



Rediscovering the Definition of the Family: Implications For the African Globalized Society

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ABSTRACT:- The family institution is a noble institution in Africa. Like some other African values that are being affected by the trend of globalization, the family is not left out. Thus, in the recent past, some thinkers tend to see the family concept as a purely sociological concept that should change *essentially* with the society. There has been attempts at *redefinition* of not just the family but also its sister concept-marriage. Contemporary families are, therefore, inclusive of single parent families, blended families, step-families and homosexual families to name a few. To define the concept of the family as a monolithic notion or as a concept consisting of one pattern of attributes leads to controversial discussions pertaining to the ideologies of marriage, divorce, sex and children. The family is no longer a concept that can be contemplated within an essentialist notion, rather the concept of the contemporary family has evolved into a fluid ideology that is constantly shifting and changing throughout society. In a globalized world where economic, political, environmental, and cultural events in one part of the world quickly come to have significance for people in other parts of the world, such redefinition of the family system places Africans on the danger of losing of their family values. This article, therefore, employs the philosophical method of analysis in order to rediscover the *definition* of the family. Such definition will place the practical implication of the family within bounds. The result will be returning to the *essentialist* notion of the family in order to safeguard not just the typical African family but also to place the family value aright in the globalized world.

Keywords: Family, globalized world and culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Defining a thing is delineating the fundamental character of the thing; it is setting its boundary and confines. It is stating the *quiddity*, nature or essence of the thing in question. A fundamental way of destroying a thing is destroying its nature, its definition. Such is the predicament of the family in the globalized society. There have been debates in various angles to redefine the family. Some of the debates are politically, ideologically, socially or even economically masterminded. Those who favour the redefinition of the family see it as a purely sociological entity that should necessarily change with the society. Change, therefore becomes the ground for this redefinition. Such changes are meant to accommodate fundamental human rights such as human equality and other recently clamoured rights as same-sex marriage. This redefinition, therefore gives the impression that there is no fixed definition for the family.

This paper takes a look at “change” and “definition” in order to place our understanding of the family aright. The right understanding of the family will help to check the changes that the society undergoes especially as it affects the family, that is, the fundamental unit of the society. Such step informs us that it is not everything that we should accept in the name of globalization. Maintaining the essentialist notion of the family will safeguard our family values as Africans.

Globalization and the Redefinition of the Family

Globalization as a word literally stems from the word “globe”. A globe is a spherical object. Because of the fact that the world has come to be seen as a globe, whatever has a worldwide influence has come to be regarded as “global”. Hence, we hear expressions like global warming, global politics, global village, etc. For William K. Tabb, Globalization is a comprehensive term for the emergence of a global society in which economic, political, environmental, and cultural events in one part of the world quickly come to have significance for people in other parts of the world. It describes the growing economic, political, technological, and cultural linkages that connect individuals, communities, businesses, and governments around the world.¹ For some people, it is “the process of greater interdependence between nations”.²

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In this process of globalization, there is no doubt that the United Nations Organization (U.N.O) plays a leading role with her attendant structures. The positive effects of globalization cannot be overemphasized. However, this article challenges its effect on the family bearing in mind that any unwarranted shift will affect the African family values.

In his work, *Between Globalization and Globalism: Dangers of Pure Humanism*, Tobias C. Ihejirika has argued that the U.N.O represents the highest International Body. The U.N.O is about 60% under the power of the United States of America. Wherever the U.S.A cannot directly enter, she uses this “mega-puppet” to super-impose selfish policies. The interests of the U.N.O are overtly U.S.A’s interests and they are in the main, selfish, profiteering, dominating and exploitative.³ This is the predicament of the family when placed in perspective. The recent outcry to redefine the family has been championed by the United States of America. It is not surprising that the U.N entered into the debate.

According to Allan Carlson⁴, the contest of redefining the family began in the 1930s with the Swedish social scientists Alva and Gunnar Myrdal who while avoiding to demonize the family as the 19th century Marxists did advocated for a redefinition of the family as a malleable, evolving institution, to enable them co-opt the family — and the warm sentiments surrounding it — for socialist, secularist ends. As they explained in their 1934 book, *Kris I Befolkingsfragan* [Crisis in the Population Question], the family had first to be ripped out of a stable moral framework. Being philosophical materialists, they argued that morals are essentially a function of institutions, and in turn a function of total social development, which in the last analysis is propelled by technology. In this vein, they said that reactionary calls to “save the family” were irrelevant to the reality of social evolution. Accordingly, the Myrdals argued that family “change” was also absolutely necessary, simply to bring this social institution into harmony with current urban-industrial realities. This effort according to them required a redefinition of the family, where it abandoned identity as an autonomous social unit rooted in religion and tradition, and assumed instead a role as part of a “great national household,” fully industrialized, where women stood by men as comrades in industrial labor, where children became a social responsibility, and where traditional attitudes gave way to social cooperation.

