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African Socio-Religio Cultural Understanding of Family and Parenting: A Case of the Agikuyu, Kenya

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Abstract:

The family is an important unit among the Africans not just for primary socialization but for identity construction as well. It is in the family that one is born, grows, molded and acquires values necessary for human interaction and existence. It is from the family that the society sprouts especially through procreation and parenting. The family, in the African context is thus a sacred institution that binds the other institutions in the society such as religion. In the contemporary African society, however, the family has changed in form and content. Responsible family hood and parenting in the contemporary society seems faulted hence the need to understand the noble task from the traditional African society. This paper examines African understanding of family and parenting in view of explicating how contemporary parenting and family challenges such as those of single parenthood can be addressed. It is done by examining the socio-religio cultural understanding of family and parenting using one African community; namely the Agikūyū as a model for other communities.

Keywords: African, Family, Parenting, Socio-religio cultural

1. Introduction

The family is the basic and primary social unit in the society more so in our African philosophy of life and living. The five main items in African world-view revolve around the family. No wonder Thongori, a family lawyer, strongly posits that Kenyans and by implication Africans “identify largely with their families and then their tribes and ...identify as Kenyans...” (Thongori, 2014:14) Magoha, a renowned former Vice-Chancellor of University of Nairobi with over 70,000 students, also confirms the centrality of family as an African in these words: “As a leader, I work hard, but I also take time to pray and play. One’s family is also important and leaders must find time to share with their family.” (Magoha, 2014:9)

By family, Africans understand not just the earthly one but also the Ancestral one in union with that of the Creator called the Trinitarian Family (Nyamiti, 2010). The main items in the African worldview are vitality, dynamism, sacrality, communality and anthropocentrism (Nyamiti, 2005). The Africans emphasize that life starts, is nurtured, protected and endures in the family through marriage in the procreative act whereby proper parenting is strongly demanded within the community. As such, the family is highly regarded and valued among the Africans for the above reasons and since it is the cradle where basic human values such as love, modesty, communal sharing among others are formed and transmitted from generation to generation.

The institution of the family in the contemporary society however, has been encroached by a number of challenges as a result of such factors as modernity, secularization, individualism, science and technology that have resulted, among other things, in the growth of strange modes of parenting such as single fatherhood and motherhood that are becoming more pronounced day by day in Africa particularly in Kenya. Traditionally, the African society prepared young boys and girls to become responsible men and women. As such, they were expected to marry and be married respectively when of age and acquire fatherhood and motherhood status as united opposite gender couples. They were trained and educated through an elaborate system of rites of passage which include birth and naming, circumcision, marriage, death and Ancestral yonder life. Each of these rites of passage marked transition from one stage of life to another each imbued with diverse responsibilities. The Agikūyū in particular cherished and upheld these rites of passage to date. To appreciate the African understanding and value of family and parenting, the paper explicates the following using Agikūyū as a model for other African communities.

2. Agikūyū Social Organization

The smallest grouping in Agikūyū socio-political organization was the elementary or polygamous domestic family living in the homestead (*mūciī*). A group of homesteads formed a village (*itūūra*). A village might be inhabited by one family group, a part of it or several of them. A group of villages formed a *mwaki*; a unit in which people would assist each other with hot embers to re-light a fire which had gone out. *Mwaki* in turn would be part of a ridge (*rūgongo*). Several ridges formed *būrūri*; a word usually referring to the three large territorial divisions of the whole Agikūyū land namely: *Kabete* (Kīambu), *Metumi* (Mūrang’a) and *Gaki* (Nyeri) (Leakey, 1977).

It is worth noting that the village was an important social and administrative unit. Social and political interaction of everyday life took place at the village level. It actually formed a closely-knit community. Furthermore, all members of the village regardless of their clan origin participated actively in protecting the life of other members of the community. Each one of them was involved in all measures connected with the safety or defense of the village. They were also obliged to each other in bush clearing, cultivation and hut building. Moreover, settling of quarrels and regulation of local affairs was carried out at village level (Leakey, 1977).

