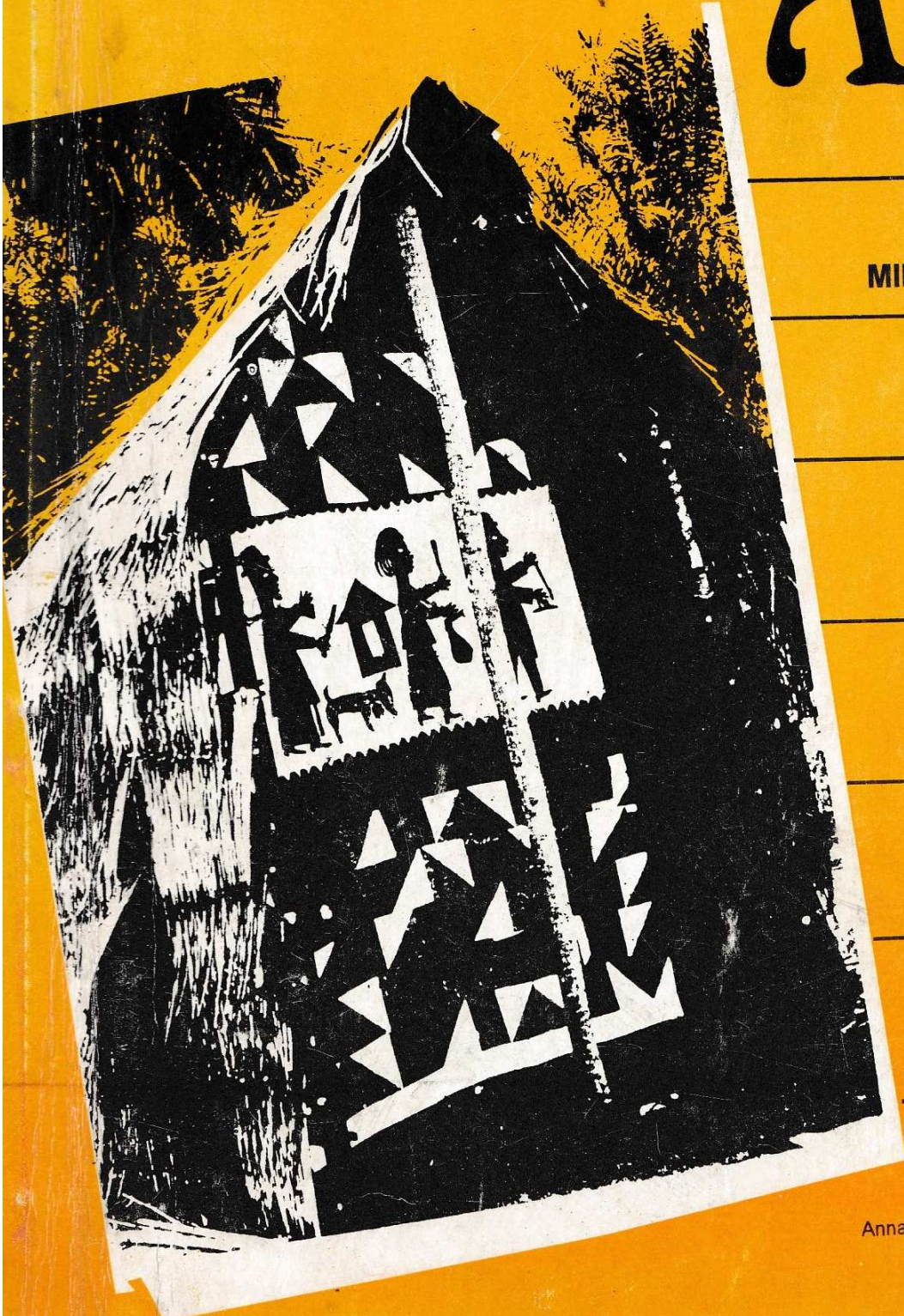


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THE NIGERIA FAMILY IN CRISIS:
 THE WAY OUT

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a picture of the family as the most elementary social institution of irreplaceable importance because of its role in the primary socialization process. The family shown to have both biological (family of orientation) and social (family of procreation) origins is portrayed as capable of existing in any one of the following several forms- monogamous, polygamous polyandrous, and group forms.

The crucial role of the family in society in respect to the moral formation of the young is explained with reference to the Nigeria family. This role expectation today falls greatly short of expectation. The crisis that faces the Nigerian family today vis-a-vis the expected role is traced to have both immediate and remote causes, prominent among which are the Industrial Revolution, the State, Urbanization and, even, Religion.

In order to overcome the crisis the minimization of the forces of modernization such as are engraved in the Western style of education is advocated. Consequently, it is imperative to return to the traditional concept of "Nigerian Family Education" with its

emphasis on the moral aspect of an integral goal.

