

# THE ROLE OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY IN THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY

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## Abstract

*This article offers philosophical appraisal and analysis of the role of marriage and family as the nucleus, the sustenance and the future of the African society in the face of modernity. In their attempt to evolve ways of life appropriate to our modern world culture, African people and their society face a number of challenges; some stem from the values and practices of their traditions, while others rise from the legacy of European colonialism. Defending the cross-cultural applicability of philosophical concepts developed in Western culture, the paper attempts to show the usefulness of such concepts in addressing a wide range of African problems. To attain insight into this relationship, three major areas of literature are reviewed: the concept of family, marriage and modernity, the key features of African society in the face of modernity and its impacts on marriage and family. A review on the impacts of modernity on marriage and family provides an understanding of changes in socioeconomic conditions, and the personal values, beliefs and behaviors that are perceived as the major socio-economic development processes in the modern era. The discussion on modernity and its impacts on marriage and family in Africa provide a comprehensive explanation of family and marriage change from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, from which the rationale for this article is built. The review concerning African family life is aimed at giving an interpretive summary illustrating trends and patterns in family change.*

**Keywords:** African Society, Family, Marriage, Modernity.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most pervasive global phenomena that affect human social life all over the world is the impact of modernity. Modernity is the self-definition of a generation about its own technological innovation, governance, and socioeconomics. Modernity influences not only the intimate and personal aspects of human lives, but also impacts social, cultural, and religious traditions and institutions around the world. 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. Stated that these value structures or systems were used to ensure and promote order of socialization and morality in the African society (Madukwe & Madukwe, 2018). They (Madukwe and Madukwe) stated that:

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 rancor 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 (2018:45).

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 because marriage and family is believed to be the nucleus, the sustenance and the future of the African society.

Traditional African family patterns are slowly but progressively being altered as a result of the process of modernization which is exhibited through trends like urbanization. Family patterns that were the norm in traditional rural African societies are gradually being altered and substituted by modern values. The African practices, relevance and functions are being socially disfigured by the intrusion of modern western values (Adinlofu, 2019, September 10). The marriage and family's affective role as reveal by Peterson (2009, August 10) includes: Promoting and safeguarding the health of children as well as instilling moral and social values in them, with the overall goal being to ensure that the next generation is productive and socially responsible (2009:21).

To execute this role parents and other adult family members generally exert considerable influence as teachers and role models for children through skill building, limit setting or discipline, and as models of healthy and competent behaviour. The nurturing and supporting role of the family as noted by Mokomanne (2012:14-5) can:

Enhance the social and economic empowerment of both older persons and young people. Essentially, developing connections with a younger generation can help older adults to feel a greater sense of fulfillment, while linking older adults with youth can provide advantages for both groups including providing an opportunity for both to learn new skills; giving the child and the older adult a sense of purpose; helping children to understand and later accept their own aging; invigorating and energizing older adults; helping reduce the likelihood of depression in the elderly; reducing the isolation of older adults; and helping keep family stories and history alive (2012:14-5).

The transformation of societies in Africa from rural to urban settings due to modernization has immensely contributed in triggering changes in family structure. This

has triggered the distortion of cultural/traditional norms and values that characterized rural communities in the region. African families are increasingly faced with the challenge and pressure emanating from the competition prevailing between traditional and modern family values. Hence, contemporary family patterns in the region are increasingly subjected to transform and adapt to changing times. The major trends in family structures in Africa and their shifts across the modern world over the past decades are well known. Fertility rates have declined below the level sufficient for the replacement of the population and childbearing occurs later and more often outside marriage (Fahlén & Oláh, 2015). Marriage, too, is being postponed and is more often foregone, and couple relationships both marital and non-marital ones have become more fragile.

Madukwe and Madukwe (2018) revealed that half of the unmarried births are to mothers who are in cohabitating relationships, and seven in ten children of cohabitating couples will experience parental separation. The dissolution rate of cohabitating couples is four times higher than married couples who did not cohabit before marriage. He noted that by the late 20th century, fertility rates had declined well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman on average, while marriage and parenthood had been delayed to more mature ages, new forms of couple relationships emerged while the propensity to marry decreased and family dissolution became quite frequent even among couples with children. Ladies now prefer to be single mother in order to have maximum freedom without restrictions of a husband. People are increasingly refraining from long-term commitments in respect of partnership formation and childbearing, which indicates a de-standardization of the family life course.

