

# AFRICAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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## PART I : Social Structure

THE FAMILY is the social unit primarily responsible for the early development and socialization of the child. Families are the primary economic unit of production in their societies; they are like businesses because of inheritance, especially of land.

MARRIAGE is universal in Africa. While marriage focuses on the individual, each individual represents a larger group and so marriages are alliances between families through the conjugal union of a female from one family and a male from another. Marriages have a series of formal arrangements or rites. Polygamy is accepted in most African societies. In the agrarian societies, it helps to increase the population for work. Also because of the high infant mortality in traditional societies, polygamy helps to make up for survivors. It is also practical for a couple as the woman abstains from sex when breastfeeding the baby. Marriages are public arrangements involving many people and are not private. Bride price or bride wealth is paid to the bride's family by the groom to show appreciation and to cement the relationship.

PATRILINEAL AND MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES exist in Africa. There are three ways of tracing lineage: patrilineal, matrilineal, and bilateral or cognate. Patrilineal family membership is traced through males and the father is the head of the family. In the matrilineal family, membership is traced through females. The woman's brother (uncle) disciplines the children. In bilateral, membership can be claimed from either the patrilineal or the matrilineal side.

CHILDREN are very important in an African marriage. There are three levels of membership of a family: 1) immediate family (man and wife/wives); 2) lineage: those who can trace themselves to a common forefather; 3) clan: everyone who can trace himself or herself to the same kin group. There is use of "brother" and "sister" to describe this kinship on this extended family level, unlike the womb brother or sister from the same mother.

TRANSMISSION OF TRADITION is important in African culture. Initiation is a ritual and involves a period of formal training for young boys and girls between the ages of nine and sixteen, and depending on the society, occurs every three to five years and lasts from two weeks to two months. The rite of passage from childhood to manhood or womanhood was designed to teach young ones how to survive in the real world, expose them to the secrets of life and to the traditions of the society, and also to tell them what the society expects of them. For boys there is circumcision, and girls in some societies had female circumcision. In societies without formal initiations, the young ones learned from observing, listening to the elders in the daily counseling and pronouncements by following examples of the adults, parents and older brothers and sisters.

## Discussion Questions

How is a child raised in traditional African culture?

What do you understand by the African saying that "It takes a village to raise a child"?

How does one trace lineage or kinship in African culture?

## Reading

Mario Azevedo, ed. *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005).

April A. Gordon and Donald L. Gordon, eds. *Understanding Contemporary Africa*. Fifth Edition. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013.

Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara, eds. *Africa*. Third Edition. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.

## PART II : Traditional Political and Economic Structures

INTRODUCTION: Chinua Achebe's earlier quoted statement that Africans had a philosophy of great depth before the coming of Europeans to Africa and the way the people of Umuofia ruled themselves before the colonialists and missionaries arrived in *Things Fall Apart* indicate a political structure in place in traditional African society. Though each ethnic group or unit has its own political institutions and modes of operation, each group's system is often a variant of many other groups that share similarities within the African culture.

AGE GRADES AND GROUPS matter in African culture. There are youths and elders and each group has its role in society. Usually the elders take decisions and the youths implement them. There are women's groups and they tend to be represented in a general meeting at the local village and town levels on issues affecting the people. In many communities, older women, especially postmenopausal ones, are members of the ruling councils that comprise mainly of men in the patriarchal societies. Priests and priestesses and healers are also respected in traditional councils.

KINGSHIP AND CHIEFTAINCY are the principal ruling authorities in African culture. Kingship is often hereditary or chosen by a council of chiefs from a royal lineage. The chief and a council of elders rule the village or town. The chief has to be acceptable and is never imposed on the people and he takes an oath of office to serve his people. The council of chiefs advises the king.

