

An Ethical Reflection on the Tiv and Christian Family Values

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Abstract

At creation, the family was made to be a stable institution which parents and children would live in peace and harmony and fulfil the purpose of God. The changing realities of time and place have greatly affected the family framework all over the world. This 21st century, families are characterised by incessant crises, witnessing gradual disintegration of family norms, values and cohesion. It is against this background that the paper makes an ethical reflection on the Tiv and Christian family values. The study employs analytic and evaluative methods and relied on secondary sources data collection. It was found in the paper that, the Tiv family like the Christian family has basic family values like love, chastity, responsible parenting, faithful unions, discipline, respect for elders and economic corporation among other things. Both cultures frowned at divorce, irresponsible parenting, same sex unions, incest and every vice that is against the development of a healthy family. Based on the findings of the study, therefore recommends among other things that: there is need to strengthen moral education in the society. This must be a shared responsibility of the family, Church and schools. Counseling is necessary in helping families overcome most challenges facing the family today thus, is recommended. And the Church and civil authorities must work towards ensuring stable marriages to ensure and create stable families. This could be done by creating good policies that promote economic sustainability and social welfare.

Introduction

The family is the basic unit in most social organisations. It may vary in form or nature across cultures but it performs basically the same fundamental functions. The institution of marriage which the family is built upon has its origin from God. At creation, the family (union of man and woman) was made to be a stable institution which parents (father and mother) and children would live in peace and harmony and fulfil the purpose and injunctions of God. The changing realities of time and place have greatly affected the family framework all over the world. In the developed countries, most especially in this 21st century, families are characterised by incessant crises, witnessing gradual disintegration of family norms, values and cohesion. The causes can be ascribed to both internal and external factors which have significantly increased over time. Whatever the situation is, it is felt that the family should not degenerate to a level of imminent collapse. It is against this background that the paper makes an ethical reflection on the Tiv and Christian family values.

Marriage and Family

Marriage according to Nelson illustrated Bible Dictionary, is a union of man and a woman as husband and wife, which becomes the foundation for a home and family (803).

Marriage was instituted by God when He declared, “it is not good that man should be alone” I will make him a helper comparable to him” (Gen.2.18). So God fashioned a woman and brought her to man. On seeing the woman, Adam exclaimed “this is now the bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man (Gen.2.23). Different people have different view about marriage. Goodenough sees marriage as:

A transaction and resulting contract in which a person (male or female, corporate or individual, in person or by proxy) establishes a continued claimed to the right of sexual. Access to a woman this rights of sexual access others current have or may subsequently acquired in relation to her (except in a similar transaction) until the contract resulting from the transaction is terminated and in which the woman involved is eligible to bear children.

Looking at this definition, given by Goodenough, it is clear that this marriage defers from the original marriage created by God. Marriage is not supposed to be a contract where it can be terminated as postulated by Goodenough. For Anyibe, marriage is a voluntary union of one man and a woman to the exclusion of all others. This union extended even beyond the life of the man but terminates substantially at the death of the woman or husband. The description of marriage according to Anyibe is in line with the true meaning of marriage as ordained by the creator (7). The Tiv people uphold the marital union and value it as the only union where procreation is allowed.

The Tiv identified with the traditional concept of matrimony as a relationship between husband and wife, contracted most often for the primary purpose of raising offspring. In Tiv society, children are a product of marriage and the main purpose of the union is for continuity in the transmission of life. Tarbo remarks as follows:

The Tiv believe that it is necessary to transmit life from oneself to another person, and are not satisfied with having someone else’s children. To the Tiv, all other devices for having children such as adoptions are considered unnatural. To the Tiv, having children means eternal life. It means to cooperate with God for the continuity of one’s life and the community in general (56).

Marriage in Tiv society is essentially contracted to form a family. The Tiv word for family is *tsombur* (umbilical cord). The umbilical cord is treated with respect because it symbolises the union between mother and child. Before birth, the child is joined to the mother through *tsombur*. What is implied by this metaphor is therefore that family members are joined together in a sort of organic unity and are made up of one common blood. This view by Tarbo brings out the communal nature of Tiv family and shows how a Tiv man values procreation. The idea of family planning and abortion has no place in the Tiv family.

The earliest form of marriage among the Tiv as documented by Tarbo was *yamishe* (exchange marriage). Marriage by exchange was the system by which a Tiv obtained a wife by given his *ingyol* (sister) to the girl’s *tien* (brother) (27). But since marriage is communitarian among the Tiv, exchange system can be more exactly described as the system by which one community exchanged one of their *ingyol* (woman) for a woman of another community.