The turning of American elites and the U.S. government in the anti-natalist, anti-family direction began in the 1960s, and culminated in the late 1970s under the guise of population control. International government takes its turn at social revolution under the guise of the same stealthy redefinition of the family resting on the familiar tactic of co-opting the word “family” through a twisted Social Darwinism focused on evolution, or “change.” Today, the United Nations defines the family as “*any combination of two or more persons who are bound together by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibility for, inter alia, the care and maintenance of group members, the addition of new members through procreation or adoption, the socialization of children, and the social control of members.*”⁵ There is no doubt that the UN definition is very broad and does not necessarily consider blood relationship, or even marriage, as essential elements in a family. It now incorporates various forms of ties as family.

Damon Taylor wrote an article on “Marriage and Contemporary Family”⁶. The core of his poser is that the ‘family’ as a monolithic notion has been replaced with the assumption that the structure of families is fluid and changeable. Contemporary families are inclusive of single parent families, blended families, step-families and homosexual families to name a few. To define the concept of the family as consisting of one pattern of attributes leads to controversial discussions pertaining to the ideologies of marriage, divorce, sex and children. The family is no longer a concept that can be contemplated within an *essentialist* notion, rather the concept of the contemporary family has evolved into a fluid ideology that is constantly shifting and changing throughout society.

The proponents of change in the family and family institutions have demanded for a change not just in the accidental features of marriage and family but in the essential features. Their argument is that the image of the family has changed much over time. Let us consider their arguments⁷:

The term family is no longer limited to those who live together in the same household. Families extend now beyond the household limitations. This is mainly because of the mobility that people in society take for granted. It is now easier to move about the country in the present time than it was in the past. It is not uncommon for a family to be spread out across an entire country.

A second point is that the contemporary family is not limited to biological relations. It is quite common to see a family with adopted children. It is also quite common for people who are not related but have extremely close relationships to consider themselves as family. For example, a person will commonly declare another person to be her/his “second mother,” or the “brother/sister he/she never had.” In this sense, the family now goes beyond biological ties and extends it into emotional and relationship ties. People will consider other people family just because they share an emotional bond together, typically love.

In the same respect, contemporary families today may not include people who *are* biologically related. For example, it is now very common to have single parent families. Depending on the family situation, for example if the other parent left the children and single parent, then those children may not consider the parent who deserted them as family.

A third point is on how the contemporary family has become diverse and mixed. Many forms of family now exist, which are not limited to but include: single parent families, gay parent families, step-families, foster parent families, extended families, etc. The family model in reality no longer reflects the model family of mother, father, and children. People with no children can also be considered a family. As long as there exists an emotional bond and a desire to be considered a family, then any form of family can exist.

Finally, one notices a change in the roles that each family member plays. Women are no longer considered the primary caretaker of the household and children. Women are now out in the workforce and often the household duties are split between the two spouses. Children tend to be more independent than in the past, and men are playing a much larger role in participating in the development of the children.

On this note, it is not surprising to read from gay supporters that we had essentially already made marriage genderless through the elimination of certain rights and responsibilities for husbands and wives. Thus there is a reinvigorated effort to define marriage no more as union between a man and a woman but as *a union between two consenting adults*. For them, the image of family and how it has changed reflects how our society has changed. As society becomes more mobile, more flexible, and more accepting of differences, so does the image of the family.

The implication of the redefinition is that a woman can marry a woman so long as they are adults; a man can marry a man as long as they are adults; a man can marry a woman so long as they are adults and a woman can marry a man as long as they are adults. The issue of begetting children in the marital life is downplayed because adoption of children is now an option. The above, therefore, will constitute the “new” family. The impact of this redefinition is already being felt in some first world countries and efforts are being made to enforce it in some third world countries. To assess the weight of this impact of redefinition, you can consider how many countries that have okayed same-sex marriage. As of 2014, sixteen countries now have the freedom to marry for same-sex couples nationwide (Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada, South Africa, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Iceland, Argentina, Denmark, France, Brazil, Uruguay, New Zealand, and Britain), while two others have regional or court-directed provisions enabling same-sex couples to share in the freedom to marry (Mexico and the United States). Many other countries provide some protections for such couples; as more and more countries and parts of the United States win the freedom to marry.

