

Socio-Cultural Impact of Inter Ethnic Marriages in Nigeria

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Abstract

Marriage has been widely defined as the union of a man and a woman for a number of reasons whether intra or inter ethnic marriages. Preferences in the marriages of whether within or outside ethnic group has attracted considerable concern. This paper, therefore, determined the socio-cultural impact of inter ethnic marriages in Nigeria. It also explained some concepts, x-rayed the challenges and then proffered strategies for improvement.

Key words: Culture, marriage, inter-ethnic marriage.

1. Introduction

The word “marriage” derives from middle English *marriage* which first appeared in 1250-1300 CE. This in turn is derived from old French *Marier* (to Mary) and ultimately Latin *Mari tare* meaning to provide with a husband or wife and *Maritari* meaning to get married. The adjective *marit-us-a,-um* meaning matrimonial or nuptial could also be used in the masculine form as a noun for “husband” and in the feminine form for “wife”. The related word “Matrimony” derives from the old French word *matremoine* which appeared around 1300 CE and ultimately derives from Latin *matrimonium* which combines the two concepts *mater* meaning “mother” and the suffix *-monium* signifying “action, state or condition”.

Marriage, therefore, is the union of a man with a woman so that they will live together and bear children. Individuals may marry for several reasons, including legal, social, libidinal, emotional, financial, spiritual and religious purposes. Whom they marry may be influenced by socially determined rules of incest, prescriptive marriage rules, parental choice and individual desire. In some areas of the world, arranged marriage, child marriage, polygamy and sometimes forced marriage may be practiced as a cultural tradition (Wikipedia, 2015). Culture in this sense is the totality of peoples’ way of life.

In most cultures in today’s Nigeria, many still frown at inter-cultural marriages. They are sometimes prohibited, regarded as a forbidden endeavour if a family is to retain its high societal standing. What is often at stake is cultural pride and the need to chase purity. There have been more resistance when women cross those cultural lines than

when it is done by men for obvious reasons. It is evident in Igbo land, in Yoruba land, in Hausa land, and as well across the country. Every ethnic group in Nigeria most certainly has its hang-ups about another. It is seemingly pervasive across the land, most parents would simply prefer that their children marry from the same ethnic groups from families they are already familiar with and can vouch for. But we should note that in these times, marrying from the same ethnic group does not in any way guarantee success of such a union.

Different ethnic groups recognize patterns and types of marriages according to their culture. When two parties of different cultural extractions get attracted to each other to a level of marital possibilities, such a union is referred to as cultural marriage. At times, cultural interaction, produces cultural conflicts, which generate in many folds suspicion, tension, disagreement, ethnic pride and identity, that lead to reconciliation processes in the forms of dialogue and mutual negotiation. Some inter ethnic marriages break shortly after wedding leaving the man and the women to regret. The stigma people hold on the inter-ethnic marriages has attracted considerable concern that leads to some questions. Does it mean that marrying outside one's tribe does not naturally favour people or that a lot of peculiar challenges come in as soon as the marriages establish?. Could it be that the marriage formulae or strategies adopted by the couples are grossly inadequate? The answers to these questions are therefore, the worry which this article tries to answer.

2. Conceptual Clarification

Some of the terms inherent in this paper were discussed for clarity.

I. Culture: Generally, culture is defined as peoples' way of life. According to Anyanwu (2002), culture is the aggregate of the social, ethical, intellectual, artistic, governmental and industrial attainments of a community, and by which it can be distinguished from any other community. It includes the ideas, traditions, customs, usages, institutions, associations and material objects characteristic of such community. Uka (1966) argues that culture consists of a set of patterned and functionally interrelated customs common to specifiable individual human beings composing specifiable social groups or categories. Culture, therefore, constitutes the answer to the need for adaptive behavior in man, and is a patterned activity, humanly developed and discovered, and socially learned, socially shared and socially transmitted from individual to individual and from generation to generation.

II. Marriage: Marriage, also called matrimony or wedlock, is a socially or ritually recognized union or legal contract between spouses that establishes right and obligations between them, between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws. The definitions of marriage vary according to different cultures, but it is principally an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually sexual, are acknowledged. In some cultures, marriage is recommended or considered to be compulsory before pursuing any sexual activity. When defined broadly, marriage is considered a cultural universal (Wikipedia, 2015). In the same vein, Catholic Education Resources Centre (2015) defined marriage as the union of man and woman who make a permanent and exclusive commitment to each other of the type that is natural (inherently) fulfilled by bearing and rearing children together. In other words, marriage is

the process by which two people, male and female make their relationship public, official and permanent. It is the joining of two people in a bond that lasts until death or cut short by divorce.

