

Dr Chroma ASUZU

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Edited by

Prof. Kayode Olanigbo, Prof. B. K. Odeh, Dr. M. A. T. D. O. Aderin

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Topical Issues In Socio-Personal Guidance And Counselling

Cele / Nri / Lagos Road

*In honour of Professor Emmanuel Aderemi Akinade
(FCASSON, MNAE)*

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Tel: 08033370697

E-mail: emanuelalasu@yahoo.com

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CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

PSYCHO-SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS FOR HEALTHY AND SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

Dr Chioma C Asuzu

Abstract.

The human family has been recognized since antiquity as the most primary and fundamental unit of society and the bulwark of health and happiness of the human person. It has been variously referred to as the primary social support unit or system for any human person, the primary unit of socialization and the primary cell of human existence and society. For these reasons, all human cultures and societies had valued it, accorded rights and privileges to it and considered higher levels of society as only subsidiary to it in all of the above-named functions. Family indeed is the centre of our life and productivity.

Therefore, the nature of the human family as our first and best love, our first and best home, our first and best school, our first and best faith community, our first and best bank, our first and best court of justice and equity, and our primary and best unit of socialization are explored in this article. Similarly, the need that such marriages that will produce such families have for the some very essential psycho-social foundations are explored; namely, for them to be permanent/covenantal unions, to be based on common core values of the spouses, to be monogamous as well as extended on both sides of the originating families of the couple.

Introduction

Marriage is a responsible, accountable and trusting relationship or union of heart, mind and body of a man and a woman that is established for one, two or all of companionship, procreation and legitimate/healthy outlet of sexual passion. To achieve all these aims, this relationship should be permanent in order to maintain the mental health of the members of the family. Marriage is culturally, legally and spiritually founded throughout the human race and in all cultures. Westermarck (1921) defined marriage as "a more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of the offspring. Formation of marriage results in establishment of families.

Teaching and learning in education, psychology, sociology and public/community health have all duly recognized that the human family, apart from the person himself, is

the most important physical thing needed in the pursuit of health, welfare and happiness by every human person, at every stage of human development. For this reason, all human societies everywhere had ordinarily accorded men and women greater honour and privileges when they become married people and also live as such. Similarly, many practices which undermine the family life such as divorce and sexual relations outside of a fully enacted marriage are generally prohibited by virtually every human community. In many societies, many taboos and cultural practices were put in place to promote, ascertain and ensure those healthy marriages and family life promoting behaviours.

In recent times, some of the cultural practices that instilled sanity in marriages have been eroded. Some of these are due to rapid urbanisation without appropriate education and knowledge as well as lack of respect for human life. In the light of all these challenges for the humans, it has become very important that the nature and the age-long psycho-social foundations of the human marriages and family life are revisited for everybody's awareness and self-reassessment. These are the very psycho-social foundations and understandings that had made marriages and the family lives the beauties that they were and which prompted society to value them as well as to protect and promote them in the past. Duncan et al (2006) identified in their studies that marriage reduces some addictive behaviours such as binge drinking, drug use and cigarettes smoking behaviours, thereby improving their marital relationship. Marriage and family life improves overall quality of life of couples.

Nature and functions of the human family

Find below some of the items of the very nature of the human family. These are the facts which make them the most vital institution of the human society after such fundamental things as God or the metaphysical of love as the perennial reality of all our human existence and of our own individual self (as a combination of Id, Ego and Super-ego). A family, established and run on the nature and foundations explored here, by the experience of all who have done so, are nothing short of beatitudes, heaven, the rapture or nirvana as described by many a metaphysical explorations and societies of antiquity.