Change vs. the Definition of the Family

So far, one observes that the notion of change keeps on appearing in one form or the other in relation to family. Damon Taylor has it that “the family is no longer a concept that can be contemplated within an *essentialist* notion, rather the concept of the contemporary family has evolved into a *fluid ideology that is constantly shifting and changing throughout society*.” (Emphasis is ours). Already involved in this singular statement are the notions of change and permanence (essence). With this, one recalls the debate between Heraclitus and Parmenides in the history of Philosophy. Heraclitus is known for popular expression that “all things are in a state of flux”. For him change, not permanence is the essence of reality. Parmenides on the other hand opposes this line of thought. Through his simple statement: “Being is, non-being is not”, he tries to show the illusive nature of change. The fundamental reality of things is that they are. A thing is real and if it is real, it falls outside the category of non-being. Change means something becoming what it was not. This for Parmenides is impossible.

There is no doubt that this is an interesting philosophical debate. Both have merits on their side. Reality has both changing and unchanging (permanent) aspects. That reality changes is indisputable, yet reality is permanent. So even in change, something remains unchanged. It is as a result of this synthesis that we can maintain that this man who is now a professor in sociology is the same young lad who was a pupil 50 years ago. Though some changes have taken place yet he remains the same person.

In the manner of philosophical debate on change and permanence, while certain phenomena on the family institution may undergo some changes, the essence of the family should remain unchanged. It is for this reason that the impression that the family is no longer a concept that can be contemplated within an *essentialist* notion should be challenged. Trying to change the essence of the family would mean to abuse its identity. The family has its essence and that is what constitutes its definition. Trying to tamper with its essence would mean abusing the family no matter the changes the society may undergo.

II. DEFINING THE FAMILY

Among the explanations offered for the word ‘definition’, we have preferred the one that states that it is a statement conveying fundamental character.⁸ Akin to it is the one that states that it is a specification of the

essential properties of something, or of the criteria which uniquely identify it.⁹ In other words, we can say that defining a thing means positing the essence of that thing. ‘Essence’ in this regard would mean what a thing is in itself. It answers to the question: what? It is what defines a thing in itself and makes it distinct from all other things. (*Ihe mere ihe o jiri buru ihe o bu n’abughi ihe ozo*). In the words of Ajuzieogu Michael Agbayi, “to define has both the dimension of describing a thing and also of setting its boundary and confines”.¹⁰ In the above spirit, defining the family means delineating the fundamental character of the family. It means stating the quiddity or the essence of the family. It means setting the boundary and confines of the family. It would, therefore, mean returning to the *essentialist* notion of the family. This return would definitely capture the unique idea behind the invention of the term ‘family’ in the first place. This is why this section is very important if we must recapture what the family is originally meant to be in its essence. It will help us to correct the impression that family can mean anything to anybody or mean different things to different people or even be defined by what it does- caring, supporting, protecting and loving. So the fundamental question is: what is the family?

Etymological Understanding of Family

Etymology has to do with the study of the origin and history of words and their meaning; and how these words have changed their forms and meanings over time. Without delving into this history for lack of space, we will consider the human context of the family. “In human context, a family (from Latin: *familia*) is a group of people affiliated by consanguinity (by recognized birth), affinity (by marriage), or co-residence/shared consumption. Members of the immediate family may include a spouse, parent, brother and sister, son and daughter. Members of the extended family may include grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin, nephew and niece, or sibling-in-law. Close family members often share personal information with each other that they would not share with anyone else. A first-degree relative is one who shares 50% of your DNA, such as a full sibling, parent or progeny.”¹¹

The Concept of the Family in Social Sciences

A key concept in the social sciences, and especially in demography and sociology, is that of the family. The family is generally regarded as a major social institution and a locus of much of a person's social activity. It is a social unit created by blood, marriage, or adoption, and can be described as nuclear (parents and children) or extended (encompassing other relatives).

For Yuval Merin, the nature and perception of “family” change from place to place and from time to time, and are dependent on points of view as well as on social and cultural conditions. Historically, the family has been defined as a permanent, monogamous, heterosexual institution based on marriage, including a clear division of gender roles. Determining who is a “family member,” who is a “spouse,” what is a “marriage,” and who is considered a “parent,” has long been based on widely accepted legal and social perceptions. Nevertheless, these perceptions have been questioned—mostly in the past few decades—as a result of social, legal, and political changes.¹²

The point worth noting is that the social sciences still recognize that family is based on ties of blood and marriage, and differ in regard to the degrees of relation included in the definition of terms making it possible to have nuclear and extended families.