III. Inter Ethnic Marriage: Inter-ethnic or interracial marriage occurs when two people of differing racial groups marry. This is often a form of exogamy (marriage outside of one's social group), and can be seen in the broader context of miscegenation (mixing of different racial groups in marriage, cohabitation or sexual relations (Wikipedia, 2015). Inter-ethnic marriage involves cohabitation, sexual relations, marriage or inter-breeding involving persons of different races, especially in historical contexts as a transgression of the law. Webster's New World College Dictionary (2010) equally defined inter-ethnic marriage as a relationship between, among or involving members of two or more ethnic groups.

3. Impacts of/why Inter-Ethnic Marriage

Marriage is the oldest established form of human behaviour providing kinship ties and an avenue for peacemaking between tribes. Beyond this, it does not only imply kinship; marriage can also be an exchange of goods and culture (Mehmet, 2012). Thus, every marriage, be it homogamy or heterogamy, contains its own acculturation, assimilation and integration process in accordance with its social environment. In addition, social and historical conditions lead to different events and interpretations on a regional basis. Human relationships which exist in their own social reality, must be understood in its historical and political context. In pre-modern times, within the tribal social order, marriage and its results had different dimensions to those of modern times. In the wake of the nation-state building of modern times, intermarriage has been a device for the application of the ideological framework of political structures. Nonetheless, despite these temporal, regional and political factors, debates on intermarriage share the same conceptual foci: integration, assimilation and cultural hybridization.

The family has a key role in cultural transfer to future generations in traditional social structure (Galvin, 2001). The function of culture and tradition transfer and the importance of marriage relationships underline their importance for society, particularly within a patriarchal context (Delaney, 2001). The exchange of women between social groups or families can be of great significance. Strong allegiances and enmities alike have been perpetuated by women or marriages between kinship groups, villages and other small communities. The first requirement for a new kinship is marriage, which then creates a blood tie. Marriage ties are like a bridge, with effects growing down through the generations and over the years among Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Mesopotamian and other nomadic people (Tillions, 2006). A Jewish saying emphasizes the importance of consanguinity: "Blood never turns into water!"

The marriage of two people brings about more complex and wide-reaching impacts within the system of kinship relationships. In the traditional social system in particular, in the absence of literary cultural institutions, the language spoken in everyday life is the main instrument for the transfer of cultural heritage (Hassanpour, 1996). Teaching language to the new generation and preserving it day to day life forms the primary way of keeping traditions and facts, keeping a language alive and transferring it to the next generation is more than just learning.

Furthermore, reason for inter ethnic marriages may be because of education similarities that will ensure compatibility of standard in the couples educational qualifications. For example, a male medical doctor may see another female medical doctor from another ethnic groups and decides to ask her hands into marriage. In political terrain, especially Nigerian politics, politicians from different ethnic groups may like themselves and decide to marry each other. The same thing applies to those who transact business and others who have personal charisma in them that attracts opposite sex for marriage.

4. Challenges of Inter-Ethnic Marriages

Marriage in itself is full of challenges which come at various stages and to almost every union. This can be easily explained owing to the fact that the two individuals have their different beliefs, traits characters, orientation and interests. Most people naturally have a distinct picture of what their marriage or home would be. The expectation is always perfect home. Unfortunately, conflicts come from time to time which are usually resolved by the two individuals but in some cases with the intervention of third party which could be another member of the family, friend and sometimes a spiritual sibling or guardian.

Some of the major challenges as pointed out in Egberipou's work (2010) and elaborated by the author include the following:

I. Money: This has a very important role to play in the lives of the individual as well as family and the couple. The presence of it makes life a lot easier but the lack of it poses so much threat to a marriage and this could challenge the authority of the man as the head of the house; thus, challenging the marriage. Certain ethnic groups in Nigeria believe that a man must be made or financially reasonably stable, with much emphasis before he can be given a wife. If at some point their finances are threatened, the parents of the girl would almost suggest their daughter quits. Families constantly wobble and sometimes threaten to collapse, obviously many happen daily. Modern ideologies are not helping to build homes and they pile up against our cultural values which on the long run affect marriages negatively. This especially becomes worse when the lady looks for money on several occasions and the so called husband still maintains that there is no money. The only option that is left for the lady is to find her way.

