

# THE FAMILY IN AFRICA

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## Family Patterns in Postclassical sub-Saharan Africa and the impact of Islam

**Basics** Sub-Saharan Africa is a vast region, with many different ecological zones and population groups. The considerable spread of Bantu peoples promoted some more general features, but the fact is that family styles varied considerably on the subcontinent by the postclassical period. In general, however, the African family stressed extended links and the importance of kinship networks. Knowledge of kin formed an important part of the oral education of young people. Extended families served as the basis for the family economy, and provided security for various family members. For example, when an adult brother died leaving a widow (and her children), another brother was frequently expected to marry, and care for, the woman. Larger clusters of kin frequently formed powerful clan ties, sometimes concentrating on a particular economic niche such as merchant activity.

**Patrilineal and matrilineal** Many groups in Africa highlighted matrilineal descent, and followed up by organizing households around maternal kin. In these situations, where husbands migrated to wives' kin, relationships between fathers and sons in law became crucial, to an unusual extent. But other groups were patrilineal. In these cases the kinship groups tended to be more extensive than in matrilineal, though the emphasis on kin was common to both frameworks. In many cases children were taught to use the terms father and mother for uncles and aunts as well as biological parents. In patrilineal families, groupings of several nuclear families under a common father was regarded as the standard form.

**Polygyny** This form of polygamy was more extensive in Africa than in any other region, particularly of course in patrilineal groups. While chieftains took many wives, even commoners often had two or three. The system was tied to a distinctive agricultural economy. While men were responsible for key tasks, such as clearing land, more agricultural work was done by women than was common in other regions. A man with more wives could handle more land. Correspondingly, many wives welcomed additions to their ranks, who could share in the expected labor.

**Marriage** Many African groups emphasized dowries brought by husbands to the wife's family, sometimes involving cattle or other basic agricultural goods. Westerners sometimes criticized this practice as "buying" a wife, but really it was a standard arrangement designed to provide support to families while establishing a firm economic base to a new marriage—only the obligations involved a distinctive gender balance compared to practices in Europe and Asia. The practice does provide another suggestion that women played a somewhat more active role in many African families than was true elsewhere. While patriarchal arrangements predominated, they were often loose enough to give women opportunities to participate in marketing activities and even, in some regions, acquire political power as reigning queens.

**Children** Children were welcomed into African communities with ceremonies such as naming rituals. In one group mothers were expected to bring the umbilical cord to the ceremony, and if it floated when placed in water the child was regarded as legitimate and accepted. In some cases children lived primarily with an aunt or uncle rather than biological parents. This highlighted the unusually serious family roles assigned to members of the extended group. Again, great variety described specific arrangements. While intense emotional ties between parents and children were not emphasized, there were many signs of affection. The extended family was the primary source of education, as most African groups relied primarily on oral instruction rather than formal schooling.

**Islam** As Islam spread to some populations both along the East African coast and in key West African kingdoms during the postclassical period, it long has a rather less significant impact on family arrangements than was true in South Asia – even as Islamic piety increased in other respects. Arab travelers to West Africa, notably the famous Ibn Battuta, noted with dismay that women were freer in their social interactions with men, as well as more brightly clothed, than Middle Eastern standards called for. Strict domestic confinement was largely rejected. Islamic rules on women's rights to property were however more congenial with African patterns, though in some regions the rules were reworked to provide equal inheritance. Gender patterns in African Muslim families did change with time, though more after 1600 than in the postclassical period itself, as Middle Eastern habits of dress and modesty gained greater purchase.

**Female Circumcision** In parts of northeastern Africa, traditions of female genital mutilation had developed before the rise of Islam, as an extreme method of attempting to assure sexual fidelity by reducing or eliminating the capacity for pleasure. The practice became deeply ingrained as a badge of female respectability, and a precondition for readiness for marriage. For many in the region, the practice also became associated with fidelity to Islam, providing additional religious sanction – a cultural package that would remain powerful in the region into modern times.

**Conclusion** Most sub-Saharan Africans remained polytheist well after the postclassical period, even in West Africa. Islam in that sense simply added to the considerable regional diversity in family forms. And Islam itself was readily compatible with features such as patrilinearity and polygyny. The most obvious new tension it could introduce concerned women's family roles and contexts.

### Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of African polygyny?
2. What were some of the distinctive features and responsibilities of African kinship systems?
3. How did common African gender patterns suggest some modifications of Islamic family practice?