Tiv people see marriage as a time of proving one’s maturity. In the culture of Tiv people when someone is matured but is not married he/she is still look upon as irresponsible person. Wegh sees marriage in Tiv as:

Marriage for the Tiv is a sign of maturity and responsibility, it is a sign of the fulfillment of the wishes and aspiration of one’s parent, king group and the community at large, marriage gives one the possibility of seeing one’s face, a Tiv

metaphoric reference to children. The Tiv who aims to totally embrace Tiv familial values has one primary ambition: to marry many wives and to have as many children as possible. This is because a large family is believed to bestow prestige (75).

Considering what Wegh has postulated, it is clear that the Tiv people married basically for procreation. This is evident in some marriages that are not blessed with children, most those marriages either ended up in divorced or polygamy with a singular reason of having children. East in *Akiga Story* affirms, that because of the important of children in Tiv marriage, the group is primarily concerned not with the comfort of the individual, but with its own continued existence, and any theory of marriage held by the community must be involved with a view to the children rather than to the wife.

The Tiv Family

The Tiv word for family is *tsombur* (umbilical cord). The umbilical cord is treated with respect because it symbolizes the union between mother and child. Before birth, the child is joined to the mother through *tsombur*. What is implied by this metaphor is therefore that family members are joined together in a sort of organic unity. The family is made up of one common blood.

The family, the smallest genealogical unit may just be a small one, husband and wife, with their children. Or it may be a large family in which one man has several wives with whom he procreates several children. It should be stressed that the fact that a family includes grand-children, both married and unmarried does not mean that it is seen in terms of extension. It is just one big family. This basically is the conception of the family among the Tiv (125).

Children in Tiv Family

Children are generally looked upon as blessing from God to humanity. It is globally agreed that children are heirs of their families. Couple that does not have children most at times feel God has deserted them and there will be no one to inherit their possessions. In the Bible Abraham questioned God over who will inherit his possession when he had attained so many years without a child. He says thus:

“ oh God, what will you give me for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? And Abraham said, you have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir” (Genesis 15. 2-4).

Based on this question it is pertinent to note that, children have occupied a sensitive position in every family. Since there considered heirs and people that will take over after the parent.

In Tiv culture, children occupy a vital position in the family. Tiv people believe that once a man is grown up or becomes matured he is to marry to produce children for their parents to see their faces or grand children before their exits on earth.

Wegh asserts that for a Tiv man “marriage is a possible way of seeing one’s face – a Tiv metaphoric reference to children. The Tiv who aims to totally embrace Tiv familial values has one primary ambition: To marry many wives, and to have as many children as possible” (75). East in *Akiga’s Story* affirms that because of the importance of children in Tiv marriage, the group is primarily concerned not with the comfort of the individual, but with its own continued existence, and any theory of marriage held by the community must be evolved with a view to the children rather than to the wife. So it is clear that Tiv people have the same believe like other languages concerning children which are globally agreed to be inheritance and continuation of the family.

Christian Family

According to Ajiki, the aim of Christian family everywhere is to deepen Christian marriage and family life, to integrate it in a Christian life as a whole so that it produces for Christian family- husband, wife and children-and for the Church, all the spiritual fruit Our Lord intends it to produce (38). This view by Ajiki helps us to appreciate God's plan for marriage and its purpose for humanity. In matrimony and in the family a complex of interpersonal relationships is set up-married life, fatherhood and motherhood, filiation and fraternity-through which each human person is introduced into the "human family" and into the "family of God," which is the Church.

Christian spouses and parents can and should offer their unique and irreplaceable contribution to the elaboration of an authentic evangelical discernment in the various situations and cultures in which men and women live their marriage and their family life. They are qualified for this role by their charism or specific gift, the gift of the sacrament of matrimony (Burke 34).

In the family, which is a community of persons, special attention must be devoted to the children by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity, and a great respect and generous concern for their rights. This is true for every child, but it becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more it is in need of everything, when it is sick, suffering or handicapped.

By fostering and exercising a tender and strong concern for every child that comes into this world, the Church fulfills a fundamental mission: for she is called upon to reveal and put forward anew in history the example and the commandment of Christ the Lord, who placed the child at the heart of the Kingdom of God.

Acceptance, love, esteem, many-sided and united material, emotional, educational and spiritual concern for every child that comes into this world should always constitute a distinctive, essential characteristic of all Christians, in particular of the Christian family: thus children, while they are able to grow "in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man," offer their own precious contribution to building up the family community and even to the sanctification of their parents (Badejo 34).

