The Impact of the Extended Family System on Socio-Ethical Order in Igboland

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Abstract
This paper on the Impact of the Extended Family System on Socio-ethical Order in Igboland, focuses on the relevance of the extended family system in the maintenance of socio-ethical order in Igboland. The paper highlights the integrative functions of the extended family system in the pristine Igbo society. It shows how Western civilization has affected the extended family system thereby undermining its integrative role in Igbo Society. The paper also recognizes the need for change in the face of strong Western cultural influence. The paper finally cautions that Western Culture borrowings should not be done at the expense of relevant socio-ethical institutions, such as, the extended family system.

Keywords: Extended family system; socio-ethical order in Igboland; traditional religious system

Introduction
The Extended family system is one of the popular and important socio-cultural and ethical institutions of Igbo traditional society. It played an important role in the development of the individual and in the maintenance of socio-ethical order in Igboland. The extended family refers to that patrilineal social structure or unit, which has a man, his brothers, sisters and their immediate families and who can trace their origin by blood to a common ancestor or progenitor.

According to Lorimer (1995), the extended family is “a group of people closely related by blood, e.g. children and their parents, their cousins, their aunts and uncles” (340). There are many types of the extended family system in Africa but one common element or factor in all is marriage. Marriage is of vital importance in the extended family system. This is because without marriage, there would be no genealogy to trace. Perhaps, this is why Uchendu (1995) observed that:

Marriage creates four-kinship matrices: husband-father, wife-mother, brother-brother, sister-sister, which are packaged into eight basic kinship syndromes. Husband-wife, father-son, mother-son, father-daughter, mother-daughter, sister-sister, brother-brother and brother-sister. (40)

Every community in Igboland has its own type of extended family system. The extent to which each type of genealogy could be traced or the importance attached to each basic structure is determined by each community. By way of a working definition, we shall depend on Uchendu’s (1995) definition as our model in this paper. In other words, Uchendu’s definition will serve as our operational definition in understanding the dynamics and functions of the extended family system in Igboland.

Implicit in Uchendu’s notion of the extended family as a social system, is the fact that, it is marked by persistent patterns of social relationships which prevail from generation
American Journal of Social Issues & Humanities Vol.2 No.4. (July 2012)

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to generation. It commands certain resources, integrative mechanisms and sanctions such as, norms, power status and prestige, which facilitate the attainment of its objectives. This is why we have chosen Uchendu’s definition as our model because it perfectly agrees with our understanding of the extended family system and its dynamics in Igbo society.

In Igbo land, using certain integrative mechanisms such as norms and values, the extended family serves as a vehicle for the maintenance of socio-ethical order in society. It has the power and authority to exert influence in the attitudes, behaviors and conducts of individual members of its unit. Its influence covers the area of social relationships, interaction and morality.

We may define the extended family as a social system lacking a fixed number of specifiable positions (e.g. husband – father, wife – mother), but consisting of two or more familiar positions of which one or more resulting dyads is not a nuclear dyad. (Uchendu 1995: 41)

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine the extended family system in Igbo land in relation to its integrative functions, for the maintenance of socio-ethical order in society.

**Integrative Functions of Extended Family System**

(i) **Imparting of Traditional Education**

The family and by implication, the extended family is the cradle of the domestication of the individual in society. The extended family performs the function of educating and teaching the members of its unit the correct customs and tradition or *omenala* of the society. It guides every member through a well-articulated practical system of traditional education to become good and obedient citizens of the society. The extended family in which a child is born and in which he grows up helps in the shaping of the behaviour of the child. Hence the family or extended family environment and training deeply affects the character of the child and leaves a lasting impression on the child. Unless a stronger cultural influence overshadows this initial influence, the child or the individual lives a life closely related to the initial upbringing. According to Ejiofor (1981), “The first years of life in the family, the experience of authority and discipline of the family…constitute the most rapid and binding stage of socialization, more of an impact occurs here than at any other point in the process” (87).

The process which sociologists refer to as ‘socialization’ began in the extended family circles. Hence “the inherent strength of the family represents the first social base of man and his main support in his years of formation” (Ejiofor, 1981: 87). It is in the extended family unit that the basic cultural norms and values, dos and don’ts, the ethical principles and moral demands of the society, are inculcated in the lives of its members. This early education and the constant guidance, acted as a tonic, which nourished the lives of individuals and enabled them to absorb the shocks of life experiences in Igbo society. Values such as respect for elders and one’s seniors, hardwork or diligence, loyalty, honesty, obedience and discipline were imparted to the lives of individuals in the extended family unit. These teachings help to integrate the members of each extended family unit into the larger society in conformity with its cultural heritage.