### Further reading

Cheryl Johnson-Oden, *Women and Gender in the history of Sub-Saharan Africa* (American Historical Association, 2007)

Esther Hicks, *Infibulation: Female Mutilation in Islamic Northeast Africa* (Transaction, 1996)

Yizenge Chondoka, *Traditional Marriages in Zambia: a study in cultural history* (Mission Press, 1988)

## Atlantic Slavery

**Disruptions** The rise of the Atlantic slave trade and American slavery were hugely disruptive of family life. At the same time capacity to form families recovered to an impressive degree, a tribute to the importance of the institution and the persistence of enslaved peoples. Disruption began with the seizure of slaves in Africa by European traders or, more often, African merchants. Young people were snatched, their parents almost always left behind; in some cases, a brother and sister might be captured together but then immediately separated. For Africans accustomed to extensive family ties, the result must have been massive disorientation and grief – as a few who later left written accounts attest.

**Impact on Africa** In many parts of West and southern Africa, so many millions were seized in the three centuries after 1800 that regional demography was seriously affected – both because of outright loss and the deprivation of many people who were just reaching their childbearing years. Further, a marked gender disparity resulted, because young men were disproportionately valued. The twin results were, first, overall demographic stagnation in the early modern period – compared to growth in Asia and Europe – and, second, greater reliance on polygynous families as a means of accommodating excess women.

**Family law in the Americas** Throughout most of the Americas, slave families, once formed in the new territory, had no status in law. Slaveowners systematically resisted any legal recognition that would limit their ability to sell or move slaves regardless of family status. Owners themselves were somewhat divided

concerning the informal families that surfaced: some remained hesitant, but others thought that families might promote greater stability and reduce the risk of flight. But this did not change the legal liability. Colonial law was also quickly applied to the offspring of enslaved women sired by Whites: they were slaves too. Rapes and sexual coercion of women were a common feature of slavery throughout the Americas.

**Further complications** Some enslaved people formed families where husband and wife worked on different, though usually neighboring, estates, with mutual visits once or twice a week (the practice was called “marrying abroad”). The high labor demands on slaves, both male and female, represented another hindrance to full family life, and children were expected to start work at a young age. But the great threat was sales of one or more children or a spouse. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, slaveowners in states like Virginia, in the United States, increasingly took advantage of the end of most transatlantic slave trading by selling slaves to the cotton-growing regions of the deep south, often without regard to family status. It has been estimated that a substantial minority of families were disrupted in this fashion, and of course abolitionist literature, quite understandably, played up this feature of slavery in trying to encourage opposition. Slave owners sometimes required the wife whose husband was sold away to take another partner, for purposes of procreation to increase the labor supply. Finally, slave owners frequently divided their slaves in passing inheritance along to their own children, again without much consistent regard for family status.

**Adjustments** Despite all the barriers, meaningful family life developed for many enslaved people, with deep emotional attachments. Some slave communities were able to identify one woman, usually somewhat older, to assist with care for younger children while parents and siblings were at work. While family ties were often precarious because of the sale of fathers or sons, women were less often at risk and as a result mother-daughter ties often developed particular intensity. In tobacco-growing areas, where few slaves were needed on each plantation and “marrying abroad” was common as a result, slaves families managed to develop larger kinship ties, sometimes over a wide area; this was less possible amid the more concentrated labor demands of cotton or sugar plantations. Kinship ties in some cases revived West African traditions, including matrilineal descent. Families in general, whether nuclear or extended, offered not only economic assistance to family members, but emotional consolation as well amid the many misfortunes that could affect enslaved people.

**Aftermath** Freed or escaped slaves often went to great lengths to try to retrieve enslaved family members. After Emancipation in the United States, former slaves took out newspaper ads and attempted other methods in order to reestablish family ties. Considerable and often bitter debate has addressed the question of the longterm impact of slavery on African American or African Brazilian family structure, into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Study questions

1. How did the slave trade affect African family structure?
2. Why did planters quickly move to deprive slave families of legal status?
3. Why were enslaved people often successful in establishing families despite the many impediments?

### Further reading

Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: slave youth in nineteenth-century America* (Indiana University Press, 2011)

Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Vintage, 1977)

H.P. McAdoo, ed., *Black Families* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Sage, 1997)

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the Impact of Imperialism

**Context** The 19<sup>th</sup> century was famously a century of European imperialism despite the recognition of independent nations in the Americas. The British tightened their hold on India, while several European countries divided almost all of Africa, pressed further into Southeast Asia and took over Pacific Oceania (along with the United States). The main goals of the effort involved economic exploitation and power

political position, not family life. But imperialist expansion inevitably produced new opportunities to evaluate family practices (whether real or partly imagined) and introduce at least some changes. Where imperialism was accompanied by massive Christian missionary efforts, as in sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania, efforts at reform were particularly extensive. (Note that now Protestants were just as active as Catholics in missionary outreach.) In India, missionary inroads were limited and changes in family practices more modest as a result.