INTRODUCTION:

The family is considered the oldest and the most elementary social institution. It is also considered the most important human institution because of its irreplaceable role in the socialisation process. Furthermore the unique importance accorded the family throughout human history derives from the fact that the well-being of the individual person and of the entire human society is positively related to the healthy state of family life. Needless saying that an unhealthy society is a mirror reflection of the individual families that comprise the larger whole (the entire society).

Although in modern society many other institutions are seen to usurp the role played by the family in the past or even competing with the family in the performance of these functions/roles - the school, the church, peer group, primary and secondary associations, the neighbourhood; etc., their roles are, in the main, subordinate to that of the family. Whether conceived of as nuclear or extended, especially in the latter sense, the place of the family in the society is uniquely paramount.

THE FAMILY DEFINED:

In the context of the social system, the family may be defined as a group of related kins, linked by blood and marriage, who occupy a common household and are usually characterised by economic cooperation and solidarity. The above definition is quite consistent with the sociological understanding of family as "the most elementary social institution where one or more men live with one or more women in a socially approved and, more or less, enduring sex relationship, with socially recognised rights and obligations, together with their offspring(s)" (Pratt, 1968). Whether understood biologically as is the case by Bredemeier and Stephens or socially as is the case by Pratt, the functional aspect of the family is a crucial one. The members are tied together by the existential need for cooperation and solidarity and mutual rights and obligation (pratt). Uniting the two definitions, complementary as they are, the family can be conceived of as a social phenomenon within the framework of blood ties and mutual cooperation.

Furthermore, the family as a basic social institution can exist in one of the following forms:-

(1) The Monogamous form: a General type of relationship involving one man and one woman to the exclusion, in principle, of any plurality of spouses;

(ii) The polygamous form: a type of relationship involving specifically one man with a plurality of wives;

(iii) The polyandrous form: a type of relationship involving specifically one woman with a plurality of husbands; and

(iv) The group form: The family that generates from the institution of group marriage where any woman is a wife to any man .

There are yet other ambiguities surrounding the concept of family which this analysis will not bother to go into. Such are related concepts like the extended family, the nuclear family, the family of orientation, the family of procreation the paternal or patriarchal family, the maternal or matrilineal family. Sufficient for our present purpose is the common denomination between these various forms, i.e., that the family is that institution in the human society where the male and the female live together with their offspring(s). It is important though, to note that every individual belongs to two kinds of families: the one to which an individual belongs biologically - the family of orientation - and the one to which an individual belongs socially - the family of procreation.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1960) sees the family as having three essential characteristics:

1. It finds its origin in marriage;
2. It consists of husband, wife and their children though it is conceivable that other relatives may find their place close to that nuclear group;
3. The family members are united by:-
 - a) Legal bonds;
 - b) economic, religious and other kinds of rights and obligations; and
 - c) a precise network of sexual rights and prohibitions and a varying and diversified amount of feelings such as love, affection, respect, awe, etc.

The above conception confirms the universality of the family as the nucleus of society which is based strictly on marriage and consanguinity. In the Nigerian context as in most parts of Africa, the family includes the parents, brothers and sisters, the couple and the children of their brothers and sisters, the concept of the family endlessly embracing a whole lineage.

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN SOCIETY

As a basic social institution the family enjoys a prominent position in all human society. It is looked upon as the first school that prepares the future adult for the assumption of adult roles and positions of responsibility in the society. In early times, the major role of the family - understood in the extended context - was to offer protection to its members. Generally speaking, today the family exists to bring up children to perpetuate the species, protect them during their early years of growth and development, educate and provide means of livelihood for its members. This does not by any means imply that families the world over follow the same pattern of socialisation and education. In fact, there are variations owing to cultural differences, time and place.

Mention has already been made that the family system intersects the sex role system at two critical points: the family of orientation and the family of procreation. The two systems are not to be considered as independent. The socialisation one receives in one's family of orientation is normally largely preparatory towards participation in one's family of procreation. The family of orientation then remains the prepotent site for early role socialization as well as one's moral formation and gives the child the closest and most prolonged contact with actors of adult roles, thus providing a picture of adult life that is to be a life-long influence on the child. Levi-Strauss sees the family of procreation as the basic unit of the social structure.

The above points simply give credence to an earlier observation that the well-being of the individual person and the entire human society is closely tied to the healthy state of family life. Those who today esteem family life highly are over-joyed to witness the various ways in which progress is being made in

fostering those partnerships of love and in encouraging reverence for human life. In the same vein, there is sorrow, anguish, and an imminent danger across the society when the family degenerates into total collapse and laxity in the area of morality.

