

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION OF AFRICAN SYSTEM OF KINSHIP

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Abstract

In societies that are more complex in terms of industrialization and territorial endowment, kinship is difficult to notice. This is largely because such societies have other agencies that carry out the duties the kin groups are supposed to perform. But in less industrialized societies where traditional values are prevalent, kinship still plays roles for the individual. Most societies in Africa fall under this category. In these small-scale traditional societies, social organizations and social structure are understood only through the idiom of social relationship arising from the mutual rights and obligations which mark the kinship system. In Africa, the foundation on which kinship operates outside the society are the family and marriage. They are the only biological influence on kinship formation.

Introduction

The Advanced Learners Dictionary defines kinship as blood relationship with special attributes like closeness, sympathy or

similarity of character. The male partner is known as kinsman, while the female partner is known as kinswoman. This definition is for the purpose of plain understanding of what kinship is all about.

More elaborate definitions were the ones given by Robin Fox and Winick. For Fox, kinship is the relationship between "kin"; for example, persons related by real, putative or fictive (consanguinity).¹ For Winick, kinship is the social recognition and expression of genealogical relationship based on supposed as well as actual genealogical ties.² The conditions necessary for kinship to be created require societal acceptance. Impregnation and birth are not enough to create kinship. For birth and parenthood to have any relevance, the society will have to sanction it. It is the legitimacy conferred by the society that can confirm kinship. This requirement, as it is applied, justifies the Aristotelian view that the society is where man can actualize his potentials. Among the Yoruba in Western Nigeria, the marriage is consummated by fulfilment of some traditional requirements. The offspring of this union belongs to the kin group of the father. A woman can still have children for different men while she is still in her parent's house. These children will be identified by their different fathers; they cannot be said to belong to their mother's kin group, though these men did not marry her officially.

The Igbo consummate their fatherhood by the payment of bride price. The children born in such union belong to the father's kin group. If the woman is not married, the children born to her will belong to the mother's kin group. This is in contrast to what is obtainable in Yoruba area of Nigeria. Among the Igbo, there are peculiar situations where women marry fellow women and choose a particular man to impregnate them. Children born under such an arrangement belong to the kin group of the woman that married her.

These variations in different areas go to show that birth does not confirm kinship. It is the society that confirms which kin group one belongs to. Francis Suarez's position that, "since man is by nature a

social being he needs a political society in which to live"³ is justified. It is this society that defines his status and gives him the sense of belonging. Different societies in Africa have divergent application of kinship status. This difference is also manifested in the functions, expectations and importance of kinship to individual and the society at large.

Concept of the Family

The family forms the building block for kinship systems. It is the family that forms the basis for the expression of kinship systems. Kinship derives its relevance from the society. This is due to the fact that it is from the family that kinship is formed. The family is an important channel for the process of socialization from childhood to adult life.

The origin of the family has been a subject of controversy among philosophers with different specializations on the origin of family. Frederich Engels and L.H. Morgan posit that the family has passed through four successive stages.⁴ The primitive stage, Punaluan family, the pairing family and the monogamous family. At the primitive stage, men were promiscuous. This stage witnessed marriage between distant brothers and sisters. At the second stage, which is the Punaluan family, restrictions were introduced to prevent distant brothers from sexual relations with their distant sisters. The third stage is the pairing family, where one man to one woman arrangement began to dominate marriage. At the fourth stage, according to Morgan and Engels, marriage ties became more rigid. One man, one wife was finally established. These classifications show that each stage is an improvement of the former stage. Karl Marx and Engels clearly demonstrated that the different stages advanced progressively.⁵ In modern times, studies have shown that there are five types of family in Africa.

- i. Nuclear family: This is a family made up of father, mother and their children.
- ii. Polygamous family: This is made up of the father, his two or more wives and children.
- iii. Stem family: This is made up of two married couples who are related and their offspring.
- iv. Joint family: This is made up of two or more families with a family head and their children under one compound.
- v. Extended family. This is made up of many families, in most cases blood relations. They might live in different houses.

