

# AFRICAN SOCIETY

*Tanure Ojaide, Ph.D.*

## 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).

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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 *togu 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.

Kwame Gyekye. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. Oxford/New York: OUP, 1997.

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

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

J.F. Ade Ajayi and Toyin Falola (eds.). *Tradition and Change in Africa: The Essays of J.F. Ade Ajayi*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000.

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Mariama Ba. *So Long a Letter*. London: Heinemann, 1981.

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Elizabeth Wheeler. *Women of Modern Africa*. New York: Women's African Committee, 1956.

#### **PART IV : African Women Today**

AFRICAN WOMEN are primary custodians of African culture; hence this week's study is devoted to African women today. Women raise children with the help of men but they play a predominant role in their upbringing.

RURAL AGRICULTURE is still overwhelmingly done by women about 80% are farmers compared to 65% of men rural farmers. Women who are divorced, widowed, or still married to men with low incomes still have to cultivate crops for subsistence of their families and for sale to make income to provide other amenities for the family. The women farmers have to work against the odds of land tenure and customs that put lands under the control of men. Women members have to borrow money from rotating credit unions called *esusu* in West Africa to have capital to finance their farming. There are few female agricultural extension workers across the continent but efforts are being made to train women.

WOMEN TRADERS AND ENTREPRENEURS have an important role in the economic sphere in their families, communities, and nations. In Ghana and Nigeria, for instance, women traders are famous for their textile business, buying wholesale and retailing their fabrics. Yoruba and Ashanti women are known for their trading acumen.

MODERNITY AND SCHOOLING have raised the status of women in African culture socially, economically, and politically. Educated women now abound in most professions, including bankers and professors. This means they earn as much as their male counterparts and they are at the top tier of good wage earners in their societies. Education and good jobs also free the women from many of the abuses of patriarchal societies in which men decide for the family. In many parts of Africa, female students are as many if not more than male students.

MANY CULTURAL PRACTICES are changing with the education of women and the general enlightenment of the populace. An example is female circumcision, which has declined considerably owing to works of NGOs and the education of women.

AFRICAN WOMEN TODAY are like women anywhere else in the world. They have changed and yet maintain their African identity. An African woman banker or professor could have the same ideas and values as women from other cultures; however, she is still likely to braid her hair African-style, wear African dresses, and still have respect for the culture knowing the roles for men and women are shared equally and not weighed against any gender.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the problems that rural women face in agriculture?
2. How are educated African women coping with their state as women today?
3. What have African women gained from modernity?

## **Readings**

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

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## PART V : **Belief Systems, Religion, Spirituality, and Philosophy**

**INTRODUCTION:** Traditional African religions do not have sacred books of the likes of the Christian Bible, the Muslim Koran, and the Hindu Veda. The oral nature of the documenting of the tenets and practices of these religions make it difficult to give their accurate history and their not having written texts to go to for doctrines might have limited their growth and followership to world religions. Africans have traditionally no single religion unifying different or diverse ethnic groups even though a few could have following in contiguous areas. It is significant that African religions do not have the aggressive proselytizing that includes forceful conversion as with religions of other cultural groups as Christianity and Islam with their respective crusades and jihads.

**BELIEFS:** Contrary to Western distortion of African belief systems, Africans believe in only one Supreme God with each ethnic group giving Him a name or names. He is the creator of the universe and all humans, and he is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. He lives in the sky and while individuals can approach Him directly, this is often done through intermediaries of ancestors, gods and goddesses, and spirits because humans feel too inadequate to contact Him directly for favors and grace. Africans also believe in the hereafter, which may be in the form of unending reincarnation.

**WORSHIP:** This takes the form of ceremonies and rituals. Sacrifices of animals, especially chickens, goats, and bulls take place in shrines or places of worship and the members of the religion share the meat among themselves and often leave the blood and bones to the ancestors or spirits. There are places of worship and in many shrines figures represent the gods, spirits, or ancestors through whom the people make offerings to the Supreme God. There are also days of worship in the four-day or eight-day week of the particular group set aside as sacred days as with the Urhobo and Igbo groups of Nigeria with their respective *eke* and *edewor*.