(ii) **Discipline**

To inculcate and instill discipline is one of the major functions of the extended family in Igbo society. A well-behaved child or individual is the pride of his kin group. To ensure discipline amongst its members, the extended family has a system of reward and punishment. Each extended family unit ensures compliance to cultural norms, customs and values by adopting tough disciplinary measures. Individuals were required to measure up fully to the
high expectations of their kin group, through responsible and honest participation in the socio-political and domestic affairs of the unit and the society at large. Deviants were severely punished as a deterrent to others. For instance, in the days of slave trade, stubborn children were not loved and were always sold into slavery. The moral upbringing of the child is the general responsibility of all within the kinship group. A child does not belong to his biological parents alone. Hence the saying, “he who hears the cry of a child should hurry to his/her rescue or assistance because a child does not belong to one person”. The implication of this saying is that children were jointly owned because all belong to the same ancestor bound by blood ties. To this end, Ilogu (1974) observes “members of the extended family take it upon themselves to correct, teach and admonish the child: sometimes a child’s aunt or uncle or cousin can take away the child into his or her own household to rear, especially when the child’s mother is regarded (as being) incompetent” (25). The participation of the extended family members in child upbringing is made easier because members lived closely together in a compound social structure. As a result of this, the child was always under the watchful eyes and guidance of many people. This situation makes it difficult for a child to misbehave or go against the customs of the society. However, when a child misbehaves, any member of the extended family has the right to punish or discipline the child without the consent of the biological parents. The authority which tradition confers on individuals within the kin group to discipline an erring child in the absence of the biological parents contributed to a large degree the high level of discipline and morality that existed in pristine Igbo societies.

(iii) Social Security For Its Members

The extended family system provided a variety of social security for its members. In time of crisis, it served as a place of refuge and a safe heaven for its members. Any member who finds himself in a serious crisis runs to his or her mother’s home to take refuge. In such a place, the individual is culturally and customarily protected and safe. More often than not, such an individual remained there until reconciliation and settlement of the problem is concluded, at the end of which he could return home to his father’s own house or village. In Things Fall Apart, when Okonkwo committed accidental murder of a kinsman, and was banished from his own community, he ran to his mother’s village, where he had immunity, to take refuge. Similarly, when a child does something wrong and is being pursued by his father or mother, he usually runs into the household of one of the extended family members for refuge. The tradition of Igboland forbids the pursuer from going into such a home to forcefully seize the child or for the owner of the household into which the child has taken refuge to hand over the child without first settling the problems. It behooves on the owner of the household to keep the child in his house safe while he initiates and settles the problem.

In times of death or when any member of the extended family is bereaved, all the other members will rally around to condole, help and assist the bereaved member in the burial of the deceased. They jointly participate in the raising of the funds and materials required for the burial as well as take active part in the various burial activities. The role which the members of the extended family play at such occasions helps to reduce the level of psychological trauma of the bereaved member. Consequently, the extended family system helps to build a bond of fellowship, solidarity, love, unity and progress among its members.

The incest taboo (sexual relations between blood relatives) is also one of the means through which socio-ethical order and morality is maintained in the extended family system in Igboland. Consequently, no marriage is legal until certified by members of one’s extended family system. The extended family must satisfy itself that the intending couples have no trace of blood relationship no matter how minute, either from the mother’s or father’s lineage. This is because tradition forbids marriage between two individuals who have blood
relationships in many parts of Igboland. It is an abomination for such a marriage to take place in such communities.

(iv) Economic Security and Empowerment

Within the extended family universe in Igboland, economic activities were in most cases jointly pursued. All members of the kinship universe are encouraged to be diligent and honest in their economic pursuits. Honest economic achievements and exploits were praised and rewarded, sometimes with chieftaincy titles, while ill-gotten wealth is not tolerated.

Based on the communalistic nature of life in pre-colonial Igbo societies, a strong bond of solidarity prevailed among all the component units of the extended family. Progress and development in one unit means progress and development in the other components. In this regard, Ejiro (1981) rightly observes, “affluence or poverty, honor or shame, gain or loss reflects on the entire image of the extended family” (39). What affects one member of the kinship unit, whether positive or negative, affects other members. This is why the Igbo of Nigeria says, “When the eye cries, the nose also cry”, because they are inseparable and intricately united by blood.

Individuals provide farming assistance to one another. If a member of the group does not have enough food or seed crops to plant, other more fortunate members of the unit will loan him some at no interest. At the same time, they also lend a helping hand to the individual in the cultivation of such crops. The reason for all this assistance is to encourage the individual to engage in honest and diligent economic activity, to prevent him from indulging in acts capable of tarnishing the image of the extended family unit. The need to help one another, to be law-abiding, disciplined, achievement oriented and to preserve the good name of the extended family, is the duty of every member of the unit.