The fundamental nature (and characteristics) of the ideal human family

- a. Our first and best love
- b. Our first and best home
- c. Our first and best school
- d. Our first and best faith community (church, mosque, temple, synagogue, etc)
- e. Our first and best bank
- f. Our first and best court of justice and equity
- g. Our first and best unit of socialization

It is quite easy for individuals to appreciate that we are naturally conceived in our mothers' wombs usually because some sort of "love" attracted our parents to mate, which resulted in our pregnancy. If the love proves false, the natural tendency would be to abort that evidence of the falsehood. But if it was primarily a genuine love, or if being originally false, some higher love may be brought to bear on it, we would not be aborted. That child, still in the womb and yet not physically seen as yet, begins to receive the love and care of the mother. Within normal marriages and families, even the father of that child also begins to love the child, and to love that would-be mother even more, because of that child. It is this love, which the parents begin to give to their ante-natal offspring, is filial love; and if their marriage was also spiritual and covenantal, then *Agape* also. Of the four fundamental human love types as postulated by Aristotle (see Table 2), only these two loves of *Filia* (Greek equivalent, *Storge*) and *Agape*, are covenantal and therefore the best of the loves.

The human family also provides our first and best home – the place where we are best known, understood and receive best compassion which emanates from *Filia* and *Agape* the best. It is the only home that we may return to, even after a heinous transgression, and expect to get our forfeited rights naturally returned and in full, if we again stay long enough for the initial annoyances to cool off most times!

The fundamental human loves in their order of development in man

- a. *Filia* (*Storge*)
- b. *Platony* (*Philia*)
- c. *Agape* (Charity)
- d. *Eros* (Libido, Carnal love)

Two things need to be noted here in regard of the four generic human loves:

1. The loves may be and are usually combinable in different forms, combinations and extents in the natural life, healthily; except for *Eros* and *Filia* which are never healthily combinable.

2. While each of the loves, once emanating and being developed by man, is essentially same in human nature throughout the spectrum, *Eros* first occurs as bodily nutritional and physical comfort-seeking from birth, gets refined and reduced as the other more genuine loves develop; but again, reappears in forceful dimensions as sexual/erotic/flirtatious love in adolescence; except again tamed by *Agape*.

3. Even though *Eros* may be listed as preceding *Filia* in origination, they essentially originate simultaneously, only that carnality is the more easily notable at birth – viz, the rooting reflex, crying for food and comfort, rather than the return/need filial love of the child for its mother as the sole absolutely, instinctively, protectively and sacrificially

loving person of the child's early and delicate life.

The normal human family is our first and best school because it is the place we first begin to learn anything at all. Our parents (especially our mothers) are the first people we believe and trust in their maternal, instinctual and covenantal/filial love for us and so to believe in them as a fundamental requirement to accept to learn from anybody. So, they are our first and best teachers, teaching both out of experience as well as duty of the doubly covenantal *Agapic* and filial loves. It is in the family that we learn all the values that will matter the most in our characters as human persons and in the paths we will thread later in life especially during marriage.

The family is our first and best faith community. It is there that we first learn about God or the metaphysical and of *Agape* or charity, before they take us to any natural external community - with their usually also close faiths or mere cultural values. Because they teach us these things out of the covenantal *Filia* (and perhaps *Agape* also), they are bound to be the best that any society can give to us in terms of any teaching or schooling in human knowledge and values.

The family is our first and best bank because it is there that we first developed any wealths; and there we entrust them as well, as our next of kins. It is only in the family that we may loan a thing and when we return it, it will be with no interests whatsoever or even returned to us as our unwritten inheritance or privilege. Anything loaned from anywhere else is bound to be with interest as well as paid back without delays. The family bank is interest free or, even, a no-repayment one; as no other bank anywhere else can ever be.

The family is the one place that we first start getting arbitrations when we have misunderstandings - with our siblings, etc. When judgements are made on such cases, it is always with full understandings of our differential natural strengths and weaknesses stemming from *Filia* and possibly *Agape* of all concerned. So, they are so full of understanding and compassions for all. So, they are not only just but even more so, with equity combined. Only polygamy destroys this fact of the human family because of the maternal instincts of the different mothers involved and the differential loves of fathers and external others in such polygamous settings.

