

Marriage as a Partnership of Friends: An Afro – Illumination from Aristotle's Nichomechaen Ethics

Thomas Targuma Akpen, PhD

Abstract

The institution of marriage is as old as the history of the human race. Without this institution, the human being would lack the necessary socialization needed to be truly human. In Africa, recent vibrations from this very important human and even divine institution seem to suggest that it is under attack and at the brink of collapse as evident in break-ups and rising cases of divorce. This paper argues that selfishness is one of the major reasons for this social catastrophe. Adopting the critical approach, the paper submits that appropriating Aristotle's concept of friendship; marriage can be better celebrated as it enables the understanding of marriage as a partnership between friends. Relationship between friends is that of harmonious co-existence, a form of being-within.. Authentic being-with seeks the fulfillment and self-realization of the other. Thus understood, partners will view marriage as a common project for fostering the fulfillment and happiness of one and the other; not a goal but a means to a goal; not a competition for dominance but collaboration. The former breeds suspicion and resentment, while the latter brings understanding and tolerance, thus minimizing what divides and emphasizing what unites, since the happiness and success of one, is the happiness and success of the other and vice versa.

Key Words: Marriage, Philosophy, Friendship, Institution, Being-With.

Introduction

The institution of marriage is as old as the history of the human race. Of all creatures that co-habit the planet earth, it is only the human species that engages in the practice to marriage. Beyond the religious standpoint, marriage is not just for procreation; it transcends p rocreation and embraces virtues such as companionship, self-realization and fulfillment. It is that “place” where consenting adults shape the other and are themselves

shaped. Some call this function, socialization. Thus, when a marriage is blessed with new members of the community, this “place” becomes the first school, moral engineer, where attitudes and principles of a happy life and harmonious co-existence in society are planted and nurtured. The value of the institution of marriage to the world in general, and to Africa in particular, cannot be overemphasized! It is for this reason that attacks on it seem to draw the attention of a class of some sociologists, ethicists and social ontologists. This is because attacks on it are attacks on the very survival of the human race.

Recent experiences on the global stage have suggested some deviation from this old practice; from marriage in the morning and divorce in the evening. The pleasure-driven emphases of same sex marriage, underscore this point. This paper shall consider the former, examining some of the factors responsible for the avalanche of separation and divorce on this continent (particularly among the Tiv of Northern Nigeria) and suggest that one of the ways of halting this trend is to borrow the concept of friendship from the Greek philosopher Aristotle, in the definition of marriage.

Conceptual Clarification

Marriage: Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary defines marriage as “the state of being married; relation between husband and wife”¹. The Holy Bible gives us two accounts of Marriage. In the first account, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’”². In the second account of creation, the companionship of man and woman is emphasized. Here, of all the animals that God created, none was found to be capable to fill the role of helper, or to put it more appropriately, none was found to be a companion fit for man. But after the woman

¹. Webster New Universal Unabridged Dictionary p. 1103

². Gen. 1.27-28.

was created and brought to man as helper, he exclaimed, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” The Holy Book adds that “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh”³. In each of these two accounts of the institution of marriage is an element of the meaning of marriage, namely: procreation and companionship, not only in Christianity, but in Judaism and Islam, the three major religions of the world. Culturally, the goal of marriage is to produce children and propagate the race.⁴ Here, marriage is comprehended only as the source of bringing new members into the society as stressed in the first account of creation in the Bible.⁵ This understanding of marriage has been the foundation of marriage all over Africa.

Murdock looks at marriage from the angle of cooperation. For him, marriage exists when those who share a sexual union also share an economic cooperation.⁶ The problem with this definition is that one may find both sexual and economic union in a relationship without that relationship being regarded as marriage.⁷ Though in Africa, marriage is primarily for procreation, the note of companionship has never been lost. Our paper has adopted both approaches in its enquiry.