With the rise of modernity, marriage and family composition in Africa seems to be undergoing sequent adaptive processes. At the same time, Africa, while roughly following the developmental pattern of earlier developing countries, has made adaptations in accord with its own historical and cultural experiences. Societies change as they come in contact with external influences and social organizations and relations become more complex. The nature of change may be dramatic or gradual and, in either case, change affects the norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, socialization process, and the general ethics that distinguish the group from every other, especially in this age of globalization. Since change can either be positive or negative and may have practical implications for survival of the society in question, it is imperative to interrogate observable transmogrifications being experienced. Meanwhile the problem is that African family patterns are increasingly faced with the challenge and pressure between traditional and modern family values and structure. There is the steady increase in the pace towards the abandonment of African traditional practices for modern (Western) ones. However, the most popular trend is that of the prevalence of family patterns that are increasing merging traditional and modern marriage norms or practices which if not attended to might have a negative implication to the African society. The transformation of African society towards modernity and westernization and its attendant social changes has greatly altered most African traditional institutions - one of such institutions been marriage and family system.

The main objective of this paper is to philosophically appraise the role of marriage and family as the nucleus, the sustenance and the future of the African society in the face of modernity. Specifically, this article seeks to examine the relationship between modernity and changes in marriage and family structure. The key features of African society in the face of modernity and its impacts on marriage and family, with the goal of illuminating the changes that are characterizing their prevalence.

## **CONCEPTIONAL ANALYSIS**

### **African concept of marriage**

The beginning of a legitimate family is marked by a socially and culturally acceptable legally consummated union called marriage. The marriage institution is a common phenomenon present in every society; however there are difficulties defining the concept marriage. Marriage can be perceived from different facets, as an institution, a partnership, a lifecycle phase and as a role. The institution of marriage is considerably subjected to the trend of accommodation to the process of industrialization/modernization (Adinlofu, 2019, September 10) Socioeconomic circumstances are encountering changes which forge alteration of the fundamental values of culture. Marriage constitutes a vital variable that is pivotal for procreation. The distortion of its structure tends to serve as a medium where socioeconomic changes associated with the main values of culture can be measured. Traditional tenets of African marriages are increasingly subjected to stabilize amidst sporadic societal changes emanating from modernization.

Marriage and family are two concepts in one which are at the center of any culture across the globe, especially in Africa (Okaba, 2006). They 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.

In traditional rural African societies, the contraction of marriage was dominated by arranged marriages whereby parents usually indulged in the selection of marriage partners for their children; this was mostly common for their daughters. This was done without the consent of the children. However, in contemporary African societies this has been altered to the extent that some countries have adopted policies that strive to advocate for the consent of both parties that are to be married as was the case of the Tanzania marriage act of 1971 and the Ivory coast civil code of 1964 (Therborn,2006). This does

not imply that the involvement of parents in the marriage of their children has been halted. The adoption of these acts has helped to promote the recognition of the consent of the parties to be married, and as well as fostered the existence of the acknowledgment that it is the right of prospective partners to select their partners. Despite this development, the selection of marriage partners is still done with the consent of family members.

Bigombe and Khadiagala defined marriage 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 some 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 the society and a fulfillment 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 (Bigombe and Khadiagala). 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 & Madukwe, 2018).

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 they 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. Polygamy was accepted and seen as a sign of wealth. Burke (2010, May 17) asserts 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 polygamy. 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 systems had however suffered some degree of neglect as individuals no longer trust their partner's productivity and libido level, so they are encouraged to secretly or openly engage their partners in sexual activities to be sure of the partner's 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 most basic institution in any society is the family and it is the social context into which members of a society derive their primary identity. Philosophers and sociologists have come up with different definitions of the family and this is owing to the fact that the family has various manifestations, organization and structures in various societies. According to Knuttila (2005) one can talk of various types or forms of family, including primary, secondary, single parent, nuclear, and extended. In this sense hence, Okodudu defines the family as a domestic group in which parents and children live together, and in its elementary form consists of a couple and their children. Ingiabuna, Olumati and Sele (2003) define family as a universal institution whose most important functions are to socialize and nurture the younger generation. For Charles (2012) the family is a group of people related by ancestry, marriage or other committed sexual relationship, or adopted and live together, form an economic unit, and rear their children (if any). Similarly, Ingiabuna and Obaro defined family as a social group whose members are related either through common ancestry or marriage and are bound by moral and economic rights and duties. The family is perhaps the most vital personal care network in human society. From different perspectives many people have tried to define the family but failed to give a definition that could be applied to all societies (United Nations, 2006).

