

THE FAMILY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE COLLAPSE OF THE FAMILY ETHOS IN RIVERS STATE

NWANYUOBU, ANTHONY CHUKWULADI
Ministry Of Commerce and Industry
Rivers State

ABSTRACT

This article takes a look at the interrelationship between the family and social change in Rivers State. The family institution has undergone far-reaching changes in its structure, roles, socialization functions, sizes, compositions, and power dynamics. Structural functionalism theory was chosen as a framework for this paper. Relying on secondary textual sources, the paper established that these changes are the attendant effect of social changes pervading the society at large. The spate of cultism, violent crimes and delinquent behaviours were traced to the collapse of traditional family ethos in River State. The re-orientation and re-awakening of age-long family values is recommended as a measure to strengthen the family institution.

INTRODUCTION

In all human societies - traditional or modern, the family is a common and universal phenomenon. As the fundamental unit of social life, everybody starts life in the family and all other known human institutions grew out of the family. Essentially, the family serves as the most important primary group for individuals from where they have their first taste of education, religious training, recreation and the provision of necessities of life (Lauer & Lauer, 2008). The family is crucial for the physical, psychological and social development of the individual as it forms the bedrock for the forming of personalities and the acquisition of emotional traits such as love, empathy, humane feelings, gratitude, patience, perseverance, altruism, etc.

Change is the most commonly assured thing in life and changes are constantly being brought to bear on all the structures that make up the society. The family institution, in Nigeria and particularly in River State, has undergone tremendous transformation in all ramifications; more so with modernisation, increasing industrialisation, rapid urbanisation and globalisation.

The family institution is embedded in cultural beliefs about marriage and family. Some of the accepted normative beliefs are that: adults should be married, marriage is a lifelong commitment; sexual intercourse should be limited to one's marital partner, married couples should bear children, parents are responsible for their children, children are to be obedient to their parents, a wife's place is in the home, the husband is the breadwinner of the family, there is a sharp division of labour between men and women inside and outside the home, the husband/father is the ultimate decision maker, etc (Eitzen, 1983).

However, social realities have shown that these cultural ideals have long been affected by changes in the social structure which is threatening the sanctity of the family and the stability of the society at large. The form of these changes and how they affect the family structure in Rivers State is the focus of this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structural functionalism is chosen as the theoretical pivot for this study. Structural functionalism is a system theory which sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. In this wise, societal function involves duties, roles, obligations and social exchanges which serve to ensure the survival of the whole society and its units (Otite & Ogonwo, 2003).

This theory views human society as a giant living organism composed of many structures which performs different integrated functions for the benefit of the entire organism. Herbert Spencer compared the society to a human body, in the same way in which each part of the body works in harmony with each other. For example, as human beings, we have hands, legs, eyes, lungs, kidneys and other organs. The different parts of the body perform different functions that are inter-related so that the body can survive and function effectively (Ifenacho, 2012).

In viewing society as an organism, Sociologists argue that the family, education, economy, politics, religion and other institutions constitute different parts of the society which perform different functions that are however integrated for the benefit of the society as a whole (Ifenacho, 2012).

Using this approach, this study considers the family as a functional entity within the society because it creates the fundamental bases for socialization, social cohesion and integration by reaffirming the bonds that people have with each other.

The concurrent workings of the family with other social institutions contribute immensely to the growth and development of the society. But where the family fails to create social cohesion and bonds between individuals in the society, it creates a problem which then affects the social structure as a whole.

Therefore, since society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole, the family (as a socializing institution) is indispensable in the continuous propagation of the human social structure.

CONCEPTUALISATION

The Family

The family is an important institution in the society because it is considered as having the traditional role of socializing its young ones for lifelong attainments (Igwe, 2008). Family life and processes, according to Otite & Ogonwo (2003), create conditions for mutual affection amongst its members as well as for the satisfaction and control of individual and collective needs as it provides a socially approved context for child bearing, child upbringing, child care and for the education of its younger children.

The family institution is a basic unit in the society, and the multifaceted functions performed by it make it a much-needed institution in a society. In its most basic form, the family is a group of individuals who share a legal or genetic bond. Lauer & Lauer (2008) further described the family as a group united by marriage, blood, and/or adoption in order to satisfy intimacy needs and/or to bear and socialise children.

A broader and encompassing definition of the family is given by Murdock (1949) as cited in Haralambos, Holborn and Heald (2008)

The family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted of the sexually cohabiting adults.

From the above definition, we can surmise that a family lives together (common residence), shares resources (economic cooperation) and produces offspring (reproduction). The adults are required to maintain an approved sexual relationship (usually through marriage) as sanctioned by the social norms of their communities. Marriage, (especially in traditional societies) thus, becomes an essential step towards family formation as it lays the legal foundation for its establishment.