Institution: The term “institution” refers to an established organization or society; a place where an organization takes care of its people for a usually long period of time; or a custom or practice or law that is celebrated by many people. Institutions are either formal or informal. An example of formal institution is the Nigerian Senate, the Catholic Church, while marriage will suffice

3. Gen. 2.20-24.

4. Hammond, T. Roots of Black South Africa. (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2000) Pg, 117.

5. Gen 1.27-28.

6. Cf. Murdock G. Social Structure (New York: Macmillan, 1949)

7. Shagbaor W. Marriage , Family and The Church in Tiv (Makurdi: Dekon Computer Services, 1994), Pg.18

as an example of informal institution. The reason is that formal institutions are guaranteed by defined authority while informal institutions are set forth by practices, customs, norms are articulations of the way Africans understand, contract, and celebrate marriage.

Philosophy: The word “philosophy” is an amalgamation of the Greek words “philos” (meaning love or friendship) and logos (meaning wisdom). When the two words are taken together, we have the term, 'philosophy'. Literally, the word philosophy means 'love of wisdom'. It represents a profound and critical approach to issues. Because there are several philosophers, the term does not have a univocal (one) definition. Summarizing the preoccupation of early philosophers, Ihuah has this to say:

Since the very beginnings of philosophy in the 7th century before first, attempts have been made to discover the ultimate nature of things, the basic source of reality and change in the universe. Thales (624- 546) derived all things from water, Anaximanes (588 - 524) claim it was air, for Heraclitus (540 - 475) it was fire, for Anaximander it was the boundless (indeterminate substance). Parmenides (b.540) went on to claim that reality is unchangeable while change itself is an illusion. Heraclitus, on the other hand claimed that change is the stuff of things and stability is an illusion. Plato (427-347) and Aristotle (384-322) proposed theories that attempt to cater for the obvious elements of things, stability and change in describing the ultimate source of things.⁸

The understanding of the task of philosophy by these ancient philosophers was unique in the sense that for them philosophy

⁸. Ihuah A. “What is Philosophy” In Alloy Ihuah (Ed) *Philosophy and Logic for Beginners* (Makurdi: Obeta Printing and Publishing Company, 2010),Pg.3

included the physical sciences too! No wonder it is said that philosophy arose from wonder when men began to take interest in their immediate environment! It was left for philosophers after them to stress one or two points out of the assumptions of these pathfinders.

For Bertrand Russell, philosophy is that discipline that preoccupies itself with asking questions and questioning answers until you come to an answer that is unquestionable or a question that is unanswerable.⁹ In other words, philosophy seeks truth. This truth is not the truth of Martin Heidegger who sees the aim or task of philosophy as nothing more than unconcealment of being.¹⁰ By truth here, we mean that which strengthens, supports, and preserves marriage as an institution. In our paper, the definition of philosophy rendered by Russell will inform our adoption of Aristotle's definition of friendship to help reposition the institution of marriage in our modern day Africa.

Friend: The term “friend” does not have a univocal definition; it has several layers of meanings. According to Webster's Dictionary, a friend is one whom one knows well and is fond of; an intimate associate; a close acquaintance.¹¹ It could also be used to refer to a person on the same side in a struggle; an ally bonded together for the achievement an objective or objectives.¹² It is this same concept that Aristotle attaches the meaning of a 'second self'.¹³

Marriage: The African (Tiv) Experience

The institution of marriage is as old as the history of the human

^{9.} Russell, B. *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) Pg. 46.