**VALUE SYSTEM:** These religions are founded in the expectation of bringing harmony to the community and also preparing adherents spiritually and morally for the hereafter. They foster a sense of community and uphold moral and ethical values that will bring this about—truth, telling right from wrong, respect for others, etc.

**THE YORUBA IFA** is a good example of a developed African religious system, which involves divination. The *babalawos* (traditional priests), who are trained for three to seven years, consult Ifa by interpreting sixteen palm nuts thrown on a divination tray (*opon ifa*) and through verse prescribing the sacrifice for desired blessings or averting mishap. Verses express each *odu*—as many as 256 *odus* in 1680 verses. Though oral, the Yoruba Ifa has a highly documented oral “text” that must be followed by Ifa priests.

**CONCLUSION:** Practitioners of African religions are not pagans, heathens, or animists and they do not practice fetishism or magic more than Christians, Muslims, and Hindus do in their respective rites; rather they pursue a spiritual value system of truthfulness among themselves and to others as they believe in a Supreme God who is merciful, and will grant their demands if they do good or out of mercy because they would change for good. The mere fact that African religions have oral texts of tenets and practices makes them to adapt more easily to new times and environments in a dynamic fashion than Christianity and Islam whose fundamentalist adherents continue to insist on things as they were written down so many centuries ago.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the concept of God in African religions?
2. What are the expected benefits of African traditional religions?
3. Compare the rituals in African religions to those of a major religion from a different cultural zone.

## Readings

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

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## **PART VI : The African Festival**

FESTIVALS are occasions for particular ceremonies or rituals in African communities (clans, towns, or ethnic groups) to pause from the year's routine works and celebrate. They are thus specific periods in the ritual calendar of communities. They are periods of rest, music and dance, and feasting with foods and drinks. Celebrants have guests, especially kinship relations who live far away and friends. The festival period is filled with conviviality and generosity.

RELIGIOUS-SPIRITUAL NATURE: African festivals celebrate different things but, irrespective of what is celebrated, there is always a religious-spiritual angle to it. Many groups in Nigeria, especially the Igbo, have their New Yam Festival to celebrate harvest. During the period, the farmers pay tribute to the Supreme God through Ani, the goddess of the earth and fertility that has ensured a good harvest. As farmers have festivals, so do fishermen and women as well as hunters, and devotees to gods and goddesses. Animal sacrifices are performed to gods/goddesses at family and community shrines to put the people in good standing before their tutelary gods. Most festivals take the form of communal cleansing at the end of the year so that the people would start the "new year" with the grace of their divine guides and guardians.

DURATION: Festivals could last one day or a week in the ritual calendar. Most traditional weeks are either four days or eight days. During that week, the celebrants do not go to the bush to farm or fish or do what they normally take as their means of livelihood and let themselves go in celebration. There are small and big festivals and while some take place every year, others take place over longer intervals of five, ten, twenty, thirty, or even more years.

MUSIC AND DANCE are common during festivals in African culture. In some Ghanaian societies, as Kwabena Nketia observes, "worship of the gods culminates in special festivals spread over a number of days. The kplezoo festival of the Ga of Ghana for example, is spread over a period of one week in some of the principal towns. The activities are generally incorporated within some dramatic framework, as can be seen in the opening event of the festival celebrated at Tema, one of the principal centers of kple worship. . ." (222). In that festival, after the priest has performed some rites, the dancing begins. The dance drama often reenacts some ancient legend or myth of the people as they use the festival to reconnect with their ancestors or tutelary gods. In different parts of Africa, there would be masquerade performances or initiation dances of boys and girls celebrating their attainment of adulthood during the festival that is the culminating point of their rites of passage. While many cultural festivals still take place, they may not still retain the intensity they generated long ago; more so now with so many Africans, including traditional rulers, converted to Christianity that frowns at traditional rites.

CONCLUSION: Festivals in African culture bring together the religious, spiritual, agricultural or some other professional, artistic in the sense of musical, dance, and other aspects of the group's lives. Each group of people, farmers, worshipers of a specific deity, musicians, or any other group set time aside in the calendar year to have a festival to recognize divine protectors and guides, reinvigorate themselves and begin a "new year" cleansed.

### **Discussion Questions and Activities**

1. Choose a specific African festival of any ethnic group and explain how the celebrations are connected to the religion, occupations, and the arts of the people.
2. How correct is it to say that the African festival is the expression of what is best in the culture?
3. The festival in African culture is the culmination of the people's expression of their values and aspirations. Discuss this in relation to a specific festival.