From the foregoing, the various definitions emphasized different ideas about what the family is, however what is striking and cross-cutting in all is that:

- i. The family is a group of people related or connected by bloodline, marriage rite or adoption
- ii. They share common residency. They live together.
- iii. They share sentiments of oneness. They view themselves as a unit.
- iv. They share values and responsibilities. Perform caretaking services for others especially the very young.

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. According to Ocholla-Ayayo (2009), it is also the socio-biological unit that ensures orderly reproductive continuity of the human race. 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. According to Madukwe and Madukwe (2018), 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. An African becomes fulfilled in life only in relation to the fulfillment of other members of the family. Madukwe and Madukwe (2018) 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 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.

### **Concept of modernity**

Due to the impacts of colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization, modernization is conceived, by Africans, as synonymous with Westernization or Europeanization. This in

turn, led African countries, lose their identity and indigenous cultural values. Gyekye (1997) is an African philosopher who argues that the critique of modernity is the first philosopher whose works, particularly, "Tradition and Modernity" discusses intensely on modernity. Gyekye (1997) used the term for the first time to distinguish between the "ancients", the masters of the ancient classical culture, and the "modern", their present heirs. When he discussed the contemporary meaning of modernity, he pointed out that modernity is culture dependent and, indeed, is linked to Western culture; particularly from the seventeen century on. He asserted that: Modernity can be defined as the ideas, principles, and ideals covering a whole range of human activities that have underpinned Western life and thought since the seventeen century.

In addition, other philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and theorists at different times understood the concept modernity in different and divergent ways. Despite the different views and propositions proposed by sociologists, it is widely accepted that a complex and modern society differ in several key respects from any previous type of social order, and their development has had significant consequences stretching far beyond their origins in Europe (Giddens, Duneier & Appelbaum). As mentioned above, a definition of the term "modernity" presents many difficulties as a social scientific concept because of the various disciplinary understandings that cover economic, political, and philosophical sphere. Much recent discussion however relates to a somewhat narrower definition focusing on changes in specific areas. Today there are many new trends in family form but it cannot be said that these are all due to modernity. Yet modernity is definitely one of the important reasons (Giddens, Duneier & Appelbaum).

Gyekye (1997) clearly explicated the notion of tradition, he noted that in order to clearly understand the concept modernity, we have to first clearly conceive "what traditional is" all about. The reason is both modernity and tradition are cultural phenomena and as we have seen earlier modernity is initially introduced to oppose the "antiquus vetus" the old cultural practices or traditions. Unless we (African) critically investigate and reflect on concepts like "modernity" we will be forced to conceive only as it had been forwarded and elucidated by the colonial anthropologists, and will continue to use the concept as an anchoring point for further analysis and evaluation of our present cultural phenomena. As Messay (2004:209-210) stated: "Africa will not really attain its cultural (historic, political, and economic) maturity as long as it does not elevate itself resolutely to a profound thinking of its essential problems, that is to say, to philosophical reflections."

Tradition is a broad concept that may cover a range of cultural elements including "modernity. Tsenay (2006) defines tradition as a belief or practice transmitted from one generation to another and accepted as authoritative, or deferred to, without argument. For [20], tradition is unchanging; it is unquestionable. However, Gyekye (1997) conceives tradition in a totally different way: "the fundamental and persistent meaning of 'tradition' is that which comes down or is inherited from the past and becomes an enduring element in the cultural life of a people. He (Gyekye) insists that every tradition does experience a change. There is no "absolutely changeless" tradition; though the degree of change may vary from one society to the other.