In the light of the above and in justification of the theme under consideration, one would need to address some very pertinent and crucial questions: To what extent is the Nigerian family fulfilling its role in line with the expectations outlined above? What are modern day obstacles to meeting these expectations? What are the sources of the identified obstacles? How can such obstacles be eliminated or at best reduced? The pages that follow are an attempt to address the above questions, as they apply to the Nigerian family.

THE TRADITIONAL NIGERIAN FAMILY:

Life in the traditional Nigerian family of some fifty years ago was lived in a simple, obedient, respectful, considerate and mutual atmosphere. Everyone knew and respected his role in the family set-up; and the family was understood in an extended sense whereby the lineage was stretched as far as possible. Some groups of Africans, generally, exposed at both the social and cultural levels to western influence, are moving away from the traditional large families to small families and from emphasis on the extended family system to the nuclear family units. Many marriages break up today because of the over-democratization of individual families by which the spouses are often left to themselves and their own resources often ill-suited and ill-prepared for marital commitment. In Africa, there is community interest in marriage. Parents on their part, knew that they had the most sacred and God-given duty to do all in their power to see to the physical, social, cultural, moral and religious development of their children.

When two people marry, they start a family. With their new status as husband and

wife, they assume the obligation of properly raising any children that may be born of the union. They cannot abdicate this responsibility. Their example of unselfish love in itself teaches the children the meaning of charity and philanthropism. Moral instruction based on the do's and don'ts of the community will prepare the children for the acceptable standards of social life in their future dealings. While other persons or agencies - school, church, state, etc - may assist the parents in providing this instruction, the primary obligation rests on the immediate family and may, on no account be transferred to others. It is not only the duty but also the right of family and may not be forfeited except for grave reasons when parents are considered incapable of fulfilling these duties to the extent that the good of the children is seriously threatened.

Thus, parental protection through good moral upbringing already prepares the child for full assumption and fulfilment of societal expectation and also introduces him to his duties as he starts life later in his family of procreation. In the traditional Nigerian family, along with providing educational and physiological needs, the following were seen as areas of great emphasis: teaching the children to pray, observing the duties and responsibilities of marriage, correcting their faults early in life with reasonable constancy, teaching them the virtues of honesty, obedience to elders, truthfulness and purity, teaching them to have respect for the rights and property of others, and respect for constituted authority. This duty of moral formation of children was to attract the co-sponsorship of father and mother and the strength for its accomplishment derives from the institution of marriage itself. The idea of the so-called one-parent family is a Western concept highly repudiated in the Nigerian set-up.

THE CRISIS/TRANSITION

The fruit of a morally stable Nigerian family is reaped not only by the child nor the family alone but by the society at large. But alas! the general observation today is a partial or total laxity and neglect of the above sacred and natural obligation. Examples abound where in the attempt to come to terms with the demands of this responsibility, parents are faced with real obstacles within the family itself as signs are never lacking of a disturbing degradation of some fundamental values; A mistaken theoretical and practical concept of the independence of the spouses in relation to each other; serious misconceptions regarding the relationship of authority between parents and children; the concrete difficulty that the parents, mothers in particular, experience in the transmission of moral values, as some may be considered ancient and old-fashioned; the concern with burgeoning divorce rates; the increasing incidence of marital infidelity; the scourge of abortion; the even more frequent recourse to sterilization; and the appearance of a truly contraceptive mentality. These secularizing trends, powerful as they are, are so prevalent and capable of adulterating young minds in their efforts to come to grips with the world of reality. These are some of the major causes of the crisis that has plagued the Nigerian family today. They are the negative social forces that confront the Nigerian family.

ORIGIN OF THE CRISES

The causes of these crises can be seen to be both immediate and remote. Among the immediate causes, the following can be identified:

- i. Marital love which is expected to serve as a foundation stone to the family in any age in history is too often dishonoured by the temptation towards selfishness, hedonism, and unlawful contraceptive practices and abortion;

- ii. The economic, social, psychological and civil climate of today has a severely damaging effect on family life; and
- iii. There are also the serious and alarming problems arising in many parts of the world as a result of population expansion, making possible cultural contact and the transmission of foreign mentality to the entire African scene.

In terms of the Remote causes, the changing structure of the Nigerian family today due to uncontrolled and at times uncontrollable social forces have contributed in no small measure to the crisis in the family. Four of such forces immediately come to mind: the Industrial Revolution, the state, urbanization, and, even, Religion.

1. The Industrial Revolution

The decay of the family in quite recent times is due, in the main, to the Industrial revolution, though it had already begun even before that event, inspired by individualistic theory. With the industrial revolution came young peoples' assertion of their right to marry according to their own wishes, not according to the commands of their parents. The habit of married sons living in their father's house also died out. So long as young people could work in factories, it became customary for sons to leave home and earn their living. The effect of all this was the assumption of independence by children who saw themselves as no longer subject to the control and authority of their parents. This peculiarly Western phenomenon made its impact felt on the Nigerian scene through the forces of migration and culture contact.