**Limitations** Even in places like Africa European pressures were sometimes cautious. Again, family reform was not a major goal, and colonial administrators were eager not to provoke local hostility. Thus in northeastern Africa, British and French officials did little to combat the genital mutilation of women, though they disapproved; they simply recognized the depth of the regional tradition and left it alone. Only after World War II were halting efforts ventured. We will see that in India, even when some changes were attempted – for example, in efforts to limit child marriage – they did not always proceed very far. In some ways the imperialist period did more to introduce new themes, very tentatively, that are still in play in the societies involved – more than changing practices directly at the time.

**Rationale** Given the intensity of many specific family values in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century West, it was hardly surprising that many colonial administrators felt at least some impulse to intervene in some local family practices. Christian missionaries were even more ambitious, now including the Protestant as well as Catholic initiatives. In this case, some interventions were similar to those in Latin America earlier, but some represented more recent emphases – such as a greater urge to promote schooling for children (while usually still utilizing their labor). Finally, historians have emphasized the role of colonial wives. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and improved medical remedies, male colonial administrators and merchants typically went out on their own, leaving whatever families they had behind; often, they developed new liaisons with local women. Now, however, Western wives often came along, and they were eager to shield their spouses from local temptation. Interactions with local groups became more limited, but disapproval and suspicion mounted – particularly with regard to imagined levels of traditional sexuality.

**Schooling** Given developments in the West itself, educational initiatives were more prominent in this phase of imperialism than before. There was more interest in training lower-level local officials as well as bringing the presumed benefits of literacy (often in a Western language) and some Western culture; some efforts were even extended to girls. Some older children were even sent to Europe for further study. This might significantly affect family life in some cases, though aspiring students – like Gandhi in late-19<sup>th</sup> century India—might promise to adhere to traditional family values. On the other hand, schools did not reach large numbers of people, particularly in the countryside, so this impetus to family change should not be exaggerated.

**India** English interventions here included strong efforts to ban the practice of *sati*, and in this they were joined by Indian reformers – and the practice did decline (without disappearing). British efforts also sought to provide new protections for widows' property and a right to remarry, and there were also some attempts to limit child marriage (a clearer thrust after 1900). Attacks on widespread female infanticide were sporadic but may have had some effect over time. The British also imposed their own law against homosexuality, against regional tradition, and this was only recently repealed. Overall, probably the greatest British influence involved the creation of a somewhat more Western-oriented group of civil servants – including some Indian nationalists – who accepted the importance of education for children and somewhat less restrictive social interactions between men and women. British authors even ventured a series of manners books directed at facilitating social occasions involving both Indians and Westerners, while some educated Indian women began campaigning on issues such as child marriage.

**Sub-Saharan Africa** Western initiatives in Africa pushed in several, potentially contradictory, directions. On the one hand, missionaries and others pressed to abolish the practice of polygyny, and recorded gradual progress in areas where Christian conversions were extensive. On the other hand, European-led economic initiatives, such as mining, disproportionately recruited male workers, leaving many women with fewer economic resources, often back in the villages. Some colonial laws actually sought to restrict women's work opportunities, sometimes on grounds that these encouraged licentious sexual behavior. A number of programs aimed at making women "purer wives and better mothers", cutting back larger families roles that women had previously maintained. Economic changes could cut into traditional

marriage arrangements, as when young men came back to the villages for a visit, flush with money wages and eager to strike up sexual liaisons. While the bulk of the African population remained rural, growing cities created new consumer opportunities for some young people, which in turn might tempt them away from obligations to the extended family. Patterns of change were varied, but not surprisingly some African scholars and feminists have emphasized overall damage to family solidarity as well as the position of women in family and society alike.

**Polynesia** 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionary work in Polynesia focused strongly on altering traditional sexual practices, beginning with imposing more concealing dress and attempting to curb traditional, presumably provocative dances like the hula. Abortion and infanticide were attacked. As in Africa, women's work roles outside the home were criticized in favor of a more strictly domestic family role. Efforts to limit the extended family also placed more childcare burdens on individual wives.

### Study questions

1. Why did many customary family practices persist in many imperial holdings?
2. Why did Western efforts to "protect" women have such complex results in family relationships?
3. Overall, did imperialism result in significant changes in family life and structure?