The Christian family is also called to experience a new and original communion which confirms and perfects natural and human communion. In fact the grace of Jesus Christ, "the first-born among many brethren" is by its nature and interior dynamism "a grace of brotherhood," as Saint Thomas Aquinas calls it (Badejo 45). The Holy Spirit, who is poured forth in the celebration of the sacraments, is the living source and inexhaustible sustenance of the supernatural communion that gathers believers and links them with Christ and with each other in the unity of the Church of God. The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realisation of ecclesial communion, and for this reason too it can and should be called "the domestic Church.

All members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of building, day by day, the communion of persons, making the family school of deeper humanity: this happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows (Olusola 56).

Christian family is the creation of God where a man and a woman with the children as gifts live in a connected interrelationships of younger and elder generations as members. Christian family is an elevation of, and a complement to, the human family. It is also characterised by the God-consciousness of faith, an element of a critical distinction. A Christian family is built on the love of God and a sense of responsibility. It is the love of God creator, who made a man and a woman, to live in an unbreakable bond, union of sacramental

love, that is, Christlike love for the world (Gen.2:18-24; Mt. 1:18-25; 5:27-32; 19:1-9; 28:19; Luke 1:26-38; John 2:1-12). There is the healing power of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies the bond, union of holy matrimony and sustains the life of the Christian family, even such times as ours, of great adverse social changes.

A good Christian family is one which lives up with biblical principles and one in which each member understands and fulfills his or her God-given role. The family is not an institution designed by man. It was created by God, and man has been given the responsibility of stewardship over it. The basic biblical family unit is comprised of one man, his spouse and their offspring or adopted children.

Ephesians provides the guidelines for husband and wives in a good Christian family. The husband is required to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and a wife should respect her husband and willingly submit to his leadership in the family. The husband's leadership role should start with spiritual matters and then flow to instructing and teaching both his wife their offspring scriptural values, leading the family into biblical truth (5:22-26). Of course, the first requirement for the members of a good Christian family is that they all be Christians having a true relationship with Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

Fathers are instructed to bring to up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). A father is also to provide for his family. If he does not, he "denies the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). So a man who makes no effort to provide for his family cannot rightly call himself a Christian. This does not mean that the wife cannot assist in supporting the family. Proverbs demonstrates that a godly wife may surely do so when it says, "An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious Jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wood and flax, and work with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar. She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. She considers a field and buys it with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard" (31:10-16). So it is crystal clear here that, in a Christian family, both husband and wife have important roles to contribute as it is the lord's desire for them.

Woman was given to man for the purpose of being her husband's helper (Gen. 2:18-20) and bear children. Husband and wife are to remain faithful to one another for a life time. This illuminates the cultural view that divorce living together without being married and same sex practice.

In a Christian family, children also have responsibilities to play. To obey their parents and to honour them (Ephesians 6:1-3). Obeying their parents is the duty of children until they reach adult hood, but we are to honour our parents for a life time. God promises His blessing on those who honour their parents (Exd. 20:5). When a husband, wife, and children all fulfill their God appointed roles in the family, when they have all committed their lives to Christ and to his service, then peace and harmony will reign in the home. But if we try to have a good Christian family without Christ as Head or without adhering to the biblical principles the Lord has loving provided for us we will fall.

To John Paul II " the Christian family, is the first community called to announce the Gospel to the human person during growth and to bring him or her, through a progressive education and Catechesis to full human and Christian maturity" (www.vatican.va/holy.father/John Paul).

In a Christian family Christ is the head. Paul encourages Christians in Corinth to be submissive to Christ who is the head of the family (1 Corinth. 11.3), that means Christian families must accept Jesus Christ first in their lives and must adhered to the principles and teachings of Jesus Christ about Christian homes or families.

Marriage as a Bed Rock of a Christian Family

Marriage is the state in which men and women can live together in sexual relationship with the approval of their social group (Nmah.69). To him, marriage is a covenant between man and woman. That is, it is a divine agreement or sacred bond or contract involving a plurality of persons with certain goals. It is a holy institution that involves dowry, which is a part of the norms for marriage. It is a lifelong union quite different from concubinage, which is a temporary union.

Nmah is of the opinion that, for marriage to be marriage, there must be a will or two will meeting together, that is, there is the consent between the man and the woman. This is the matrimonial mutual will.

In a Christian context, what can make marriage a reality are, love, confidence, trust and mutuality among couples. Once marriage is contracted, it cannot be repudiated. It is indissoluble and irreversible. In marriage Spouses are equal partners, equal in right and neither is inferior to the other. Though equal in rights a wife is not equal to her husband in authority, for man is the head of the family (Nmah. 69).