II. Communication: Still on the question of cultural differences, the indigenous language is most times put aside for a rather neutral national language or worse still, foreign language or the official language (English) in many homes in Nigeria. Illiterate parents expect that their would be sister in-law should understand their language for easy communication and where they do not, communication would be limited and gossips come in that may threaten the marriage. Besides, younger women these days have to contend with especially sisters and mother in-law over their style of dressing, she may find quite comfortable but to the in-laws, it may not reflect the symbol of "married woman" it could be interpreted to mean non submission or being uncultured if she does not cover her body all the time especially outside the house. It could be the issue of short dresses, trousers or make-ups. To the wife, she might not see it in this light. Yet this could be brought about by not just the culture but the religious doctrines and

traditional beliefs of the ethnic group her husband comes from or even her own, though the men usually do not encounter problems with their dressing or appearance. In this case though, each person's attitude towards the other's cultural differences is what makes the difference; for the purpose of knowing more or well enough of the family or ethnic group you are to joined with, do not hasten into the marriage.

III. Ethnic group he/she comes from: Emphasis is placed on area of weakness of people from that ethnic group. For the non-literate parents, they are concerned with the medium for communication between the two families, especially the son or daughter in questions bothering on family history, for example sicknesses, death, character, occupation, size of family, success and failures cannot be fully or satisfactorily investigated. So, from the on set the parents see these as posing a very big challenge and issues that call for concern. Nevertheless, the intending couple tries painfully and sometimes unsatisfactorily to explain some of these concerns to them. Where there is discrepancies between the two families on the family history, problems set in to the detriment of the marriage.

IV. Cultural differences: This brings a lot of strain in an inter-ethnic union. Naturally, the different ethnicities bring a lot of challenges and are worth it if the partners discuss and if possible study, by way of researching and reading books about the culture of the ethnic groups the partner comes from. It is indeed a lot of work but in the long run you are better informed, you would not be biased and could be in better position to educate the rest members of the family and friends who may have earlier expressed concerns.

By interaction, the intending couple learns what is expected of a son in-law. It could be by way of simple gestures, pleasantries, gifts and so on. On the part of the lady, tasks as simple as serving food to the in-laws which may require particular style, she may need to gesticulate. The husband too might be very down to earth or home-boy type who would always prefer local delicacies and soups from his area (village), these the women must learn from the on set. Modern ladies do not find this interesting as sometimes, they find it not convenient to do but on the long run it affects the relationship not just between her and her husband, but even the relatives who go on gossiping against the lady that she is not worth it. What it implies is non conformity to their culture and for their brother to change mind over the lady, hence the marriage is threatened.

V. Mutual Respect: This is very important in inter-ethnic marriage. As much as we know of the secret fears parents of both partners might entertain at some point, there seem to be higher degree of respect for each others family especially coming from two different ethnic groups. Where the two families do not respect each other, problems set in. The reason might be that one family is richer than the other and wants the poor family to always respect her or that both families are rich, each saying; what are they?

VI. Gender Roles: Some ethnic groups have it that women should work very hard, if not harder than the men to be able to cater for the needs of the family. There are others too, who do not believe in women taking up white collar jobs not withstanding the level of western education she may have acquired. Yet another ethnic group believes that a woman sits at home to take care of the home, while making babies and "watch" them grow. In some areas, it is

believed that once a woman marries, she takes one or two of her siblings with her and it becomes the responsibility of her and her husband to train them and even those left behind in the village. Consequently, the man in this situation may not find it interesting but he is forced to comply, because that is what the tradition demands from the wife's side. It may be alien to the man's cultural practices and this may affect the smooth running of the home due to economic strain and lack of privacy in some cases. At times, some women do not allow their husbands to pay the school fees of their brothers and sisters just to make sure that their brothers' and sisters' schooling is fully sponsored. In this case, when the relatives of their husbands hear this, they will make sure that the marriages are threatened so that the women suffer.

VII. Sex. It is something out of place for the topic "sex" to be mentioned or even discussed among some races. It is considered a taboo. This goes a long way affecting a lot of things with one of the parties realizing it on time. For example, the man may come from an ethnic group where it is believed that a woman has no say when it comes to the number of children they should have. For this reason, the issue of child spacing or family planning becomes a serious burden on the woman who may not win the sympathy of her husband since it is not hers to decide, but of the god's or God. In such a union, the woman must cooperate all the time. This tells on her physically, psychologically and even the finances of the family might be affected which happens to be the case most of the time as the standard is brought below average. The woman is usually highly upset and may begin to question the religious or cultural belief that has brought her under such 'bondage'. Worse still, if a woman commits adultery which the 'land' of the husband forbids, marriage would be threatened.