^{10.} Heidegger M. *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996) P. 201/219

^{11.} P. 733

^{12.} P.733

^{13.} Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1171a5

race; it is not a Western or African invention. In Catholicism, a religious group that has captivated a large portion of the Tiv population, marriage is considered to be:

An institution confirmed by divine law and receiving stability, even in the eyes of society, from the human act by which the partners mutually surrender themselves to each other; for the good of partners, of the children and of society. This sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone. For God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various benefits, and various ends in view: all of these have a very important bearing on the continuation and eternal destiny of every member of the family, on the dignity, stability, peace, and prosperity of the family and of the whole human race. By its very nature, the institution of marriage and married love is ordained to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory.¹⁴

Commenting on the above ground breaking submission on marriage by the Second Vatican Council, Wegh offers a succinct capturing of African (Tiv) marriage that "...anyone who is familiar with traditional African marriage will see that the values of marriage just enunciated re-echo the African marriage and family values. The idea that marriage is divine and sacred; that children are the crown of marriage; that, they should be educated; and that through procreation, the continuation of the human race is ensured; all these are values that are vigorously pursued in the African family system"¹⁵. These values cannot be achieved in the event of any instability in the vocation of marriage.

^{14.} Gaudium et Spes, Pg. 48

^{15.} Francis W. *Globalization of Tiv Social and Cultural Values* (Makurdi: Selfers Academic Press, Ltd, 2018), p.167 - 168

The institution of marriage has basically two main features: monogamy and polygamy. Whether monogamous or polygamous, marriage is celebrated in Africa according to the several cultures that occupy the continent. Our discussion of marriage in Africa shall be undertaken under its two manifestations of monogamy and polygamy.

Monogamy

Monogamy simply means one man one wife. In this practice, a man and a woman get united with each other and are closely and intimately related to one another. It refers to an exclusive relationship between a man and a woman. This is the kind that is emphasized in the biblical injunction that “what God has joined together, let no one put asunder”¹⁶ Wegh describes the practice of monogamy amongst the Tiv people of North Central Nigeria in the following words:

Monogamy is simply the marriage of one man to another woman to the exclusion of all others. Monogamy has always been part of the Tiv marriage system. Judging from the practice of exchange marriage which gave little room for extravagance, one may safely assert that monogamy must have been the predominant pattern during the time of exchange marriage; Marriage must have been mainly on a one to one basis.¹⁷

One man and one woman policy is not alien to African culture. One is free to marry one or many wives if he is able to handle such a situation. Thus, the advent of Christianity did not impose the idea of one man one wife on the African people. Wegh reasons that in

^{16.} See Matt. 19:6; Mk. 10:1-2; LK. 16:18; 1 Cor. 7:10-11.

^{17.} Shagbaor W. Marriage , Family and The Church in Tiv (Makurdi: Dekon Computer Services, 1994), Pg. 34

Nigeria,

It would seem that among the Tiv monogamy is either a self-denying ordinance, in the sense that a man voluntarily renounces or abstains from polygamy, or it is dictated by inability to afford more than one wife. Where the traditional outlook prevails, the possession of a number of wives is normally a mark of importance and success in life, and therefore polygamy is something which the average Tiv would like to achieve. In other words monogamy is for the majority a matter of necessity rather than choice. This does not mean one can completely ignore the fact of many Tiv who have remained genuinely monogamous.¹⁸

One must admit that, though the practice of one man one wife is not alien to African culture, the most prominent feature of marriage is that of one man many wives, named polygamy.

Polygamy

The concept polygamy, a derivation from the Greek “literally refers to many marriages.”¹⁹ Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary defines polygamy as the “state of or practice of having two or more wives, husbands, or mates at the same time”²⁰. In the context of our focus, polygamy refers to the state or practice of having two or more wives at the same time. In “social and cultural anthropology, polygamy is the practice of marriage to more than one spouse simultaneously, as opposed to monogamy in which each person has one spouse at a time”²¹ For Nwogu, polygamy is:

18. Francis W. *Globalization of Tiv Social and Cultural Values*, pg.167-168

19. P. 168

20. Webster New Universal Dictionary Pg. 1395

21. Francis W. *Globalization of Tiv Social and Cultural Values* (Makurdi: Selfers Academic Press, Ltd, 2018), p.167 - 168P.168

Voluntary union for life of one man with ...several wives. It's essential characteristic is the capacity of the man to take as many wives as he pleases. The mere fact that at a given moment he has only one wife does not affect the character of the marriage so long as the capacity of taking more wives is retained.²²