To Joseph Eton, marriage is an everlasting covenant consecrated and sanctified by God (2). To him, practice is not meant to be divorced because it is a covenant man and woman makes publicly between people and God. It is through this covenant between two parties of opposite sex that forms a family.

Tiv and Christian Family Values

Values are ideals in life that mean something to a certain person or group of people. Values shape the way people live their lives, how they interact with others and how they feel about themselves. In the same vein, an individual in Tiv society necessarily live within family. In other words, he or she has an intimate relationship with members of the family. He acquires his identity from the family he owes his existence to other members of the family. He or she therefore becomes conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people (Mbiti 108). The cultural and morals of the family help an individual to grow into a productive and respected member of the community. These norms serve as blueprint. This being the case, every individual strives to do things to protect the family name and not the other way round. The conduct or ethical standard of one person is capable of affecting others positively or negatively. The good deeds of one man within the family equally bound to bring fame to the whole family. Therefore, the behavior of an individual provides a necessarily good atmosphere for the equilibrium of things in nature for the good of the family. Any act otherwise is frowned at.

The family includes all these brought together by consanguine, affinitive, putative or adoptive ties; even through the introduction of Christianity emphasise that the husband and the wife shall both leave their blood relatives and cling unto themselves. This is to explain that the Christian family in Tiv has Christ as the head of the family; other wards Christian virtues as love, honesty, chastity and the sort, are emphasised. These virtues are upheld in the Christian family in Tiv. The father of the family is expected to deliver his responsibilities as the leader, while other members follow the good steps. Duties and responsibilities are performed according to scriptural provisions. The mother also performs her role by encouraging or teaching the children values which go a long way in molding the personality of the family, thereby upholding the good name.

About sexuality, the parents are expected to teach their children sex education, by discouraging nude dresses, and licentious talk. Such vices as adultery, fornication, incest,

indecent dressing are discouraged, not to talk of homosexuality. When Christian virtues are observed, the family is sure to succeed. The following are just some of Tiv and Christian values.

Chastity and Fidelity

Many of the popular views regarding fornication and adultery in Tiv society are based on a poor understanding of the deep rooted values of chastity and fidelity underlining Tiv culture. It is quite clear that chastity is a cherished value here. There were clear incest taboos that set the boundaries within which sexual relationships were allowed or sanctioned.

Details of these boundaries have been clarified by Atuu and it is quite clear that every breach of incest was sanctioned ranging from ritual burning to stigmatisation. Similarly, even where incest boundaries were not of the essence, stiff sanctions existed against rape and fornication (23). Each girl at puberty underwent the “*ikyoor*” (ritual of snail) to forestall rape and ensure chastity. In the event of rape (or fornication) the “aggressor” was required to propitiate the *ikyoor akombo* (ritual of snail) without which he run the risk on the one hand of persistent ill luck while the woman (victim) on the other hand could have problems ranging from irregular menstrual circles to inability to conceive. Because of these sanctions, prior to the actual exchange process, each woman was given the opportunity to confess whether he had been sexually violated so as to set the records straight and get the “culprit” to propitiate the *ikyoor akombo* (ritual of snail) and cleanse the woman before marriage.

The same exemplary level of faithfulness was expected in the woman at marriage. She was expected to abstain from both *ijimba* (loose manners) and *idya* (adultery). There existed stiff sanctions against infidelity and no man could violate the chastity of his neighbour’s wife and still expect the approval of the society since such violation was capable of destroying friendship and undermining filial love. Age grades had strict codes against members caught in compromising situations with the wives of other members. Culprits were heavily fined and stigmatized. As a way of reinforcing sanctions against adultery, it was believed that if an adulterous person was wounded in a hunt or war, his friend (or brother) whose wife he had, had an adulterous relationship with, attempted to help, instead of surviving, he would surely die.

Though, all these were effective deterrents, aggrieved individuals probably not satisfied with these sanctions, still went as far as poisoning or stabbing those going out with their wives. Against this background, Umaru Eri’s ruling of 1987 in the case between Denen Tofi and Ushe Uba to the effect that adultery amongst the Tiv was not an offense known to Nigerian Law can only be understood (Chia 21) as arising from a purely technical oversight in drafting the 1955 “Tiv Marriage Law and Custom Order”. As explained by Justice Terna Puusu, the Chief Judge of Benue State (personal communication) Umaru Eri’s landmark decision did not deny that adultery is an offence under Tiv native law and custom, the decision taken was in cognizance of the constitutional provision, the failure to declare it an offence in a written law made it an offence unknown to Nigerian Law for which a person could be tried and punished. This unfortunate lapse has since been corrected through an appropriate amendment of the order.