Tradition is created by people at some point in time. Thus, that particular generation is considered as the creator of some cultural values, and these values may or may not transcend across the next generations. At every stage across the generations, the people create some new cultural values in addition to what they have inherited from their ancestors. Those cultural values which manage to survive and transcend at least for three generations would be assumed to reach the maturity level of cultural values or cultural productions where they can be labeled as tradition. However, this does not mean that any cultural practice or institution that has lasted a mere three decades (generations) would be regarded as a tradition. Thus, Gyekye (1997) in his horizontal line represented the fate of cultural values as they pass from one generation to the other. The dynamism of these modern institutions not only undermines traditional habits and customs worldwide, but also intrudes into the most personal and global aspects of human life.

### **Diffusion of innovation theory**

This paper adopts the diffusion of innovation theory propounded by Rogers, principally to explain the how, why and what new ideas as well as modernity (technologies) spread through cultures. How are these new ideas, technologies and artifacts 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.

### **FEATURES OF AFRICAN SOCIETY IN THE FACE OF MODERNITY AND ITS IMPACTS ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY**

Marriage and family still remains a prominent nexus in the social life of Africans. In

Africa, there is considerable importance attached to the respect for elders and ancestors. Makinwa-Adebusoye (2001) outlined the major characteristic features of African household to be that they are mostly rural, patriarchal and hierarchical, polygamous and open to kinship networks, and finally they attached substantial importance to lineage continuation. The demographics of families are changing, and with that, the philosophical underpinnings of relationships are also changing. Many young adults feel marriage is old-fashioned and confining, and that open cohabitating relationships provide a healthier option that is more conducive to personal development. If a relationship does not provide personal happiness, parents often believe that their children will adapt to new family relationships so that divorce or separation will have few long-term, adverse consequences. These beliefs have led to marriage occurring later, women having fewer children and doing so later in life, single mothers giving birth to many of our children, more parents cohabitating, and fewer children living with their married, biologic parents.

Molitoris, Barclay and Kolk (2019) asserted that:

The demographics of families are changing, and with that, the philosophical underpinnings of relationships are also changing. Many young adults feel marriage is old-fashioned and confining, and that open cohabitating relationships provide a healthier option that is more conducive to personal development (p. 1349).

If a relationship does not provide personal happiness, parents often believe that their children will adapt to new family relationships so that divorce or separation will have few long-term, adverse consequences. Premarital childbearing in African countries is becoming an important phenomenon demographically and socially in part because of its implications for single mothers, their children, and society. Contemporary African family patterns are subjected to changes that emanate as a result of the ameliorated economic conditions, education and health opportunities as a result of modernity (Smith-Greenaway & Clark, 2018). These factors continuously exert tremendous impact on contemporary family patterns in Africa. Socioeconomic circumstances in the Africa are encountering alterations that have to a considerable extent triggered changes in the fundamental cultural values most especially in the domain of the family. The occurrence of competition between traditional and modern family patterns illustrates a dichotomy. There is a rise in the pace towards the abandonment of traditional practices for modern ones (western). However, the most popular trend is that of the prevalence of family patterns that are increasing merging traditional and modern marriage norms, values or practices.

The advent of modernity has inherently fostered a progressive transformation of African family organization marked by the drift from larger family size to small size households, single parenting, same sex union etc. Perelli-Harris (2009) identified the changes taking place in family patterns such as changes in family size to be a characteristic of the second demographic transition process. It is marked by the reorientation of family values from extended families to smaller family sizes (Nuclear). According to Perelli-Harris (200) the shift in society is inevitable and is part of the process of modernization. One major area

that has encountered or is experiencing alteration is the size of family that is the number of children that married women give birth to. It is imperative to highlight that family size discussions in the region is renowned to be dominated by the extended family settings whereby a family is not made up only of a married couple and their children but also include uncles, aunties, grandparents to name a few. Extended families still have quite a strong hold in Africa despite the advent of modernization (Therborn, 2006). The main reason for this has been linked to the role that extended family plays as social security in the society. Marriage in most African countries is universal. There is early and universal female marriage (Okaba, 2006). The age at first marriage is experiencing slight delay than it was before as a result of modernity. Marriage in Africa is subjected to the task of adapting amidst sporadic changes emanating from the society. Marriage is still quite important in African communities, the age at first marriage ranges between 17 to 22 years for women. It varies across regions depending on regional and ethnic practices. The age of first marriage has experienced a slight increase in most countries in Africa (Therborn, 2006). It has risen since the 1950s to 1990s in Guinea from 16 to 19 years, from 15 to 18 years in Niger. In Nigeria it has risen from 19 to 20 years, Ivory Coast from 19 to 21 years and Zimbabwe from 19 to 21 years during the 1980s and 1990s. Countries like South Africa and Botswana have much later ages of marriage which has rose from 26 to 27 years. The percentage of the female population that is married by age 23 was 82 percent in Mali, and 90 percent in Niger. Both of these countries have relatively high fertility rates (Rogers). Contrary to this, contemporary African countries are gradually experiencing slight changes in the age of marriage at which women get married as later age of 25 and above.