The Agikūyū social organization was and is still based on three important aspects which determine the behavior and the status of every individual in the society. These are namely: the family group (*mbarĩ*), the clan (*mũhĩrĩga*) and the age grade (*riika*) (Kenyatta, 1978). The family group was the smallest unit of social organization. It brought together all those related by blood namely: a man, his wife or wives and children and also grand and great grandchildren, who lived on a piece of land.

The Agikūyū society was and is still organized under the patrilineal system. The father or grandfather is thus head of the family and is the custodian of the family property (Kenyatta, 1978). As the head of the family, he ensured that there was peace and harmony among his family members. This was a significant role since his position in the community depended largely on the type of homestead he kept and how well he manages it. A father's capacity to manage his family well was taken as a testimonial of being able to handle well public affairs (Kenyatta, 1978).

Each member of the family was expected to respect each of the other members of the family. The young members in the community were expected to respect and emulate the elderly who were their role models. Likewise, the old were to advise, respect and protect their young members. Most of the ceremonies required the presence and participation of all the family members. In this way, individuals learnt to value family welfare and to see their first responsibility as belonging here (Kinoti, 2013).

The *Mbarĩ* (family group) affairs were coordinated by the *Mbarĩ* Council comprised of all the initiated males who have attained Elderhood status. Normally the Council chose a titular head called a *Mũramati* (guardian) whose primary role was to oversee and ensure harmonious co-existence among the members of the *mbarĩ* such as mediating, being a spokesman in intra-*mbarĩ* affairs as well as administering the *mbarĩ* land and calling the *Mbarĩ* Council when need arose (Muriuki, 1974). The second basic social unit is the clan (*mũhĩrĩga*). Owing to the polygamous system of marriage, a family unit increased rapidly and in a few generations thousands of members of the same *mbarĩ* increased thus rendering it impossible for one *mbarĩ* to continue living together as a group where they could still refer to one another as father, mother, aunt, uncle, and so on. As a result of the loss of these identities, it became necessary to adopt the *mũhĩrĩga* system as the next level of identity after the family (Muriuki, 1974). The clan consists of several families (*mbarĩ*) who have the same clan name and are believed to have descended from one family group in the past. These clans are named after the nine full daughters of Gikūyū and *Mũmbi*.

The inclusion of a wide range of relatives such as uncles, aunts and grandparents in the clan played a significant role in the community. For instance, in issues such as circumcision, boys were mostly referred to their grandfather or a man of their father's age for advice, while girls would be referred to their aunts who were believed to be able to discuss freely with them even that which was considered very secret in life. This played an important role as far as responsible parenting was concerned.

The members of the same *mũhĩrĩga* feel knit together. They meet on all important occasions to render mutual support to one another. In order to preserve this unity, representatives of the *mũhĩrĩga* generally meet on occasions such as marriage, initiation and funeral ceremonies. In such gatherings, the elders bring young members from different family groups and introduce them to the *mũhĩrĩga* and to one another. They are warmly exhorted to cultivate and maintain the feelings of togetherness especially when they grow and take over the leadership of their *mbarĩ*. They must learn to conduct wisely the affairs of their family group, as well as following the correct line of their ancestors in promoting the unity of the whole *mũhĩrĩga* (Kenyatta, 1978).

The Agikūyū thus have a very strong kinship system which is rooted in the ten clans (*mihĩrĩga*). A man always kept his clans' social and religious activities whenever he settled. At the beginning members of one clan settled down in one place but gradually, due to migration, all these clans spread out to wherever new settlements were found. The ties with their ancestors were always kept as far as memory could recall. A person going on a safari or journey did not bother very much with what he would eat on the way or where he would spend the night since every *Mũgikūyū* had in mind one of the traditional proverbs which read *mũciĩ wa ndũgũ ndũhĩtũkagwo*, that is, a relative's homestead is never bypassed. The Agikūyū furthermore have a proverb which says: *wega umaga na mũciĩ*, that is, the family is the first teacher of the moral life.