Family types are varied and different from society to society, depending on the structure of such society. The nuclear or elementary family, commonly found in Euro-American as well as other societies, consist of the husband, his wife and children. The extended family, on the other hand, is a family grouping broader than the nuclear one which consists of two or more nuclear families and related by descent, marriage or adoption. Families can also be described as either monogamous or polygamous which reflects the kind of marriage contracted and could lead to a nuclear family (monogamous) or many nuclear families (polygamous) (Igbanibo, 2005; Otite & Ogionwo, 2003).

Irrespective of the size of family, the institution of family can again be seen in two mutually exclusive categories, namely the family of orientation and the family of procreation. The family into which a person is born can be referred to as the family of orientation and the family of procreation is constructed by the adult individual who creates a family as he or she becomes an adult. Family systems are also categorized by residence of the couple who formulate the family unit. For example, if a married couple moves to live with the parents of the bride or of her house with close proximity to her kin, such family is recognized as a matrilocal family, while the inverse of this model is identified as the patrilocal family (Giddens, 1993).

The family function as the primary agent of education, religious training, recreation and means of providing the necessities of life. Lauer & Lauer (2008) argued that most of these functions have been largely assumed by other social institutions. They however maintained that the family “continues to be an important factor in regulating sexual behaviour, reproduction, and rearing of children.” The family also function as a primary group; consisting of people

sharing intimate face-to-face interaction on a recurring basis such as parents, spouse, children and close relatives (Lauer & Lauer, 2008).

Social Change

Social change is any significant alteration in the basic structures or the institutions of the society which cuts across the family, religion, education, politics, economy and legal. It basically entails changes in social structure within the framework of its institutions, values and attitudes as well as personnel (Otite & Ogionwo, 2003).

According to Jaja (2015), social change can be said to refer to the changing equilibrium of existing social relationships. It is the change that takes place in society and affects certain activities, behaviour and institutions that already exist and are in practice.

Otite & Ogionwo (2003) identified two causes of social change to include endogenous - those inherent within the social structure and exogenous - changes influenced by factors outside the social system. They however, noted that these causes are not mutually exclusive of one another as there is a noticeably interplay of how each of these categories affect the social structure at any given time. For instance, changes in value system can be caused by growth and expansion of a particular community and the same time be influenced by influx of foreign ideas and cultures.

Social Change and the Family

Structural changes in the family institution have far-reaching impacts on the society beyond just the disruption of the home setting. Lauer & Lauer (2008) posited that the ideal family should be structurally complete; having both a father and a mother in the home. It must also be a supportive group, providing emotional support for each member. Therefore, where the family suffers structural changes, the most important primary group is disrupted and family members experience stress which diminishes the quality of life. This ultimately affects the society, as family members can no longer function optimally in the social structure.

New patterns of marriages have since emerged; superseding arranged marriages. A tendency on the part of younger generations, to overlook the consent of the “procreated” family for conduct of sexual behaviour as led many young people to marry from outside their immediate tribal group. Education and ease of communication has brought people of diverse background into contact and close proximity so much that young couples can now choose to marry based on their feelings (love) than any consideration for cultural background. It is now common place to find marriages contracted between couples from different socio-cultural backgrounds and from distant lands. Otite & Ogionwo (2003) noted that choice of mate is now increasingly controlled through socialization since opportunities for meeting and mating are more and more assertive.

In addition, the change occasioned by societal transformation poses a strong potential to change the attitudes, particularly of the younger generation, who experience and experiment with the changes, causing a pattern of delayed marriage. Male and especially females, now marry in their late 20s, 30s and even in their 40s using education as a delay mechanism. According to Otite & Ogionwo (2003), the society no longer frowns at a girl working while waiting to get married as the working girl is no longer associated with promiscuity. This is contrasted against the hitherto tradition of settling down once a boy or girl reaches young adulthood. A resultant outcome is the decline in birth rate as young people now marry late and when they eventually do, have less number of children than their parents.

Another grave effect of social change on the family structure is the increasing cases of children born out of wedlock. This has become a common phenomenon in urban cities and semi-urban settlements and to some extent in rural communities where social control has broken down. In fact, it is now an occurrence that is gradually losing whatever stigma associated with it. Singleparent (especially single mother) families are no more seen as an aberration that is worthy of social sanctions.

Cohabitation of unmarried couples has also become popular among the young generations who now live together without seeking the hitherto respected societal approval given through marriage. In every nook and cranny of the cities and suburbs, you can find a boy and girl living together without normative approval of such sexual relations by the society.

For the married couples, social changes together with reorientation of social values and increased participation of women in production of economic goods and services have promoted and engineered functional and structural changes in the institution of the family. Married women now work to earn money and thus spend a greater part of their day outside the home, thus depending more on hired domestic helps to work in their kitchens and for the care and upbringing of their children (Otite & Ogionwo, 2003).

