
OVERVIEW

The behavioral sciences in African context are in a developing stage. This book claims to be the first offering a sociological introduction to the sub-Saharan African family. This book aims to "summarize what is known about African family life in terms of general sociology of the family framework." (p. 1)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN FAMILY

- Importance of the larger kin group (extended family) beyond the nuclear family.
- Dedication of the extended family to the raising and support of children.
- Lack of public display of affection.
- Care and respect for the elderly.
- Marriage as a series of interrelated ceremonies.
- Polygamy as a desired measure of social success or status; male access to younger women and female division of labor.
- Less prominence of romance in courtship and marriage.
- Constrained communication between parents and children.

Some aspects of the traditional family change fairly rapidly in transitional situations. Yet, the importance of the extended family and children, the restrained public display of affection, and care and respect for the elderly are sustained.

CHANGING ASPECTS OF AFRICAN FAMILIES IN TRANSITION

- Changing socialization patterns of nursing children.
- Changing roles of father and children especially in family life.
- The decline of polygamy yet the persistence of polygamous behavior.
- The increase of large single marriage ceremonies—church or civil.
- Greater emphasis on romance and freedom for choosing one’s own mate.
- Increased communication among members of educated families.
AREAS OF TENSION FOR THE TRANSITIONAL AFRICAN FAMILY

"The fact that Africa has been going through many social changes has been documented by many writers...Forms of nuclear family systems can now be found in Africa, especially in urban areas. This problem of change has exposed the African family to varied problems...[with] considerable conflicts of prescribed norms and behavior." (p. 56). The following issues comprise sources of tension within the transitioning African family:

- Mate selection and brideprice.
- Alternatives for families of barren women.
- Lack of privacy for couples forced to live with relatives.
- Lack of support for women with husbands working at a distance.
- Lack of adequate housing in urban areas.
- Extramarital relations—especially on the part of separated spouses.
- The problem of balancing responsibilities between work and family. (e.g., the working mother)
- Continued expectations of extended family for support.
- Confused roles and authority within the family. (e.g., a husband’s irresponsible expenditure of money earned by the wife in farming)

These and other problems arise when norms, expectations, and supports of traditional subsistence society crumble in modern cultures. In traditional society, for example, the father "would expect the children to regard his new wife as a mother and to call her such while their own mother was still alive and lived in the same house." But "to most (modern) urban African children, a person called a ‘mother’ is that one who has given birth to you...All this creates much conflict...in the children and may explain alcohol and drug abuse among the youth in Africa." The negative reaction in children to polygamy is especially acute "when the children are either approaching their teenage years or when they are really teenagers and need their parental support...through the tumults of adolescence." (p. 66)

"Our opinion, is that, in general, the African family represents a synthesis of traditional and Western family forms...The African family is undergoing rapid change that is not fully understandable through either simple descriptions of African family life or through use of theories based solely on
studies of non-African societies. After more detailed studies of issues covered in this textbook, we may then start conceptualizing African variations on a common family form." (p. 109)

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Fundamental to youth work is understanding the family. This introductory text highlights aspects of, and issues facing, the African family today.
- Change prevails in African society and families and evolves as the source of many tensions. Youth leaders need an understanding of the change from the standpoint of the behavioral sciences as well as a theology of change.
- Youth workers should use this book to understand the family context of the youth served and to train young men and women for future family life.

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