DEMOCRACY IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: Kings and chiefs rule by consent of their people. The unwritten constitution of the people imposes customary limitations on rulers because the chief's authority derives from the ruled. The king is not above the law but has to obey the duties the office demands of him. When the king or chief fails his people, they could defy him, dethrone him, or in extreme cases, as among segments of the Yoruba of Nigeria, could be asked to commit suicide. Among the Urhobo of Nigeria, the old women perform a nude dance to bring down tyrants. The African traditional council continues talking until there is agreement. Most of the decision-makers are elders who are highly respected for their wisdom and experience. The Dogon of Mali have the *toгу na* (the house of words) in which nobody stands where the elders meet to resolve problems. Some critics believe traditional Africa cannot be democratic because the society is hierarchical and gives women no room in political decisions. However, even Britain with a Queen is hierarchical and so a state can be hierarchical and democratic. As for women, it took women a long time in most Western countries to have the franchise. As Chinua Achebe told Bill Moyers in an interview, Africa had democracy before the coming of Europeans to Africa. To the renowned novelist, the colonizers brought a form of dictatorship in their colonial rule.

ECONOMIC STRUCTURE: As indicated earlier while talking about the African family, the family structure is tied to the economic and business structure too. A husband and a wife or wives among the Urhobo do the palm oil production together from cutting down the bunch of ripe palm nuts through their collection to a central place where the oil is extracted. In other cases, husband, wives, and children farm or fish together. As also explained earlier, it is the need for manpower that drove traditional Africans to practice polygamy so as to have as many hands as possible to farm. The decline of the agrarian economy has also led to the decline of polygamy.

### Discussion Questions

1. How is the African family a business partnership?
2. In what ways will you consider the traditional African political structure democratic?

### Readings

April A. Gordon and Donald L. Gordon, eds. *Understanding Contemporary Africa*. Fifth Edition. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013.

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Bill Moyers: A World of Ideas—Writers. One on One Interview with Chinua Achebe

<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/achebe>

### **PART III: African Society Today**(New Social Structure: Family, Roles of Men and Women)

MODERNIZATION and its attendant angst have brought changes into the African family over decades. Most educated men, whether religious (Christian or Muslim), secular minded, or practicing African religions no longer practice polygamy as done by their agrarian forefathers. Similarly, women who have gone to school and gone through the high school level to the first degree or studied more are less likely to go into a polygamous relationship because of the perceived problems in such a family. With the agrarian lifestyle gone and infant mortality down, the justification for polygamy has weakened. Families find themselves working to raise cash to take care of many expenses that have become necessities such as paying their children's school fees and taxes and raising money to pay rent or build houses and buy imported luxuries.

URBANIZATION is a major outcome of changes in African culture. Even though towns have always been in some parts of Africa, especially among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, urbanization is a modern phenomenon that has seriously impacted on African culture. The towns tend to have a mixed population of people from different ethnic groups that may not have the same customs and festivals. So, while as educated people and government and industry workers men and women relate as colleagues or co-workers, the same folks are very mindful of their specific customs and families. Thus, when Africans migrate to urban areas, they do not cut themselves from their rural homes that they visit during important traditional and modern festivals and public holidays such as their festivals, Christmas, New Year, and Independence Day. Those families doing well in urban areas and out of ancestral homes send part of their earnings to supplement members of their families—parents, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, and cousins—at home.

WOMEN find their roles expanded in the rural areas as well as in the city. With population increase and less land to cultivate, rural women have less land to cultivate to take care of their children going to school. There are similar pressures on women in the city who have to play their traditional roles as wives and still go to work as their men; a problem that Mariama Ba talks about in her famous novel, *So Long a Letter*. This course will have a week to focus on women in the new state of African culture.

OUTSIDE HOME: Africans in urban areas, outside of their home areas, and even abroad have adopted traditional ideas of communal support to form migrant associations. There are hundreds of Igbo town/village associations across the United States of America.

YOUNG PEOPLE in Africa are changing with the times. They are becoming alienated from elders; those in the city no longer care much about their age-grade roles since they are cut from home. Many no longer speak their ethnic languages fluently, if at all they speak them. The greatest change comes from their adopting of Western individualistic beliefs and pop culture lifestyle promoted by globalization.

#### **Study Questions and Activities**

1. What will you tell somebody who says that African culture does not change as far as the family is concerned?
2. What factors of modernization have come to bear on the African family?
3. Look for an African family wherever you live and ask its members about their family. Note whether any of them will talk of his or her immediate family or describe the family to include relatives in the extended family.

#### **Readings**

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