The third principal unifying factor among the Agikūyū is the age-grade system (*riika*). The *riika* (age-grade) unites and solidifies the whole tribe in all its activities. The *riika* is mostly formed by those circumcised in the same season. Almost every year, thousands of Agikūyū boys and girls were circumcised, thus becoming members of one age-group. Initiation ceremonies (circumcision for boys and girls) brought together young men and women from different family groups and clans. This important event earned the initiates new status, new responsibilities and new privileges symbolized by the giving of a name to the initiates. They form one strong tribal bond and they always act as one body in all tribal matters. They highly respected each other and have strong bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood. Then there is the formation of the different councils of various age-sets, derived from all the clans. These councils coordinate political, social, religious and economic life of the Agikūyū (Kenyatta, 1978).

The clans and the age sets were principal factors in the maintenance of peace, order and harmony of the Agikūyū society. They helped the elders in administrative works. That is why the Agikūyū had a high regard for clans and age groups. However, the work of administration was principally done by the council of elders (*kĩama kia athuri*). They were responsible for keeping law and order as well as the settling of all disputes and conflicts.

3. The Agikūyū Family-hood and Parenting System

The traditional Agikūyū family included parents, children and grandparents. It also included the relatives, such as aunts, uncles and in-laws. It also included the unborn and departed relatives i.e. the living dead. The living dead were alive in the memories of their surviving relatives. They were interested in the matters of the family to which they belonged in their physical life (Mbiti, 1969). That was why any Agikūyū elder before taking any drink would first offer some to the living dead (*aria makomete*). Failure to give offerings would result in misfortunes which would affect the family hence the need for oblation.

The Agikūyū family was thus an inclusive one, and the classificatory system of relationship meant that everyone was catered for (Leakey, 1977). For instance, an orphan, a classificatory mother or father would take the place of his or her dead parents. In the average Agikūyū family, according to Leakey, the bonds of friendships and love which connected a man, his wife or wives and their children were very strong (Leakey, 1977). It was rare for a father to deny a portion of meat to his children or wives.

The Agikūyū family was as well the center of religion. Leakey confirms that in “family worship was more important to the Kikuyu than public worship” (Leakey, 1977:2). Public worship was conducted only on special occasions such as during times of famine and drought. It was in the family circle that children obtained most of their education. This was informal education imparted through stories, legends, proverbs and riddles among others. The father taught his sons while the mother did the same to her daughters. Grandparents as well played a significant role in educating their children on proper morals, code of conduct, their roles and responsibilities among other important lessons. Further education was acquired by the children when they shared in the lives of their parents. For instance, boys would learn herding and hunting skills when they accompanied their fathers to grazing fields while girls would learn how to cook and perform household chores as they help their mothers in their kitchen work. The Agikūyū family functioned under the patrilineal system. Hence, the father was the head of the family who also had the responsibility of providing and protecting the family. He was respected and obeyed by all members of the family (Kenyatta, 1978).

Children had the obligation to obey their parents. A disobedient child was reprimanded by the parents. For instance, Kenyatta reports that such a disobedient or careless child would be told. “If you carry on like this you will never get married, you will disgrace your parents and the clan” (Kenyatta, 1978: 114). But the obedient son or daughter would be well rewarded, especially in the case of the sons where an obedient son would get a bigger share of his father’s inheritance. The fear of the curse by the parents enhanced children’s obedience and being responsible to their duties. A parent could, for instance, curse a disobedient or disrespectful son with the following words “*Ūronyararwo nĩ ciana ciaku oro ta ūgwo ūnyararĩte* (May your children treat you with disrespect as you have treated me” (Kenyatta: 1978: 114).

The rites of passage were used to instruct the initiates of their respective responsibilities at given stage of life. The educational aspect of circumcision for instance, was accorded similar attention to the physical aspect. The initiates were taught to be responsible for themselves, their family and the entire community. In addition to being mature adults, the initiates (both boys and girls, in the traditional Agikūyū context), were expected to demonstrate maturity in speech and actions, courage, respect for others according to age and relation, strength and beauty of both body and character. Dependency on others was highly discouraged and hard work encouraged (Kenyatta, 1978).

