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What is family?

The family is also the fundamental unit in the socialization of the child and continues to serve as a socializing agency for the child. For example, if we want to explain juvenile delinquency, crime etc we always investigate the kind of family which the individual was reared.

FUNCTIONS OF FAMILY

- ◆ It serves as an agent of societal maintenance. The family is inevitably concerned with every aspect of society's operation. For example, the family is always in some ways a unit through which the economic systems, political systems and religious systems operate
- ◆ The family is aimed at keeping society's members in 'working conditions'. The family is a small unit to achieve an effective mutual responsibility for each individual physical and mental welfare.
- ◆ Family is the most important primary group in society. It is an outstanding primary group, because the child develops its basic attitudes in the family. Family, as a social institution performs several functions.
- ◆
- ◆ MacIver classifies its functions into two types: (1) Essential or primary and (2) non-essential or secondary.
- ◆ Essential / Primary Functions
- ◆ The essential functions of family are:
- ◆ (1) Stable Satisfaction of Sex need:
- ◆ This is the Primary and essential function of family. Sex instinct is the natural urge of human being. The satisfaction of this need requires that both male and female should live together as life partners. It is the family where the husband and wife can satisfy their sex instincts easily and comfortably. Without family the satisfaction of sex need is almost socially quite impossible. A family not only satisfies but also provides the appropriate mechanism through marriage to regulate sexual behavior of husband and wife.
- ◆ (2) Reproduction or procreation:
- ◆ Reproduction or procreation is another essential function of family. The family along with regulating the sexual behavior in relation to the satisfaction of sexual needs secures a legitimate basis for procreation. Since the inception of family, it has been performing this fundamental function. This function of family contributes to the continuity of family and ultimately perpetuates the human race as a whole.
- ◆ (3) Protection and care of the young:
- ◆ Protection and care of the children is another essential function of family. It is regarded as an institution par excellence for the production and rearing of children. It is true that no other institution can take required care of the child like family. The child at birth is complete helpless and cannot survive at all without the help of the family. It is the family which provides care, protection, security (Physical, mental) and fulfills all other needs to make him fit in the society.
- ◆ (4) Socializing Functions:
- ◆ Family is one of the primary agents of socialization. Family members teach the child the

norms, value morals, beliefs and ideals of society. In the family the children first learn what is good and bad, what is right and wrong. They develop specific habits, traits of character, attitudes and values. The senior members of the family pass the family culture to the new generation through socialization process. Thus, family acts as an instrument of culture transmission.

◆ (5) Provision of a home:

◆ Family makes a provision of a home or a common habitation for its members. Here both husband and wife live together for procreation, protection and care of the children. It is a place of multifarious activities. All the members of the family depend on home for comfort, protection and peace. It is that institution which provides the mental or the emotional satisfaction. Members of the family exchange their love, sympathy and affection among themselves.

◆ Non-essential / Secondary Functions

◆ The non-essential functions of family are:

◆ (1) Economic function:

◆ The family fulfils the economic needs of its members. This has been traditional function of family. Family fulfils all the economic needs of its members such as food, clothing, shelter etc. The goods required by its members are produced at home.

◆ (2) Educational function:

◆ Mazzini says, "The first lesson of child is learnt between mother's kiss and father's care". Family is regarded as the first school of children. The family provides the basis for the child's formal learning and gives the child his basic training in the social attitudes and habits.

◆ (3) Religious function:

◆ The family is a centre for the religious training of the children. The family used to teach the children the religious values, moral precepts etc. It is through the family the religious inheritance is passed on to the next generation.

◆ (4) Recreational functions:

◆ Family is the centre of recreation. It serves as a centre of all recreational activities like singing, dancing, playing indoor games etc. The small children are the source of recreation for the elders.

◆ (5) Protective function:

Family always looks after the health of its members both young and old. It takes up the responsibility of its members and maintains sound and good health. Eurocentricity and the Traditional African Family

Patrilineality, matrilineality, and the practice of polygyny are three of the major distinguishing variations of the African traditional extended family. The literature on the subject is truly as vast and reflects traditional patterns that are as diverse as the variations of the physical looks of the people found on the continent. What is significant about the various descriptions of the traditional African family is that they are from back in the period before the 1940s and in case of the Baganda from the late 1800s. Social change in Africa as everywhere else is ubiquitous. Such influences as end of intra and inter-tribal warfare with the coming of European colonialism, the Western money economy, industrialization, migration, and urbanization have certainly transformed the traditional African family from what it was 50 to 100 years ago. By 1935, for example, anthropologists like Mair and Richards and no doubt many others were already noticing change in marriage and family patterns.³⁶

The written descriptions and therefore perceptions of the traditional African family were also a victim of the European colonial cultural bias and Christian values. In a more obvious way, this Eurocentrism³⁶ did not treat polygamy, the African marriages and the extended family and any others of its “eccentricities” (regarded as such because they were different from European customs) as social phenomena that was legitimate and workable in its own African social circumstances and environment. But rather as curiosities that were to succumb to the superior European monogamous marriage values legitimated by Christianity.

Some of the issues that were the products of the Eurocentrically biased judgements include the following two. First, the strengths, durability, and resilience of the African traditional family were never dwelt on explicitly and at length. For example, in the polygynous African family, like among the Baganda, and many others, your father’s wives and brothers were not just mothers and fathers just as mere kinship terms. These carried with them all the heavy social obligations demanded of a mother or father, daughter or son. There was never a distinction between the biological and non-biological kin as far as primary parental obligations were concerned. Other significant strengths are that the traditional African family increased group cohesion in an otherwise harsh physical and social environment.