The family is our first unit of socialization and apart from the family members, the very next group of people or societies that we encounter are those related or associated with our families who are therefore bound to be of the same social values and practices. We will have to wait till adolescence before we may be able to encounter or create such societies different from the ones associated with our families. Families do all these things out of the covenantal *Filia*, and possibly *Agape*, they are bound to be the best for

us at the given time.

The psycho-social foundations of healthy and ideal human marriages

For any family to be all the above “firsts and bests”, it must be properly established. Some basic psycho-social foundations are necessary for such marriages to do so. That is why in every culture until lately, courtship is required by the intending individuals, and even in cases, their families as well, so as to ascertain the possibility of these needs for the family. Table 3 below lists some of these psycho-social requirements for establishing a healthy and ideal human marriage and family life.

The psycho-social foundations for an ideal or would-be successful human marriage

- a. It should be a permanent/covenantal union (not a merely contractual one)
- b. It should be based on common core values of the would be spouses
- c. It should be monogamous
- d. It should have a proper courtship
- e. It should be as extended as possible on both sides of the families of birth/orientation of the intending spouses.

Apart from the above psycho-social foundations, other factors and values that would enhance marriages include the following:

- a. Effective communication between couple
- b. Establishment of the true identity and knowledge of the spouses before the marriage
- c. Mature and genuine spirituality or religion
- d. Right attitude to conflict and conflict resolution skills in marriage
- e. Handling of finance or family resources
- f. Good physical appearance
- g. Good and shared understanding of one's sexuality as well as attitude towards sex.
- h. Reasonable level of fertility
- i. Living together by the couple

If the family that results from a marriage is going to be rich enough as our first and best bank, then it must be a permanent and irrevocable/covenantal union. If it is not so, no reasonable person may invest in it. They will just continue to put their treasures in the only covenantal community that they invariably already have – namely, their family of birth or cultural/value orientation. Thus such a marriage and family may naturally die of starvation.

The marriage and family that grows from it must be established on the basis of common core values of the intending spouses, or even their families. Without it, the basis of easy agreement, unity of purpose, dialogue, and peaceful and growing understanding, will be lacking. They will be unable to bring up and affirm any of their children in any single

value but produce eventually confused people. Nobody should yoke himself in life in any unequal basis; and the yoke of marriage and family life is the heaviest yoke that any human being may be involved with for all his/her life.

Monogamy is the only basis for equal love and non-discrimination between any two people in any human relationships. Thus, whenever polygamy – simultaneous or sequential – occurs in any marriages and family life, such institutions have taken leave of the universal and equal love needed for healthy institutions. This is why all the societies or religions that permit polygamy, do so only reluctantly – usually on the two impossible conditions that the one **MUST** love all the spouses equally. The second condition given for marriages is for the intending spouse consulting and agreeing with all the previous spouses before entering into such extra relationship. Nobody in any polygamous relationship can ever do either or both of those fully well. This is pointer that no reasonable and unchallenged person should ever attempt to do so.

Courtship: Marriages are healthy when they are entered with certain amount of understanding of each other through courtship. This is a period of understanding of each other, families on both sides to a certain extent before enactment of the union. The individual should be mature and maturity in its entire ramification such as physically, emotionally, educationally, socio-economically and spiritually. These variables are the basis for the future healthy relationship. At the level of courtship they learn to communicate and discuss their likes and differences in order to grow in the knowledge of each other. They also learn to quarrel and settle issues. The difference is just the time it takes to settle the quarrel. Issues such as further education after the marriage, finance, in-laws, children and their education, sexual intercourse and friends should be adequately discussed and re-discussed as time pass by. They should also agree on establishing their HIV status. These series of discussions would help them to establish effective communication in marriage.