The Agikūyū husbands were expected to consult their wives in all matters affecting their home and real relationship and companionship were added to their marital life. Therefore, Agikūyū women were assured of respect, especially when they become mothers. Furthermore, the Agikūyū mothers were loved and respected by their husband and children. Only few men would openly go against their mother’s wishes. This was perhaps due to the fear of the curse of the parents. In this case, no man could lead his family in worship or other ceremonies without the presence of his mother. In addition, “no man could make any decision of importance about family or properties without first consulting his mother unless she was deceased” (Leakey, 1977: 10).

Traditionally, Agikūyū women did not inherit or own property. However, there were exceptions; for instance, women even had the right in special circumstances, to marry wives of their own. This was mainly in the case of elderly childless widows, whereby they could marry according to the customs, a young woman to bear children for them. Although women did not own property, they had considerable say in the alienation of property.

From the foregoing discussion, particularly from the Agikūyū perspective, it is evident that Africans value and cherish the family to date. Family and parenting, in the traditional African society was the responsibility of the entire community so that child rearing and molding depended on everyone’s effort. Children are of great value and a blessing not just to the immediate family but to the community as a whole. The African worldview generally revolves within the family. Unearthing the above centrality of family and parenthood is key in attempts to address contemporary crises and existential challenges inherent in families.

4. Agikūyū System of Education

The paper considers it prudent to examine traditional Agikūyū system of education as this played an important role in parenting. It was part and parcel of parenting. Agikūyū system of education began at the time of birth and ended at the time of death. “The child had to pass through various stages of age-groupings, with a system of education defined for every status in life” (Kenyatta, 1978: 99).

The parents took the responsibility of educating their children until they reached the age of tribal education. They aimed at educating their children more about family and clan traditions. Play was part and parcel of this education. While playing, the children imitated their elders in anticipation for adult life. For instance, the young girls imitated wives while the boys imitated husbands; the same way they saw their mothers and fathers do in their respective homesteads (Kenyatta: 1978).

When the child had grown beyond babyhood, the father took charge over the boy’s education, while the mother took the whole responsibility of the girl’s education. The father taught the boy how to become a practical agriculturalist. The boy was also taught

about the family, clan and the tribal traditions and land. The mother on the other hand, taught her daughters all the responsibilities of a wife including domestic duties of a wife in managing and harmonizing the affairs of the homestead (Kenyatta, 1978).

The initiation of both sexes among the Agĩkũyũ was looked upon as the deciding factor in giving a boy or a girl the status of manhood and womanhood respectively. The trials of circumcision taught the youth various lessons. Boys for instance, learnt how to bear pain, meet misfortune and carry himself like a warrior. He was taught, by his father, sponsor and other elderly men, to think over matters carefully and not to act on the impulse of the moment. He was strongly instructed to work hard in the garden so that he might get the dowry to marry. He was taught to obey the parents and other older people, to help the needy and to obey a leader elected by people. He learnt in particular the right behavior to certain people especially the in-laws. Moreover, boys were taught to look forward to marriage as a duty to themselves, to the clan, and the tribe (Kenyatta, 1978).

When a girl was ready to get circumcised, she was taught by her mother, her sponsor and older women in the women's advisory council (*ndundu ya atumia*) manners such as how to behave like a lady, not to show off, not to bathe in the open, not to raise her eyes or voice talking to men in public other than those of her own age or kinsfolk. She was taught to treat strangers with the proper mixture of courtesy and suspicion. Respect for her marital relatives was inculcated as well as obedience to him. She was also warned against hasty and impetuous behavior (Kenyatta, 1978).

At marriage, the husband was taught his duties towards his wife; to treat her well, to establish good relations with his parents-in-law and to receive their blessings before he took their daughter to his home. When the wife delivered, he was instructed when the sexual intercourse might be resumed, how he should respect the child's maternal relatives among other issues. At marriage, the wife on the other hand, was taught to obey her husband's parents and to regard all the children and the property in her husband's homestead as hers and to treat them with the utmost care as she would do with her most personal belongings. She was also taught her husband's rights and her rights over against his (Kenyatta, 1978).