Second, the continued Eurocentric descriptions and characterization of the African traditional family as some what depraved lead to the use of such terms as bride price, avoidance social taboos, segregated relationships, lack of “love” and “tenderness” in African marriages and families.

The continued, persistent and wide use of the term “bride price” to describe the valuables that were often given to the bride’s parents before marriage was legitimated is one excellent example of evaluating and perceiving a custom from a biased Eurocentric perspective. Indeed, such authors as Chondoka have recently found little accuracy or justification in calling this custom “purchasing” or “buying” of a wife. In fact Chondoka finds the use of the terms “dowry”, “bride price” to refer to particularly traditional Zambian marriages to be serious misnomers introduced by European missionaries and colonialists in Africa. “There is no bride price in our society. Traditionally no parent fixes a price for his daughter (a bride). If he did, it would be like selling her. We do not sell brides in our society. However, as a prospective husband, you are told to pay for the marriage and not the bride. Marriage involves much more than just the bride.”³⁷

This author would further argue that among the African people that are conductors, participants, and are actors in these marriages, the concept “buy”, “purchase” a wife or bride does not exist. For example, among the Tumbuka³⁸ of Eastern Zambia the verb kugula (to buy) is used to refer to purchasing of material objects or commodities and domestic animals. The verb kulobola is very specific meaning the valuables that are given partially or in full to the girl’s people to legitimate or seal the marriage. Lobola is widely used among the Bantu peoples of Central and Southern Africa.³⁹

“Avoidance”, “segregated relationships”, lack of “love” and “tenderness” in traditional African marriages and the family has been a common theme among European scholars. These views were expressed before 1930s and as late as 1960s. LeVine⁴⁰ described some of the customs and patterns that surround interaction in the traditional African family as “institutionalized restrictions”, “segregated patterns”, and “avoidance patterns”. These relationships which are described in this way are rituals of respect between a son-in-law and his mother-in-law, a daughter-in-law and her father-in-law. Similar customs or “rules of restrictions” in interaction apply between many other kin in a traditional African family. These Anglo-Saxon or Eurocentric descriptions do not help in

the fair and accurate perception of the traditional African family. “The descriptions implicitly portray (to the African and Westerner) African relationships as being negative, rigid and miserable. Anything described in these terms must inherently be bad, primitive and, therefore, undesirable.”⁴¹ Typical of this Eurocentric characterization of the traditional African family is often not only the contention that there cannot be genuine love in a polygamous marriages but that even monogamous ones lack “genuine” love. Some have even gone as far as saying that for the African husband nothing else matters so long as he impregnates his wife every few years.⁴² In the study of the Baganda traditional family cited earlier, the author describes how children are raised among the Baganda. The author describes the interaction between the Baganda mother and her baby as unfavorable and lacking any affection or love. “The mother may hug or caress the child and comfort it when hurt or in distress. However, children are never kissed – kissing is not known to the Baganda – and the close intimacy of the mother-child relationship as found in America, for example, is not present. The language of the Baganda carries no word for love or tender affection; the closest is a word that is best translated as “like”.”⁴³

The issue to emphasize, is not so much that there are no weaknesses or shortcomings in the traditional African family, but that the Eurocentric Anglo-Saxon descriptions (that are believed to be objective and describe social phenomena as accurately as possible) eliminate, and over shadow the strengths and positive aspects that might have existed and may still exist in the African traditional family patterns.

The common descriptions of the African traditional family in the literature is Eurocentric and biased. Caution should be applied when sweeping generalizations are made which make the traditional African family is made to appear static, rigid, and lacking in vitality.

Conclusion

The traditional African family is a very broad concept which has challenging variations across the continent. These variations are caused by differences in tribal customs or culture according geography, history, religion, external influence of colonialism, inter migration, political and economic structures and influences. Because of this wide spectrum, it is not possible to explore all aspects of the traditional African family.

This chapter only focussed on the matrilineal and polygynous patrilineal African traditional family patterns because they seem representative of the broad patterns that exists on the continent. It must be emphasized, however, that these were traditional patterns as far back as late 1800s up to as late as 1960s. The dramatic social changes in Africa during the last three decades of political independence from European colonialism have obviously affected the traditional family. Explaining these changes would require a different chapter.

Nuclear family system is a family structure that consists of two parents living with their children, also known as an immediate family. For example, in *The Simpsons*, Homer and Marge are the parents, and they live with their children, Bart, Lisa and Maggie. This system is different from an extended family system, in which the household may include non-immediate family members, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Many believe that a nuclear family is the best arrangement, yielding numerous advantages. However, with any system, there are also disadvantages.

Advantages

There are a number of advantages for having a nuclear family. Let's take a look at a couple of them, now.

In today's traditional nuclear families, it is common to have dual incomes. Both parents work to provide financial stability for the household, creating a larger cash flow to supply the basic family needs of housing, food and healthcare. Financial stability also allows the parents to provide additional extracurricular opportunities for their children, such as music or athletic lessons. These opportunities allow children to flourish socially and develop a higher level of confidence.

A 2-parent household is more likely to have a higher consistency with raising their children