The United States Census Bureau has provided what is regarded as the Standard Demographic Approach in understanding the family. In this sense, the family is defined as a “group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption”¹³. Until the so-called move towards redefinition of the family recently, the plain meaning of these definitions has been universally recognized. The definition excludes non-marital cohabitation but can include extended as well as nuclear family members.

The Definition of the Family according to the Natural Law

Nature comes from the Latin “*nascor, nasci, natus sum*” denoting what is given by birth, what is inborn. By nature, we do not mean physical or biological nature, but metaphysical nature. It is the spiritual-corporeal essence of man as the principle of man’s action. As inanimate creatures, organic and animate beings are governed by laws, so also man is governed first of all by the natural law, that is, a norm or body of norms of human conduct derived from human nature and known to or knowable by human reason. It is the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided. It signifies the plan of God in relation to human life and action. Regarding the natural law, the ancient orator, Cicero writes:

There is in fact a true law (namely, right reason) which is in accordance with nature, applies to all men, and is unchangeable and eternal. By its commands, that law summons men to the performance of their duties; by its prohibitions, it restrains them from doing wrong. Its commands and prohibitions, always influence good men, but are without effect on the bad. To invalidate this law by

human legislation is never morally right, nor is it permissible even to restrict its operation, and to annul it wholly is impossible. Neither the senate nor the people can absolve us from our obligation to obey this law, and it requires no Sextus Aelius to expound and interpret it. It will not lay down one rule at Rome and another at Athens, nor will it be one rule today and another tomorrow. But there will be one law, eternal, unchangeable, binding at all times upon all peoples; and there will be, as it were, one common master and ruler of men, namely God, who is the author of this law, its interpreter and sponsor. The man who will not obey it will abandon his better self, and, in denying the true nature of man, will thereby suffer the severest of penalties, though he has escaped all the other consequences which men call punishment.¹⁴

Some important elements are to be noted about the natural law. The natural law is immutable, universal, indispensable and evident to human reason. It is in the light of this law that the family is seen as the fundamental and natural unit of the society. In the abstract to his work on “The Natural Law of the Family”, Ryan C. MacPherson maintains that the fundamental unit of the created order, as governed by natural law is the “natural family” – namely, the lifelong union of one man and one woman, together with their children.¹⁵ While writing about the natural family, Ekedobe Camillus making reference to Jane Adolphe writes:

The natural family is established by the coming together of a man and a woman in a marital community which creates the publicly acknowledged status as husband and wife. This in turn leads to a community of parents and child, i.e. parental community.

This parental community establishes the societal accepted relationships as mother and father, brother and sister, son and daughter. This culminates in the societal community- the relationship between the family and the state. It is from this relationship that we get the general knowledge that the family is the basic unity of society.¹⁶

The Definition of the Family according to Civil Law

In the article “The International Protection of Family Members' Rights as the 21st Century Approaches” by Geraldine Van Bueren, published in *Human Rights Quarterly* in 1995, her impression about the definition of the family is worth noting:

It is somewhat ironic that, even after the passing of the International Year of the Family, there still is some confusion as to precisely the nature of the institution that is being celebrated. Although international treaty law salutes the family as the basic unit upon which society is organized, the family is still a concept in transition.¹⁷

While the civil society and law acknowledge that the family is the natural and fundamental unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State, they still lack a standard definition of it. They lack the standard definition because of the growing metamorphosis in the society which has resulted in the outcry from some quarters towards a redefinition of the family. Efforts to deviate from the natural definition of it have inevitably led to confusion about the standard definition of the family in the civil society. It is, therefore, not surprising that they can enunciate laws about the right to family life, as indicated by the provisions of international conventions, encompassing the following: the right to marry; the right to be a parent; equality between the sexes within the family context; protection for children within the family context; and the family’s right to privacy. The right to family life also includes the right of individuals within the family not to be exposed to physical violence or verbal abuse, the right of family members to live together in the same country (“family unification”), the right of single-parent families and large families to receive state assistance, protection for working mothers and safeguards related to pregnancy and childbirth, the right to benefit from the educational and cultural resources of the state, the right to an adequate standard of living, and the right to family health services. These rights are not based on a clear, standard definition of the term “family,” but rather derive from an individual examination of the various needs and functions of the family.

Determining the scope of the right to family life, and identifying those persons entitled to benefit from it, mainly depends on the definition given to the term “family.” However, it appears impossible to find a single, clear, exhaustive, and standard definition for the concept of the “family,” whether in international law, comparative law¹⁸ or other civil laws.