Cases of divorce are also on the increase as economic empowerment of women through employment tended to loosen their bonds to the patriarchal family and gave them the taste of economic independence. The image of the woman is no longer simply one of a wife and mother and her sacred duty to serve the man (Otite & Ogionwo, 2003). Women now experience greater confidence to discontinue a bad relationship with a married partner. Increase in divorce rates imply that the number of single parent families also increases.

Of course, it is not all a gloomy tale as social change has brought some positive dividends. Foremost is the increase in access and trajectory of women education which has impacted positively on family earnings and socioeconomic mobility. In the same vein, over the decades, there has been steady improvement in quality of living, improved life expectancy, increased child spacing practices, reduction in population explosion, reduction and outright eradication of some communicable diseases, improved sanitation, expansion of political space amongst others (Jaja, 2015; Johnson, 2013; Igwe, 2008).

Social Change and the Collapse of Family Ethos in Rivers State

According to Ezekiel-Hart & Adiele (2010), the family is the first place of reception for the child and helps in preparing the child with enduring learning experiences and personality identification which helps the child to fit into the larger society later. This is made possible because the family, as the nucleus of any society, is a typical example of a social group where members have common interests and goals (Orisa, 2010). Therefore, if and when the family fails to provide the child with this all-important personality identification, the child grows to become a misfit for the society.

In Rivers State, escalating social vices and communal strife are clear manifestations of the failures of the social control function of the different social institutions including the family. Of course, changes in the environment often require changes in the family structure and functions. Breakdown in the family structure is evident in the social malaise bedeviling various communities in Rivers State.

Orisa (2013) opined that the family remains the hub of the socialization process, which begins from birth and continues till death so if the family (home) is stable by all standard, invariably the society will be stable or close to that. A stable family will, to a large extent, produce peaceful and discipline society. A peaceful and discipline society will be a safe haven for business, economic, political and educational development among others. But the reverse is the case in Rivers State as escalating violence is reported daily in almost all the communities of the state; implying that the home stead itself is unstable.

Jaja (2015) argued that in the context of industrialization and rapid social change, the old bonds of family and tribe are weakening as old customs are replaced by new norms. Hence where you have a child of single mother (born out of wedlock) or where the father is away in search of economic leverage

(absentee father), the child loses the primary guidance that would help mould him/her into a composite well-adjusted human. Same applies where the mother spends the greater part of the day working outside the home.

The social dislocation caused by disruption in family structure is manifested in children and young adults seeking convivial acceptance among their peers who eventually distort their perception of the cohesive nature of the social system to now bring them in conflict with the social system as delinquents and deviants. The reduction of emotional and physical support by the family directly affects the personality development of children and their health. The rising spate of proliferation of cult gangs and their violent nature is a manifestation of the breakdown of family ethos in Rivers State.

Declining values, failed expectations and dashed hopes have become potent reasons for malcontent and disadvantage youths to band together to attempt to impose their own values (however so unrealistic and inordinate) on the larger society. Johnson (2013) noted that the failure of sound family values leads to conflicts and deter the society's development and peaceful coexistence.

Nmom (2013), on his part, observed that the family institution which ought to provide guidance and protection through effective parenting for the youths has suffered a terrible breakdown resulting in the increasing the menace of illegal oil bunkering, kidnapping, street violence and cultism in schools and communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that there is an urgent need to salvage the family institution from decay and destruction in the face of modernisation and globalisation.

Foremost, our traditional institutions must make concerted effort to restore the basis of the family structure through the resurgence of various traditional transition mechanisms (such as age-grade groups) which guide community members from childhood to adulthood. This will go a long way in bringing back discipline and reawakening of our cherished cultural heritage.

Value re-orientation and behavioural/attitudinal modification should be instituted by other agents of socialisation such as religious bodies, schools, the media, governmental and non-governmental agencies, social clubs, etc. This is aimed at correcting the ills associated with undesirable influence of foreign cultures.

Government should put in place and enforce stringent legislation against child abandonment and endangerment, refusal to provide for necessity, failure to provide support by fathers (in the event of divorce or separation), spousal abuse, child abuse and the likes. It is believed that such severe punishment will deter people from treating the family with levity and make them own up to their responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

The family as the basic social institution have suffered changes and distortions which have affected its status and stability in contemporary. These social changes have combined to alter the foundation, structure and functions of family in Rivers State. It is the position of this

paper that the destruction of traditional values and norms as related to the family institution has contributed to the insecurity challenges bedeviling the many communities in Rivers State. Unstable families raise maladjusted and malcontent children who in turn grow to become a menace to the larger society.

If we must reverse this dangerous trend, we must rebuild the family institutions and strengthen it the more to deliver on its avowed function of nurturing the future generation as the primary instrument of socialization.

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