The extended family group, more than any of the other types of family, advances to kinship group in Africa. One will first of all be a member of his family before he identifies with his kin group. The extended family system is the most popular family system in Africa. It is from this extended family system that we graduate to kin group, from kin group to clan (tribe).

Uduigwomen writes that; “African society has been based on an extended family system which in turn expanded into kinship groups which further expanded into clan system”.⁶ The family is the basis of the African social life. It is from the family of a man that he undertakes both economic, social, religious and educational functions. At the level of the family, he generates the necessary support to enable him carve a niche for himself. The African believes in his family and strives to maintain his family's good name. He struggles to uplift his family and assist as much as he can in solving their daily problems. He derives his social status from his family. The great philosopher, Plato, in his theory of social stratification, insisted that the Guardians who should rule the Republic should not be allowed to have a family or private property, as these are the two most important hindrances to impartial rulership. Plato insists that the interest of the family tends to supersede public welfare.⁷

The Igbo in South East Nigeria take issues in their family seriously. They are prepared to work extensively to satisfy their family. In their

kingroup, the family is known and no man will like his family to be made a laughing stock in their kin group.

African Kinship cum Philosophy

Kinship in Africa has formed the social instrument for creating an enabling environment to assist the individual achieve his potentials in the society. Kin group has the mechanism to enthrone unity, peace and orderliness among the members. For Aquinas, "For the good life of the community three things are required. First, that the Community should be established in the Unity of Peace, second that the community united in the bond of peace should be directed to good actions, third that through the rulers diligence there should be sufficient supply of the necessities for good life."⁸

Various kin groups in Africa strive to create Aquinas' peaceful environment. Among the kingroup, any activity that will endanger peace is nipped in the bud. Before the coming of the white man to Africa, the Igbo kinship system maintained the security of their territories. Because they lived close to each other, it was easy for them to mobilize and counter an attack. They became more capable of monitoring themselves to prevent any member of the kin group from harming the other members.

According to Rousseau, "Human beings are driven by their instinct to live in clusters, in groups and this mode of life affords them the opportunity to socialize."⁹ This need in man is the driving force behind kinship in Africa. It is the attempt to meet their need and care for the interest of one another. Kinship in Africa has done more than what Rousseau has said. The African of today has come to rely on his relationship with his kin group to fulfill the spirit of oneness in his interaction with his environment.

The individual African can thus only say: "I am because we are". The fundamental of the existence of the individual is the kin group. There upon the individual can only use his life energy towards maintaining

the cosmological or ontological interpretation and balance which generate positive social control and ensure genuine kin cooperation. The African who fails to conform to the dictates of his kin group pays dearly for it. The kin group applies strict disciplinary measures against him. The individual can be ostracized from the kin group. Once this happens, he loses the cooperation of his kin group. At this stage, he can be attacked by other people because he has lost his kin-group protection. At this stage also, he becomes an island unto himself, which is not an African way of life. The life of the individual at this stage becomes an inauthentic life that is not worth living. For Aristotle said that, "Right is the basis of the political association and right is the criterion for deciding what is just".¹⁰

In most African societies it is extremely difficult to become a member of a kin group, while in some societies it is easy. Nwanunobi (2001) recounts how one anthropologist, for instance, recalled how he had to be adopted as a son (kinsman) by the oldest male hunting and gathering group in Botswana before he was allowed to stay with these people during his fieldwork.

The capacity of kinship ties to remain strong in advanced societies is in doubt, but in some modern African societies, kinship has continued to be a dominant force in the election and voting pattern of the people. In the South African election, the Kwazulu Natal Province voted for Inkantna Freedom Party of Mangosuthu Buthelezi of the Zulu ethnic nationality, while ANC won in other areas. The voting pattern in Nigerian elections is also a reflection of the over-dominant presence of kin group (ethnic nationality). In the First Republic, the Action Group won in the area dominated by the Yoruba ethnic nationality. The National Council for Nigerian Citizens won in the area dominated by the Igbo ethnic nationality. The Northern People's Congress won in areas dominated by the Hausa-Fulani ethnic nationality.