2. The State

The portion of the family in terms of authority and control has also been weakened by the State. In those days the family consisted of an elderly patriarch, a large number of grown-up sons, their wives and their children -

perhaps their children's children - all living together in one house, all co-operating as one economic unit, all combined against the outside world as strictly as the citizens of a militaristic modern nation. Nowadays, the family is reduced to the father and mother and their younger children who, by modern state decree, spend most of their time in school and learn there what the state thinks good for them, not what their parents desire. Unlike the ancient father who had power of life and death over his children, the modern father is likely to be prosecuted for cruelty if he treats his child as most fathers a hundred years ago would have thought essential for a moral upbringing. The functions of the father in this direction are reduced to a minimum, since most of them have been taken over by the State. Even the father's responsibility of protecting the young, so essential in the Nigerian society, has been taken over by the State.

3. Modern Life/Urbanization

In the modern world, the great majority of parents (especially fathers) are too hardworked to see much of their children. In the morning they are too busy getting off to work to have time for conversation; in the evening, when they get home, the children are or (or ought to be) in bed. One hears stories of children who only know of their father as "that man who comes for the weekend." The result is that fathers seldom participate in the serious business of caring for the child. In fact, in most cases, this duty is shared, between mother and education authorities. The situation is even worse with professional and upper-class families where the custom is to leave the children to nurses while they are young and send them to boarding schools when they are grown-up because both parents are working class. This, too, is a very unhealthy development as the family cannot afford the time for the moral up-bringing of their children. The effect of this on the society of the future is too obvious.

4. Religion:

Religion has both good and bad sides in the moral formation of the young. The leaven of individualism has worked slowly, but has tended gradually to weaken all social relations, especially among those who take their religion seriously. This effect is less seen in Catholicism than in Protestantism because in Protestantism the principle that we ought to obey God rather than man has come to the fore. But to obey God means, in practice, to obey one's conscience, and men's consciences may differ. In early civilization, the father was God; in Christianity, God is the Father, with the result that the authority of the merely human parent is weakened. This leaves the children freer to parental control than in earlier times.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

That the Nigerian family is in a crisis not a disaster stage is at least consoling. Every society has its age-related problems. If the problems are not quickly tacked, they result in a crisis, which if not managed properly, leads to commotion, which if ignored results in a disaster and finally to disintegration. The Nigerian family can still be saved before it reaches the stage of complete disintegration.

In tracing the life cycle of Western families in the history of Western Civilization, Zimmerman (1947) observes a regular pattern of movement. There is a movement from the TRUSTEE FAMILY in which the family control is weakened. The Domestic Family finally degenerates into the ATOMISTIC FAMILY which breeds individualism. Zimmerman's conclusion that the atomistic concept of the family is the cause of the decay of social life may not be unrelated to the problem at hand. This paper therefore proposes that in order to save the Nigerian family from total collapse, we must primarily de-emphasize the concept of Western education. One way to do this is to go back to the Nigerian traditional idea of Family Education.

In the traditional Nigerian Society, education was informal and directed at preparing the individual for life in his immediate environment and society. It prepared the young adult for meaningful adult roles later. Traditional (informal) Nigerian education occupied itself with the following areas of emphasis:

1. The economic aspect that equipped the individual to provide for his material needs and those of his dependants;
2. The social aspect which enabled the individual to live functionally with other members of the clan;
3. The religious aspect that catered for the moral and emotional needs of the individual in relation to his attitude to life and the world in general; and
4. The artistic aspect which prepared the individual for creative undertakings in the use of language, music and dexterity in dancing and ceremony.

The main methods used for the achievement of the above goals were different from the Western methods. It was an informal method based on imitation, observation, participation, custom and tradition. An analysis of the above Nigerian traditional family education shows that character moulding and inculcation of moral qualities are the primary objectives. The emphasis on morality was further strengthened by religion. That way, every sphere of activity was considered sacred as religious sentiments provided taboos which supported the moral code. In sum, family education in traditional Nigerian family equipped people to live well-adjusted lives in their communities and nation unlike modern education which tells a different story because of its strong affinity to the standards of modern western ethics. It is obvious that the ample provision for meeting the material needs of the child without a corresponding provision for character and

personality training (evident in the Western style) is of no advantage to the Nigerian, bearing in mind that a great deal of the crimes in Africa today are committed by those Africans educated according to Western tradition. We might be the wiser for it to stop the so-called modernization half-way in order to reap the full benefits of our reach Nigerian cultural heritage. The place to begin is in the Nigerian FAMILY.

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