VIII. Polygamy: Women generally dread polygamous marriage apart from those who are bound to accept it as a religious obligation. Circumstances varying from inability of the woman to bear male children sometimes bring about pressure from the in-laws or even the husband to take another wife who would bear them male children/grandchildren as they consider it a serious setback where male children are not born to the family. On medical advice too, it might be that a woman cannot and should not attempt to have more than two children, which may not augur well with the man who would say that where he comes from (ethnic background), it is a taboo to bear only two children. As such, he goes for a second wife to produce more children.

Other Challenges of both Intra and Inter Ethnic Marriages include:

IX. Unresolved marriage issues: These are often the major stress points in marriage. Even in quite strong relationships, there are times of tension and marriage difficulties caused by unresolved marriage issues. It is when they begin to really take over a relationship and cause real difficulties that advice needs to be sought. Issues in marriage are many and varied, and should be discussed and settled before they threaten the marriage.

X. Job versus Family: Difficulties often arise when one partner puts his/her job ahead of their family. Working long hours in a job is something that many married people use as an excuse to avoid dealing with other matters such as having to help the children or helping prepare the evening meal. A working spouse may also be very ambitious and feel it necessary to work long hours to impress the boss. Either way marital relationships suffer.

XI. Bad habits can be a marriage killer: One spouse's bad habits can develop into more than an irritation for their partner; they can often be the determining factor for a couples marriage breakup.

In no particular order, here are some of the top annoying, disgusting and irritating behaviours that can grow into monumental marriage issues that are constantly referred to by marriage couples: bad hygiene habit, leaving dirty clothes on the bedroom floor, breaking wind in your partners presence, always putting one's self first in all matters, constantly altering the order of things in the home, lack of personal hygiene, not tidying up their own mess, lying or hiding the truth, drinking to excess, monopolizing conversations, criticizing your spouse in public, childish behaviour, flirting, nagging, neglecting grooming, among others.

5. Strategies for Overcoming Problems of Marriages

To ameliorate the challenges every marriage goes into, the following prospective strategies are proffered:

- I. Do your best to make the introductory meeting as pleasant and enjoyable as possible. First impressions are difficult to be forgotten.
- II. Make sure you tell you fiancé/fiancée from the beginning the details of your culture especially the ones that are dear to your family. Example, some cultures require actually kneeling or prostration when greeting elders, while a simple curtsy or bow would do for others.
- III. Do your best to discourage stereotypes and emphasize that each person is an individual and should be regarded as such. Sweeping statements like "Igbo people are usually very..." or "Yoruba people always..." should be avoided. If you accept the positive generalizations, you will also be expected to accept negative ones.
- IV. Develop an interest in the history and culture of your intended's ethnic group. If you are not familiar with their cuisine, be ready to learn how to prepare and enjoy at least your intended's favorite dishes.
- V. Accept the fact that marrying someone whose language you do not understand may make it difficult for you to bond with their family and you may not be able to bear people talking around you, and maybe about you, without understanding what they are saying.
- VI. Always do your best to include your intended in conversations with your family. If they refuse to speak English, or are more comfortable carrying on lengthy conversations in your own language, be ready to interpret.
- VII. Know that if a wife does not understand her husband's language, the children may never learn it. Be open to the possible of this and make peace with it.
- VIII. Know that you may face intense opposition from members of your family, so you must embrace patience and make sure that what you and your partner share is strong enough to weather the storm.

- IX. Frustrations will arise – don't take them out on your beloved. Always remind yourself why you chose this person.
- X. Don't lose your essence in a bid to prove that you will make a son-in-law or daughter-in-law. If trying to become a part of this family is changing you, and you don't like who you are becoming, it may be time to call it quits. Marriage is a lifetime commitment and forever is a long time to be unhappy.
- XI. Learn how to make decisions cooperatively.
- XII. Increase the positive energies you give to your partner e.g. smile more, touch more, hug more, more kisses, more sex, more shared time, shared projects and more appreciation.
- XIII. Show remorse when you err (e.g. pardon me, sorry).
- XIV. Learn how to express concern rationally.
- XV. Look back at your parents' marriage strengths and weaknesses and decide what difference you can make in your own marriage.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that marriage is a union of a man and a woman who agreed to live together and bear children and can be separated by either death, divorce or annulment. Individuals marry for several reasons and from any where they like both within or outside their ethnic groups. When it comes to choosing a partner, many Nigerians are still guided by ethnic affiliations. Some families still frown at inter-ethnic marriages because of challenges that occur frequently that break the marriages. To overcome the challenges, a number of strategies were proffered which if employ, will engender positive outcome that will strengthen the marriages.

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