Meanwhile, Madukwe and Madukwe (2018) revealed that family structures in Africa are experiencing changes due to modernity which are felt in childbirth rate that is the number of children, and age at first marriage. In order to comprehend contemporary African fertility, one needs to understand that there has not been any traditional fertility control in the light of limiting family size, and also that the practice of female abstinence has been a vital feature of societies in the region. This, they identified as been the reason for the resistance and apprehension mounted by most people in the region to modern methods of fertility control which were perceived as being unnecessary in the region. The number of children women in the region are averagely giving birth to is progressively declining even though the rate is not quite significant. The locus of most traditional African countries is centered on the perception of large families as an asset especially in rural subsistence agricultural societies (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2001). From the foregoing, it is deducible that the conventional definition of marriage is that it is a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognized as legitimate offspring of both parents. However, Okodudu asserts that the idea of marriage has changed in recent times. In much of the Western European countries, marriage has been conceptualized as a union between two consenting adults irrespective of their sexes with or without approval from their parents or family; hence same sex marriages are being contracted today without the possibility of having children, except that it is a relationship between two consenting adults that has been recognized by law. However, in Nigeria and most part of Africa, marriage remains a union of two consenting adults (male and female) but largely

with the express support and approval of the immediate families of the individuals involved in the relationship. Marriage also confers upon a man various rights over a woman. These rights are in two classes: rights to a woman's sexual and domestic services, which is right in uxorem and rights to a woman as a mother i.e. rights over her offspring which is called rights in genetricem (Okodudu).

As of 1999, in Nigeria, 32.7 percent of married women were in polygamous marriages that were made up of two or more wives (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2001). This is characterized by the trend of early marriage; most of the women got married quite young, mostly to older men. Polygamy constitutes a prime feature of rural Africa. Marriage in contemporary Africa is substantially marked by the movement from polygamous marriages to monogamous marriage. This is prominent in urban areas in the region mostly amongst the younger generation. The practice of polygamy was centered on the notion of precluding the situation of husband shortage. Monogamous marriages have become the norm, based on the fact that the contraction of marriage has substantially drifted from polygamy to monogamy. This however does not mean that polygamous marriages do not occur; its scale is smaller nowadays than it was before. The introduction of Christianity in most of the countries, to a certain extent has a great role to play for this as well. The contraction of marriage in the region is increasingly marked by the union of one man and one woman. This in principle has not been the case in rural African societies, where marriages between one man and two or more wives dominated. Modernization as well has been pinpointed to be responsible for these changes. African family patterns are increasingly faced with the challenge and pressure between traditional and modern family values and structure. There is the steady increase in the pace towards the abandonment of traditional practices for modern ones (western).

However, the most popular trend is that of the prevalence of family patterns that are increasing merging traditional and modern marriage norms or practices. Some of other practices taking place include non-marital childbearing and single parenthood; non-marital unions are as well gradually gaining momentum in the region. Looking at the mentality of single mothers and celebrities towards marriage, the question is; what about the family, the children and what becomes of the African society in future? This is because a good founded and structured marriage will give birth to sound family with proper ideals that forms and nurtures the individual by inculcating the attitude of right thinking and consciousness of being a responsible person, in turn forms a society with the right mentality. Regrettably, this is fast eluding us.

### **Conclusion**

This paper philosophically appraise the role of marriage and family as the nucleus, the sustenance and the future of the African society in the face of modernity 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 acculturation through modernization. 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 (viewed as the nucleus, the sustenance and the future of the African society) 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, Africans should not be in a hurry to give up their culture and traditions; 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 paper 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.
- For marriage and family to be right in its sense, efforts must be made to internalize in the minds of the young people, the tenets of an ideal marriage and family, that will bring intending couples into the right disposition to be more committed in preparing for marriage more than the way they prepare for their weddings.

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