This same tendency manifested itself in the Second Republic, with the Nigerian Peoples Party dominating in the Igbo ethnic areas, while the

National Party of Nigeria dominated in the Hausa-Fulani ethnic areas. The Unity Party of Nigeria was controlled by the Yoruba ethnic nationality.

Extreme kin group solidarity can sometimes have negative effects on the society. This madness was witnessed in Burundi where Tutsi tribe and Hutu tribe engaged in wide-spread massacre of each other. This type of extremism was demonstrated by Adolf Hitler when he said: "We aspire not to equality but to domination. The country of foreign race must become once again a country of Serfs, of Agricultural labourers, or industrial workers. It is not a question of eliminating the inequalities among men but of widening them and making them, into law."¹¹

The Burundi violence is a manifestation of kinship extremism. The African, in his kin group, is not alone; he is seen in the picture of Plato's organicist theory where individuals are relevant only when seen as a whole. The kin group is always there to create soft landing in times of adversity. Even at a very old age, a man's kingroup absorbs him. The Africans, in proper kin group arrangement, do not need the old people's home. The man's economic activity and material needs are mostly exercised within the kin group. In times of natural disaster, the kin group can come to the assistance of the kin member. During the Nigerian Civil War, the displaced Igbo tribesmen easily found shelter among their fellow kinsmen. This was the major reason why refugee centres were not common in Igbo land, despite the high casualty suffered by the Igbo people.

Plato, like most scholars, holds the economic function as the basis upon which society builds, with a view to satisfying those basic needs for food, clothing and shelter.¹² The three institutions - marriage, kinship and the family - are closely related. In traditional African society, kinship groups have contributed immensely in the consolidation of marriage contracts. It is through marriage that parent-child kinship connections in most societies are established. Traditional

marriages in African contexts have been more a relationship between two individuals. In most cases, the kin group decides the nature of marriage that is contracted. They act as pressure groups in the process of selecting a partner. For Mbiti JS, "Kin-group pressure is manifest in all segments of the man's social¹³ life. The man among his kin group will enjoy love, unity and trust".

The marriage of the individual members becomes the concern of all the kinsmen, since such marriages carry with them the potentials of affecting the size and fortunes of the kinship group as a whole. This informs the seriousness with which kin groups view marriage, since the offspring of that marriage will be counted among their kingroup.

For Mbiti JS, "To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community".¹⁴ In most African societies, it is the kin group that helps to sustain marriage. This is done in the areas of assistance in farming periods. Chinua Achebe recorded in his work "Things Fall Apart" that Okonkwo visited Nwakaibie to solicit for yam seedlings to plant. Nwakaibie obliged and Okonkwo was assisted to start his own farm.¹⁵ This assistance Okonkwo received from his kinsman enabled him to start his private business in farming to sustain his family.

Among the Igbo, for instance, it is very rare for a wife or husband to decide unilaterally to terminate the marital union. Before the case goes out of hand, kinsmen on both sides intervene to sustain the union. This is also predominant among the Zulus of South Africa.

Conclusion

In Africa, kinship is a major social institution for interaction among the people. The differences inherent in the application of kinship in different areas in Africa do not deny the fact that the African man knows that the family and marriage are crucial to the practice of kinship.

The degree of kinship influence is, to a large extent, determined by the industrialized nature of the society. If the society is highly industrialized, other agencies emerge to perform the role of kinship in the society. In less industrialized societies, the influence of kinship increases both as a means of identity and social participation. Plato's organicist theory encapsulates the importance of the institution of kinship to the individual.

Kinship can be beneficial in modern period as a measure of control in this period of social, moral and political corruption. The African kinship institution, if not for anything, has contributed immensely towards minimizing divorce in Africa. It has also helped the African man to survive adverse economic problems. In the kin group, utilitarianism, as conceived by Jeremy Bentham, which preaches happiness for all persons, is actualized. Though there are instances in which inter-kinship struggle has led to devastating consequences, like in Burundi, kinship for a long time to come will remain a veritable social institution for Africans.

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