III. RELIGION AND THE DEFINITION OF THE FAMILY

Religion is as old as man. It is claimed to have begun as a spontaneous reaction to man’s immediate awareness of a living power that is mysterious, invisible and awesome. Through religion, man shows his total dependence on the Supreme Being whom he expects would help him out of his inadequacies. The notion of deity, God, mystery and otherworldliness is central to the expression of religion. When the bond of relation between the human being and divine is discovered and established by the natural light of reason, it is natural religion, for example, our native African religions. When it is revealed by supernatural means, it is supernatural

religion, for example, the Christian religion. There is no one religion rather we have plurality of it. All of them point to the relation between the human being and the divine.

When we turn to the discussion on the family, we discover that there are some variations in some elements of the family in some religions though the central understanding remains the same. Thus, though some religions may favour polygamy, the definition of family as a permanent, monogamous, heterosexual institution based on marriage, including the resulting offspring has generally been maintained. Marriage which is the family's foundation is an institution that does not depend upon man but on God Himself.

Rediscovering the Definition of the Family and its Implication for Africa

Having considered different definitions from different angles, it is time to posit a holistic definition of the family this paper intends to rediscover. This effort is geared towards offering a definition that retains the essential elements of the family in other words, returning to the essentialist notion of the family. This means that the etymological, natural law, sociological, civil and religious definitions will play a role in giving us the type of definition that has stood and will continue to stand the test of time. In this regard, the family can be defined as *an institution designed by God and implanted in human nature whereby a man and a woman bonded together in marriage together with their children either by birth or adoption form the natural and fundamental unit of the society.*

This definition acknowledges that the family is God's design not man's design. It is the product of natural law and conforms to human nature. The constituents of the family include the man and woman joined in marriage and their children either by birth or by adoption. This family forms fundamental unit of the society. This definition contains the essential elements of the family. Omitting any of the elements gives room for pejorative interpretation.

Consequently, it is simply false to argue that there is no relatively fixed definition of "family." The human record honestly confronted shows that the family is a natural, universal and irreplaceable community rooted in human nature. The family, in all ages and in all corners of the globe, starts when a man and woman are bonded together through a socially-approved covenant of marriage to regulate sexuality; to bear, raise, and protect children; to provide mutual care and protection; to create a small home economy, and to maintain continuity between the generations, those going before and those coming after. It is out of the reciprocal, naturally recreating relations of the family that broader communities grow, such as tribes, villages, peoples, and nations.

There is no doubt that disciples of change with regard to marriage and family will not accept the concept of natural family or traditional family. Be it as it may, this article upholds the natural family as it is established by the natural law. Accepting same sex marriage in the standard definition of the family would be abusing what the family stands for. Such abuse has ugly consequences for the traditional family. For instance, what would happen to procreation? Ethicists have decried immorality of In-vitro fertilization without much practical success. With this re-definition, there is no doubt that procreation will soon be totally artificial and our babies will become laboratory babies or agric babies. Marriage will become a celebration of sodomy! Universalizing and legalizing 'defects' will turn to be solutions to the defects! If the re-definition is accepted, then there is no doubt that we are canonizing abortion, the use of contraceptives, divorce and related issues.

Holding unto the rediscovered definition would mean holding unto the idea that the family is the basic unit of the society. It would also mean holding unto the structure that promotes and sustains our African Cultural Values like sense of community life, sense of good human relations, sense of the sacredness of life, respect for human sexuality, sense of hospitality, sense of the sacred and of religion, etc. Erosion of this idea of the family would mean jeopardizing our cultural and family values.

IV. CONCLUSION

Redefinition of the family has bothered on change. No reasonable person will abhor positive changes in the society. In the same way, positive changes that are in accordance with the family's nature should be welcome. There is always permanence in the face of changes. A good definition retains the permanence. That permanence is the thing's nature which defines it. Altering the definition of the family is altering the core or essence of the family. Thus, gender equality is a welcome development in the family institution but that does not make marriage genderless nor does it entail same-sex marriage. Adoption among couples is a welcome development but it is not meant to promote same-sex marriage. Fighting for human rights both male and female is worthwhile but it does not entail promoting what is *anti-natura*! There is need to encourage the positive changes that are in accord with nature and damn the negative changes. Africans should, therefore, hold on to their natural conception of the family. There is need to be watchful of the effects of globalization that jeopardize our family structure and values. Retaining the essentialist notion of the family is the way to maintain the natural family in the globalized Africa. Such definition will keep our family values intact.

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