In terms of sexual education, Agĩkũyũ had a practical and instructive system of education. The youth in the traditional Agĩkũyũ society were allowed to mix freely. Notwithstanding this freedom however, sexual intercourse before marriage was counted a disgrace and thus their togetherness as boys and girls was monitored by a set of rules and regulations. This was given through a practice known as *ũmbani na ngwiko* (platonic love and fondling). This was a restricted form of intercourse allowed for the initiated boys and girls only. In this practice, sexual intercourse was not allowed. There were rules governing the practice. The practice was intended to safeguard the youth from nervous and psychic maladjustment (Kenyatta, 1978).

Ngwiko was looked upon as a sacred act which was to be done in a well-organized, systematic manner. As noted earlier, sexual intercourse was not allowed and thus, the practice was meant to develop in the youth, sexual self-control. Furthermore, a girl was expected to be a virgin by the time she gets married. Any man who impregnated a girl before marriage was punished severely by the tribal council and was made to pay a fine of nine sheep or goats and three big, fat sheep as *kĩama* fees. The girl on the other hand, was also punished and paid a fine of providing a feast to boys and girls of her own age-group and would be ridiculed (Kenyatta, 1978). The practice was meant to discourage single parenthood and to instill sexual morality among the youths.

In summary, Agĩkũyũ traditional system of education was both theoretical and practical. In the absence of formal centers of education as we have them today, initiation served as one of the main educational channels in Agĩkũyũ society. This education covered such topics as tribal traditions, religion, and folklore, duties of adults, taboos and sex and mode of behavior (Muriuki, 1974). Social obligations were emphasized through the age-grade system. Important roles, responsibilities and privileges in the social system were vested upon the initiates. Children learn the habit of communal work as they grew up by joining the older people in social services such as hut building, cultivation, building bridges among others. Furthermore, in this system of education the entire community participated in ensuring education of the children right from birth throughout to death as mentioned earlier.

5. Value of Children in the Agĩkũyũ Family

A brief observation of Agĩkũyũ value of children would help us to appreciate better the challenging role of parenting particularly where one is single such as the widowed single parents. According to Agĩkũyũ customs, child bearing was inseparable from marriage. As Kenyatta (1978: 163) argues, sexual intercourse between a husband and wife or wives was looked upon as an act of production and not merely as the gratification of bodily desire. This could explain why the Agĩkũyũ people refer to another as (*nĩ mwana wa ng'ania*) that is 'so is a child of so'; which may mean a son or a daughter regardless of age. They may be referring to an individual at his/her seventies or a one day old, as long as he/she has been born of parents which are an indisputable fact. But to distinguish dependency on the parents and to indicate tenderness that calls for great attention and care, the Agĩkũyũ use the term *kaana* (small child) which may signify the age between infancy and childhood but not limited to this only, for so long as one is not initiated into adulthood and is under the care and guidance of the parents. This shows that it is not easy to define according to the Agĩkũyũ, the age at which one ceases to be considered a child under the parental care. The role of the family is seen as fundamental with this sense of love for the family and respect of life. The Agĩkũyũ love children and welcomes them joyfully as gifts of God. Life is respected from the moment it is conceived and born until its natural end. Elderly parents and relatives too, are cherished in the family.

Among the Africans, inclusive of the Agĩkũyũ, there is a great regard for children in individual families and societies at large. Everything seems to be centered on children. In this case, the birth of the first child sealed marriage rite. In view of this "to be childless is the worst fate for an Agĩkũyũ woman." As Cagnolo further observes, "she is regarded as a useless creature, one who has failed in the one thing expected of her" (Cagnolo, 2006: 57). A family thus, is considered incomplete without children. Nevertheless, a woman without children was not looked down upon because polygamy was commonly practiced. The children of any of the wives in the family became the children of all the wives in that family. Thus, the barren wife had a right to keep or send any child in the home

just as those wives with children had. Moreover, barren women could marry other women to bear them children. The barren woman would identify someone from her marital family to sire her children through her “married” woman.