In pre-colonial and colonial Africa when agriculture was both for subsistence and economic purposes, many hands were needed for the farm. The source of such was inward, in the family. So, many children were to be born so as to have more hands on the farm. This reason for marriage is the major factor for the practice of polygamy in pre-colonial and colonial Africa. Procreation, the emphases of the first account of creation, is taken seriously by the African in general and the Tiv in particular. To procreate massively is to take as many wives as possible. This is because the survival of the African race and that of the family depends on the children produced by the union. Reflecting on this, Wegh asserts that;

The greatest outcome of marriage for Tiv is children. Children are not only a sign of prosperity, but also bestow prestige on their parents. Through children, the Tiv see a long future before them. Children are a supreme example of the human potential for creation. One without a child is as good as dead. Tiv being a patrilineal society put a premium on male children. The Tiv social system of compound dwelling and its pattern of land property inheritance through the male child make having a male child a great source of anxiety. A Tiv who has not had a male child in his family does not consider that he has established a family... When a Tiv says that he has not vertse ((family continuity

^{22.} Nwogu, I.E. *Family Law In Nigeria* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigerian Limited, 1974) p. xxii

assurance), it means that he has no son. A Tiv therefore wastes no time, if possible in marrying a second wife, if the first wife has not given him a son at the expected time.²³

While this is true for the Tiv, it is also reflective of many cultures in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. This desire for family continuity assurance is one of the major causes of divorce in Africa in general, and the Tiv people in particular today.

Divorce

One of the major social epidemics ravaging the institution of marriage today is divorce. Each year, statistics show that the problem is on the increase. While the highest divorce rate comes from the West, particularly in the United States of America, Africa is not left out of this malaise wrecking havoc on families. In 2014, South Africa represented Africa with the highest rate of Divorce. Currently, the divorce rate stands at 62.2% from 34.5% reported in 2013.²⁴

Many factors account from the rise in divorce rate. Many argue that with the clamor for gender equality and the rise in the number of educated women, the center is no longer holding because the traditional roles that women were satisfied with are no longer tenable. It is no longer news now to hear of a wife earning more in salary than the husband and becoming the main bread winner of the house. With the reverse of roles, the stage is set for conflict and divorce because competition sets in rather than collaboration. The truth or otherwise of this claim needs to be investigated further rather than outright dismissal.

^{23.} Francis W. *Globalization of Tiv Social and Cultural Values* (Makurdi: Selfers Academic Press, Ltd, 2018), p.167 - 168P. 37

^{24.} <http://newinki.com/will-never-guess-country-highest-divorce-rates>). Assessed on 19/09/2016.

The other reason advanced for frequent divorce in the continent is the issue of children. Africans are known for their love of children. In instances where marriage does not produce children, couples are impatient and see divorce as the way out. Looking at marriage with Christian spectacles, Christensen is of the opinion that “the religious wedding service is the recognition before God that marriage is a lifelong commitment. It is not a mere contract or bargain that has certain contingencies and escape clauses”²⁵. Where marriage is understood as friendship in line with Aristotle's thought, a remedy can be found; there will be no escape clauses, for a friend in need is a friend in deed.

Aristotle on Friendship

Aristotle begins his Ethics by arguing that every human being; all of us act with the hope to attain something good. We tend towards something, we walk because acting that way doles out pleasure to us, gets us in shape and enables us to live long and see good things. We study to gain qualifications which in turn will give us employment. In the same way, all activity and all sciences aim and desire their good. So medicine seeks the good of health. So in the words of Aristotle: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and human pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that to which all things aim”²⁶.

