood which families are proud of, should be revisited. The idea of being one brother's keeper would not be allowed to die. It is the main force of unity and stronghold.

Conclusion

The family has numerous ways of inculcating in her citizenry the rudiments of living. Through the training given to an individual right from home, the individual is equipped both politically, socially, economically, morally and otherwise. This creates opportunity for continuity in a way of living and doing things.

What one needed to be in life were embedded in the type of family one comes from. It therefore becomes necessary that Igbo people should uphold their family line of decent for a more unified and well spirited Igbo nation.

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