Similarly, curious references have been made to the idea that Tiv as part of their hospitality gave their wives to visitors. Let it be emphasised from the onset that these references are not substantiated anywhere in the extensive anthropological literature on the Tiv and it is difficult for such a unique practice to have escaped being documented in the colonial library on the Tiv given the fact that administrators and anthropologists on the African field seemed hungry in reporting the “exotic” in African societies. It is not unlikely that a husband’s normal words asking a wife to “*nenge sha orvanya dedoo*” (take good care

of the visitor) or “*tar orvanya gambe a yav*” (arrange a bed for the visitor) have been misunderstood to imply more than what was really meant. It is contradictory and patently absurd that a people who sanctioned adultery and even killed their blood relations to avenge an affair with their wives would abandon this strong stand to please a total stranger.

Discipline

Discipline also runs as a core value through the fabric of the pre-colonial marriage systems. The period of courtship as indicated earlier was one in which the man spent following his wife (to be) religiously from morning to evening. During this intense period, none of them ate until late in the night when each was alone. This amounts to a fasting and as pointed out by Akiga it did wear both man and woman down, they both lose their strengths. Considering the significance of the fasting, in even present day religion and its importance in spiritual cleansing, it is little wonder that both man and woman considered the period of courtship critical enough to refrain from food and possibly reflect on the upcoming marriage (13).

Respect for Elders

Elders had a pride of place in all pre-colonial marriage systems. They were saddled with the responsibility of distributing *angor* (sister) to their children and brothers. Young men literally depended on elders for wives and no person could separate himself from the authority (of elders) and obligations imposed on him by the society and hope to get away with it. Though the youths resented the pride of place of the elders, charging it was being misused, it proved to be an efficient social control value ensuring stability and intergroup harmony.

Challenges Affecting Tiv and Christian Marriage and Family Today

The Tiv like a Christian family is built on values, values that held the family together. Regrettably, modernity, secularism has greatly affected Tiv morality and individuals do not act to project the good family name. Adultery, fornication and now the new sexual orientation same sex union has been threatening the cherished values in Tiv.

The challenges facing the Christian and Tiv family today are the same and are many. They range from abuse of marriage to adultery and divorce, polygamy and incest, free union, separation and trial marriages, to mention but a few, these are offences against the dignity of marriage. Whatever happens to marriage invariably affects the family much like whatever happens to the eye inevitably touches the nose as the saying goes in a Yoruba West African wise saying. Granted these challenges amongst others are offences against the moral law as well as the law of nature, they reflect more the lack of love, the fundamental and innate vocation of every human person (LG 11; FC 11; CCC 2392; NADRE 31, 34). There is need to communicate the truths of marriage and family, within the vision of God, to the generation of youths who also suffer untold hardship from these challenges (NBS 74, 75).

These challenges are in themselves opportunities for a reflection on the gospel of family, what God’s Word is to us, as the marriage of salvation, healing and reconciliation. In a similar tone, Catholic bishop’s conference of Nigeria, in their communiqué, from their first plenary in February 2015 identified the selfishness as the bane of many ills plaguing the land, including families. They rightly, therefore, proposed the need to embrace the love and live lives that promote selflessness, charity, solidarity and peaceful coexistence, both within families and among ethnic nationalities.

Irresponsible parenting, waywardness, sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, domestic violence, rape, cultism, rejection, spouse abuse, disrespect to the parents and elders, lack of economic corporation, violent behaviour are becoming very common experiences in Tiv society today. The institution of the family is becoming disintegrative and breakages in marriages and dysfunctional families are becoming more than stable due to fact that the

values that once held families together are been sacrificed in pursuit of wealth and fantasies. The family is no longer a place where one finds love, affection and support. This has created a challenge both for the Tiv and Christian family.

Conclusion

This paper set out to make an ethical reflection on Tiv and Christian family values in present day circumstances of great but adverse social changes that affecting not only the family but the society at large. It imperative to watch out for the changes and forces that constituted ills plaguing our present human society. God's purpose for the family is to be a place for love, affection and responsible parenting. The Tiv family like the Christian family was against the breakdown of the family both cultures frowned at divorce, irresponsible parenting, same sex unions, incest and every vice that is against the development of a healthy family. The basic family values must be restored; values like love, chastity, responsible parenting, faithful unions, discipline, respect for elders and economic corporation among other things.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. There is need to strengthen moral education in the society. This must be a shared responsibility of the family, Church and schools.
- ii. Counseling is necessary in helping families overcome most challenges facing the family today thus, is recommended.
- iii. The Church and civil authorities must work towards ensuring stable marriages to ensure and create stable families. This could be done by creating good policies that promote economic sustainability and social welfare.

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