However, these situations of life thrived effectively in pre-colonial Igbo society but today the story is different. With the introduction of Christianity, western education and cultural values, things are no longer the way they used to be. Modern Igbo society has undergone a tremendous change and transformation.

Impact of Western Culture on Extended Family System in Igboland

Before Igboland’s contact with Western civilization and culture, the extended family system provided a conducive environment for the inculcation and maintenance of socio-ethical principles of life. The concepts of love, justice, honesty, decency and diligent pursuit of wealth, depended largely on the strict adherence to traditional ethics as taught by the elders. The Igbo society functioned effectively on communal rather than on individual basis. The individual functioned within the ambit of the community. According to Emenanjo (2001) “the Igbo of innocence was a community dweller and a team worker” (13). The spirit of love, cooperation and solidarity characterized life in which successes and failures were collectively shared. It was then a duty to belong and to identify with one’s community. “Kinship ties defined the status and roles of every person in the society and determined the behaviours of members towards themselves and the outside world” (Ifemesia, 1979: 40). Ekwuru (1999) also agrees with Ifemesia when he says that the Igbo society was characterized by, “a deep spirit of communalism, which involved a sense of concern in other people’s affairs, (where) problems and responsibilities were shared and shouldered by all” (65). Implicit in all these views, is the Igbo saying that, “a tree cannot make a forest”, meaning that an individual cannot function or prosper on his own all alone, without an interaction or co-operation with other individuals. But as the saying goes, change is the only constant factor in all human endeavors. Accordingly, no culture is static. In the words of
Vogt (1972) “culture is never static, rather one of its most fundamental properties is change” (556).

The extended family social system has witnessed changes in varying respects and degrees, in the face of Igbo land’s contact with Western civilization. Onunwa (1990) recognizes the existence of this change when he observes that, “a new social order is emerging partly out of the old and partly as a response to the new contact with powerful external change agents” (31). The rise of the nuclear family system in Igbo land which is of Western cultural origin, has dealt a severe blow on the extended family system in Igbo land.

The nuclear family system of Western civilization, with its emphasis on monogamy and individualism, has grossly diminished the influence of the extended family on members of the society. The spirit of solidarity, which characterized life in the extended family, has given way to individual life and living. A situation where members of the extended family no longer have the right to discipline and control children of their blood brothers and sisters has helped to undermine the moral life and discipline of children in the society. Hence, one of the disturbing situations of life in modern Igbo society is the apparent lack of morality among our youths. This is because the social mechanism for the enforcement of traditional values, such as the extended family system has been displaced. According to Nwala (1985),

Morality, under the present circumstances is becoming a secular affair and people are thinking and behaving according to the way they are influenced by the forces of the present society...a society in which individualism reigns supreme and in which the individual is morally free and responsible to none but himself (239).

The implication of Nwala’s observation is that, Western cultural influence has destroyed to a large extent, the communality of life which was the bedrock of the extended family system. In its place, individuality of life has emerged and the influence and authority of the extended family no longer counts. Communal morality has been replaced by individual morality, leading to indiscipline and moral anarchy.

However, it must be recognized that Western cultural contact with Igbo land produced ambivalent results. It enshrined both good and bad effects in Igbo land’s social life and living. Consequently, African scholars according to Njoku (2002) “do not dispute the relevance of Western contact with Africa. However many are convinced that Africa naively gave up a lot in its contact with the West” (214). It is true that the extended family system in Igbo land provided moral and socio-economic assistance to its members primarily, but ultimately, its aim was to build a disciplined society. While one recognizes the fact that, interaction and integration are essential characteristics of the emerging global community, Igbo land must not be lost in this community in an attempt to become a part of it. In other words, while borrowing from Western cultural ideas, healthy socio-cultural institutions such as the extended family system must be recognized and allowed to stay. This is because its contribution to the maintenance of peace, socio-ethical order and discipline in society are inalienable facts of Igbo land’s historical evolution and moral development.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the impact of the extended family system on the socio-ethical life of Igbo land. The paper discussed the various functions of the extended family and their impact on the moral life of the people.

The paper notes that the extended family system provided a conducive environment for the inculcation of socio-ethical and moral ideals, discipline and learning, which are
indices of social harmony in Igboland. It exposes the effects of Western cultural influence on the workings and dynamics of the extended family system.

Finally, the paper cautions that, while borrowing from the abundant Western cultural ideas and values, socio-cultural institutions of relevance, such as the extended family system should be preserved.

References