The family, the clan and the society at large find their existence through the children. Among the Agĩkũyũ it is believed that, ‘*rũru rĩtarĩ njaũ ti rũru*’ that is ‘a herd that has no calves has no future’ (Interview: 2014). This indicates that children in the family assure the continuity of the family, the clan and the community. This continuity is first demonstrated by a desire to have children and name them after the relations to guarantee continuity. This is as well confirmed by Kenyatta when he says, “One of the outstanding features in the Gĩkũyũ system of marriage is the desire of every member of the tribe to build up his own family group, and by this means extend and prolong his father’s *mbarĩ*” (Kenyatta, 1978: 163).

The characteristic that marked a happy family, which of having several children prevailed upon all others like property, land etc. In pursuit of this, many men would go for another wife to get more children and always to give the first wife time to suckle and nurture the child to maturity before getting another. Healthy children were and are the pride of the father and so the spacing of children was and is considered very important.

The Agĩkũyũ believe that many children grow socially and morally healthy. A child who is reared alone, is considered a spoilt child and the Agĩkũyũ use the term (*gĩtũnio*) for such a child has had the whole attention of the parents focused only on him/her, until he/she becomes self-centered. Such a child cannot be educated in communal spirit that characterizes the Agĩkũyũ society. The above assertion of having many children is as well confirmed by Kenyatta when he argues that the Gĩkũyũ tribal custom requires that a married couple should have at least four children; two male and two females (Kenyatta, 1978).

Children are considered as a blessing to the couple upon marrying and thus the popular saying, “they have been blessed with many children by God.” In this way, they become a sign of assurance of a blessed future. This blessedness is in one way materially interpreted, and they are seen as a sign of wealth, because upon growing up, they are considered to earn a living through work establishing their families and finally supporting themselves, their parents and community at large. This is why the more children one had the higher the social status. Children were also seen as a social security in old age and an asset in continuing the family name as aforementioned (Kenyatta, 1978). Children were also regarded as belonging to the community so that a child could live with a relative without any difficulty unlike today. This is because the Agĩkũyũ upheld communitarian approach to life that was pursued for the common good of all.

From this understanding, events surrounding the birth of a child are of immense importance among the Agĩkũyũ. These events signify the acceptance of the child as a gift from *Ngai* to the family and community at large. Mbiti observes this among the African people where, according to him, the arrival of a child in the family is one of the greatest blessings of life. African people receive this event with great joy and satisfaction. Among the Agĩkũyũ, for instance, the women attending the mother of the newly born announce joyfully the successful birth of the child by acclaiming five or four ululations depending on the gender of the child. This great joy is as a result of the long-awaited period of pregnancy, whereby steps are taken to ensure safety of the baby and the mother (Mbiti, 2000) and also due to the anticipated benefits to the child, family and entire community. Furthermore, among the Agĩkũyũ children belonged not to the immediate family only but to the *mũhĩrĩga* (clan). As such parenting was also done at the *mũhĩrĩga* level and this is why in the traditional Agĩkũyũ society terms such as *Ciana cia ndigwa* (orphans) were rarely used.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the Agĩkũyũ and by implication the African family set-up reveals a value system that we can continually appeal to even as modernity takes a grip on our society today. This remains a challenge to our families and religious institutions to rediscover these values and apply them, for the integral development of children. There is great novelty within the Agĩkũyũ (African) family set-up that needs to be exploited. The family is understood as community of persons that generates and gives life. This generation and giving of life to all members of the family is motivated by a loving relationship that exists among all the members. The loving relationship calls each individual person to work and live for the good of the other in totality. Such attitude of mind manifests a great sense of communion in the nuclear family as well as in the extended family and the large community. This consequently shows the indispensable role of every person in the family and the importance of networking in bringing up of children. It is because of this love, and communion of sharing responsibility, that the parents take up the bringing up of children mutually assisted by their close relatives and the larger community. All these people come into the aid of the family because of understanding the noble work that a family has for holistic upbringing of children.

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