Effective communication between couples

Communication is vital in the couple's relationship and health. Is the type of communication that leads to desired outcome. It involves the use of certain skills such as active listening, non-verbal communication and giving and receiving compliments from each other. Communication is very vital in marriage as it enables couples to bridge gaps between them, assist in providing appropriate information enables them to make informed decision about their lives thereby resulting in their achieving psychologically wellbeing in marriage. This type of communication should be empathic, non-judgmental, patience, active listening, creating a warm, accepting and conducive atmosphere for discussion. Communication should be properly timed, under a conducive atmosphere, it would produce desired outcome. Couple should communicate intimately and openly not just about work but about themselves, relationship, home and their children for the health of their marriages. They should

express themselves as much as possible as lack of communication often leads to suspicious behaviour. Effective communication results in proper understanding of each other which will eventually lead to peace, progress, good health and productivity. Poor or lack of communication in marriage results to poor understanding of each other, anxiety, depression, negative mental health and lack of progress generally in the marriage.

Establishment of true identity of couples in marriage

Couples are one after the enactment of their marriage. Through their interaction and relationship, their identity will evolve. They need this identity to guide their practice of living in the family. Parents-in-laws and relatives on both sides should allow this identity to evolve for the sanity and health of the married couples. This is evidence as they move to establish their homes, etc. Religious belief and practices of couples should be properly discussed before the enactment of the marriage. This should be properly discussed and implications for it understood before marriage is enacted. Lack of mutual trust and respect on this aspect of our lives had led to a lot of conflicts and unhealthy relationship between couples.

Life is an experience, it is full of trials and difficulties and it shows up in different ways. This is not different in marital relationships. There are some common areas of problems in marriage. These are infertility, impotence, drug and substance abuse in marriage, in-laws and relative's interference, work and work related difficulties such as job location and relocation, handling of finance and physical appearance. Finally, the marriage and family should try to be as healthily extended on both sides of the marrying spouses as possible. This is by far the greatest basis of the rich resources that make the marriage and family, the stupendously rich bank that it ought to be – in terms of love, home, time, faith, culture, education, care, nurture, and even money/bank, etc

Psychosocial foundations versus psycho-social issues affecting marriages and family life

There is difference between psychosocial foundations of marriage and family life and psychosocial factors affecting family life. The psycho-social foundations are those issues in the very formation and living of the family life that may be likened to the genes of a human person. They determine, ab-initio, the likelihood that the marriage and family life will produce the one person from two that marriages signify as well as the first and best in the 6 issues in life as described above of the nature of true marriages and family life. If those genes are dominant, the character of the person owning them are invariable indelibly marked by them. However, if those genes (foundations) are weak or recessive, the environmental issues will help the person to manifest significantly differently from what those genes predict.

Hence, these psycho-social issues influencing marriages and family lives from it (including those genes and foundations) produce the equivalent of the phenotype of

the person. Now, apart from the psycho-social foundations of marriage and family life discussed above, the other (external/environmental) psycho-social issues involving or impacting negatively on marriages and the family life in Nigeria now, are poverty, rapid unregulated rural-urban migration with rapidly growing urban slums, over-crowding and criminality, unemployment; poor rural life, etc. The list of these psycho-social factors is very long indeed and their negative effects on marriage and family are numerous. The focus of this paper is on psychosocial foundation of healthy marriages.

Recommendations

Intending couples should prepare for marriage through participation in pre-marriage counselling programme before actual marriage celebration. Couples should seek the expertise of counselling and clinical psychologists to help them deal with marital adjustment issues. They should avail themselves of yearly marital assessment, through which poor marital adjustment could be identified and managed adequately. They should attend marriage enrichment programmes such as marriage encounter programme. This will enhance their marital relationships, leading to healthy and productive marriages.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to explore the nature and psychosocial foundations for any ideal and would-be successful marriages and family life as seen from all human civilizations until these later days. Furthermore, it identified some factors that would enhance marriage and family life and few recommendations were made for couples to sustain their health and wellbeing in marriage.

We thank the organizers of this tribute book as well as the honouree for the privilege of sharing in the exercise and pray for similar privilege for all involved in the exercise.

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