### Further reading

Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakaniye Musisi, eds., *Women in African Colonial History* (Indiana University Press, 2002)

Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: gender and sex in an African society* (Zed Books, 1987)

Patty O'Brien, *The Pacific Muse: exotic femininity and the colonial Pacific* (University of Washington Press, 2007)

J. Krishnamurty, *Women in Colonial India* Oxford University Press, 1989)

Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context* (Routledge, 1995)

Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: the making of empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Sub-Saharan Africa

**General** Sub-Saharan Africans participated in many of the standard family trends in the contemporary period, though often at a slight lag in time thanks to a slower pace of industrialization and urbanization. Thus birth rates fell, and the average age of marriage rose: but the subcontinent still had the highest birth rates of any world region by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the most rapid pace of population growth (levels expected to double by 2022). Family patterns in the region were also partly defined by some distinctive crises, including various war-induced migrations and the particularly severe impact of the AIDs epidemic. Finally, continued adpatatin of earlier traditions, such as polygyny, also continued to affect family styles. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century many African cities housed nuclear families very similar to those in other parts of the world, but many rural areas differed considerably and the rise of an unusually important sector of single-parent households also marked parts of the subcontinent.

**Birth rate** High fertility was promoted by continued reliance on child labor in the countryside and by a desire to assure the perpetuation of the family line as child mortality, though declining, remained high. But the diminishing economic utility of children in the cities, plus costs of living factors, began to cut into traditional assumptions. Rapidly rising interest in education promoted the notion that family size should be limited (even in the countryside), while use of contraceptive devices was also encouraged in response to the AIDs epidemic. Fertility changes began to emerge particularly from the mid-1970s onward (again, later than in most other regions).

**Marriage and kinship** Marriage at a fairly young age remained common, but the number of women marrying before age 20 declined noticeably. On the other hand, polygyny persisted strongly in the

countryside, despite expectations of more rapid change, primarily because of the continued importance of wives' labor in the maintenance of landholdings. Polygyny was even adapted to the cities, with "matricentric" households of women and children visited periodically by the husband/father. Because of polygyny also, men were more likely to retain at least one spouse during the AIDs epidemic than was true of women. Similarly, while increasing numbers of couples make their own decisions about marriage, kinship ties remain strong and constrained women's autonomy in many cases. On the other hand, women often gained more education than men by the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, another factor that might affect relationships within the family. In some cases women have also been able to take advantage of new national human rights legislation that provides greater protection for their property in cases of family dissolution or inheritance disputes. Some law codes, as in the Ivory Coast in the 1980s, specifically limited the authority of the husband, even requiring (in principle) greater collaboration in household chores. And while the practice persists, international and local agitation began to reduce the incidence of genital mutilation of women in the northeast.

**Feminism** Important feminist movements developed in Africa after decolonization, sometimes following United Nations initiatives. They worked for a variety of changes in women's family position and well as wider social issues. Some feminist intellectuals urged an approach different from Western feminism, arguing that imperialism had reduced vital family supports for women. Their goal was a less individualist feminism, with more attention to mutual protections within the family.

**Single parent households** The rise of single-parent households was a clear sign that kinship traditions were weakening. As women gained more education and a greater role in the urban economy, single parenting became more common – though it was over-represented among the urban poor. In South Africa the results of the Apartheid system added to the disruptions of urban life, creating an unusually high incidence of single parenting. Single parenting has also, however, increased the importance of grandparents in providing child care in many cases (including guidance in educational decisions), promoting some stability in the rates of multi-generational households. Here was another case where changes generated imaginative adaptations of older family traditions. On the other hand, there was a marked decline in the practice of fosterage, in which urban families had often provided care for the offspring of rural relatives. Economic problems in the cities but also growing consumer aspirations disrupted older rural-urban ties, to the disadvantage of the countryside. Finally, the AIDs epidemic, far more severe in Africa than elsewhere given more limited public health systems, generated a growing number of households headed by a single parent or even an adolescent.

**Migration and gender** The late 19<sup>th</sup> century had already seen a pattern of male migration to jobs in urban and mining areas, leaving women and families in the countryside. This persisted into the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rural families received money transmissions from absent husbands, but they were also confined to subsistence labor in the villages themselves – and there were frequent cases of family abandonment. Poverty and migration have also encouraged trafficking in children, seized for use in labor or sexual service; one estimate calculated about 200,000 cases in year in which African children were effectively enslaved.

**Ageing** Rising life expectancy has increased the percentage of the elderly in the population. Surviving extended family and kinship traditions make this a less severe problem in Africa than in some other societies, with more reciprocal assistance among generations. In some cases, of course, older people provide child care even when they can no longer work. But the trend does put strain on some families, and poverty among the elderly was increasing by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of African family life by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
2. What traditions have proved particularly resilient amid social and economic changes?
3. In what ways do contemporary African families reflect more standard global trends?

### Further reading

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Women, a modern history* (Westview Press, 1997)

Nana Apt, *Coping with Old Age in a Changing Africa* (Aldershot, 1996)

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(Universidad de Alicante, Escuela Universaria da Trabajo Social, 2004)