### **Readings**

Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958.

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## **PART VII : Health (Medicine and Healers), Environment, Science and Technology**

**INTRODUCTION:** This week's assignment should be one of the most challenging in the course because little work has been done in this area. Often when scholars and students discuss African culture, this section is avoided; maybe because such people feel as if a traditional society has no health, environmental, scientific and technological aspects incorporated into its way of life. It is left for us to look for these aspects in the culture and we will find them.

**HEALTH (MEDICINE AND HEALERS):** African communities have their concept of the causes of ill health and how good health can be restored. Ill health or sickness in traditional African culture could result from what a person has done—the result of breaking a taboo—or the result of witchcraft from malevolent and envious folks, and the catching of diseases or sickness. Thus, there are applications of antidotes to ill health sustained from supernatural afflictions and from diseases. Medicine men/women and healers abound to take care of the physical, mental, and spiritual health of folks in the society. They have different names across the continent—*dibia* among the Igbo, *babalawo* among the Yoruba, and other names in East and Southern Africa. One of the most documented healer/diviner traditions is the *babalawo* of the Yoruba who consults Ifa through sixteen cowries thrown on a divination plate (opon Ifa) to divine the ailments or transgressions and to recommend sacrifices. Irrespective of what is actually done, the *babalawo* and other diviners give a sense of self-confidence to people who consult them. This shows the African does not believe that every ailment can be cured by ordinary medication alone. Other healers specialize in using herbs, barks of trees, and other preparations to cure sicknesses. The proof of the veracity of their cures lies in the health of traditional folks without Western-style hospitals that lived and still live long lives.

**THE ENVIRONMENT** is an important aspect of the people's culture and lives. Ranging from myths explaining the environment to folktales that deal with the animals around to the musical and visual arts of the people that rely on instruments made from available materials, the African environment gives sustenance as in farming, fishing, pastoral, and other occupations of the people. It is significant that the people have methods of taking care of their environment. Many gods and goddesses relate to nature as represented by rivers, hills, land, and caves, and so these are seen as sacred and treated as such. To ensure environmental conservation and sustainability of their livelihood, the environment is taken care of. Among the Urhobo of the Niger Delta of Nigeria, there are times to cut palm nuts, times to hunt, and times to fish to allow young ones grow to maturity.

**INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY:** There is the astrological knowledge of the Dogon people of West Africa gained from their experience in living in the harsh and isolated environment of the Bandiagara Escarpment area in Mali. They have names for most of the stars and knew Sirius before Western astrophysicists "discovered" it. In other parts of black Africa, the people had knowledge of and practical extraction knowhow of iron and its smelting, copper and bronze works, and gold industries. From the Nok culture of Central Nigeria to the Dogon of Mali and the Fon of present-day Benin Republic and others, iron has been mined and smelted for weapons and artistic productions for centuries in Africa. In Central Nigeria and the Great Lakes region of East Africa, iron smelting goes back to at least 800 B.C., even preceding the adoption of iron in Europe (Schmidt and Childs 1995). We now know that Africans not only invented the technology of iron production on their own but that the Haya people of Tanzania produced steel when such technology was missing in Europe (Schmidt and Avery 1978). Ife and Benin's use of bronze in the lost wax method for sculptures and figurines is legendary and for the latter continues till this moment. At Ife, geochemical analysis now tells us that the craftsmen of that ancient city produced primary glass beads and sold these beads across West Africa in the 12<sup>th</sup>

through the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lankton et al 2006). The Ashanti and their Akan brethren have over centuries perfected their gold mining and refining skills.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How has necessity generated scientific and technological discoveries in African culture?
2. In what ways were traditional Africans involved in environmental conservation and for what purpose?
3. Where do sick folks in traditional African culture go to for a cure and why?

### **Readings**

Omoweh, Daniel A. *Shell Petroleum Development Company, the State and Underdevelopment of Nigeria's Niger Delta: a Study in Environmental Degradation*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005.

Schmidt, Peter and D. Avery (1978). Complex iron smelting and prehistoric culture in Tanzania. *Science* 201: 1085-1089

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