But one good may lead to another good and so on and the goods become endless. Aristotle is searching for that good which is not to fetch another good; he is searching for that good which is self-sufficient and is the aim of all goods. For him “The self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be.”²⁷ For

^{25.} Christensen, J.L *The Minister's Marriage Hand Book* (New Jersey: Flaming H.C. Company, 1985) Pg.66

^{26.} NE 1094a1-3

^{27.} NE 1097b14-16

Aristotle, happiness is not an emotional or sentimental stuff. To understand the meaning of happiness, he offers the advice that:

A clearer account of what it is is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the "well" is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function.²⁸

The human being certainly has a function or activity of his own. It was Rene Descartes who said that "I think therefore I am" (Cogito ergo sum).²⁹ This is to say that man cannot be separated from the function of thought. Aristotle was the one who had earlier identified this principle that defines man. He, along with other ancient Greeks saw man as being endowed with reason (Logos), though Heraclitus had earlier argued that Logos was at the base of reality. So, his activity is either obedience to reason" or "the exercise of thought." Therefore, man's good is "an activity of the soul in accordance with reason." This activity must not be done haphazardly, that is to say, "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue and if here are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and the most complete"³⁰. For Aristotle therefore, happiness is not a state but an activity of the soul; a man is happy or virtuous when he performs to the best of his ability, the function of reason that is proper only to him.

Happiness as an important activity speaks to our society today on very important moral issues. Is human life about our individual successes, of honor and privileges, and of fulfilling our civic obligations and familial duties well? As Aristotle challenges our

^{28.} NE 1097b21-27

^{29.} Descartes, R. *Discourse On Method and Meditations* (The Bobbs-Merrill, Company Inc, 1960) p. 84

^{30.} NE 1098a7 -17

understanding of happiness, so does he shake us to a new understanding of friendship. In the perspective of Aristotle, friendship is what is most necessary in human life and what is greatest in man. In his words, “The justice that is most just seems to belong to friendship.”³¹ Cicero, who had familiarized himself with Aristotle's doctrine of friendship uses this beautiful metaphor: “To take friendship out of life is to take the sun away from the world”³², an idea so dear to the Nicomachean Ethics: “For without friends no one would choose to live.”³³

Aristotle stretches the content of the concept of friendship to include the highpoint of our paper, namely, to mean sharing, life together. He submits that “His friend is another self.”³⁴ That is why in friendship we “rejoice and grieve” together.³⁵ It is this submission of Aristotle that our paper sifts out for African appropriation.

Marriage as Friendship

The extended family system in Africa has many benefits. One of those is the role of social security it plays. In this practice, there is always something or someone to fall back to in times of distress and need. One sees this as a form of friendship that Aristotle encourages. Marriage in Africa (the Tiv) is not union between two individuals; it is an amalgamation of two extended families, making them even more extended. If there is security in the extended family system, then there is even more security in this type of system. This is evident in the coping of displaced individuals (IDPs) in different parts of Tivland occasioned by incessant attacks of herders. To Africanize the metaphor of Cicero, one would say that 'to take the extended family out of life is to take

^{31.} NE 1155a27

^{32.} Cicero *Dialogue On Friendship Vol XII* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1928) Pg.27

^{33.} NE 1155a3

^{34.} NE 1166a31

^{35.} NE 1171a5

away the sun from the world'. It is this safety net that has spared Africa from the mass killings that the West and some parts of Asia have been witnessing over the years. It is indeed reassuring to know that there is always a place where one is welcome and accepted when all hope is lost. Psychology will call this, some form of "defense mechanism" to cope in an unpredictable world.

As the extended family promotes life and engenders peace, so does the expansion of the concept of marriage. To expand the concept of marriage to include friendship is not at variance with African culture. For Aristotle, a friend is a second self. So the happiness and success of the one is the happiness and success of the other. Friends stay together, come rain come shine. Marriage, thus understood, promotes endurance and perseverance. When marriage goes beyond procreation to companionship as friends, divorce would simply mean self alienation, which is contradictory.

Conclusion

Marriage as an informal institution is very old. It is the union of one man and one woman or one man and many women. This institution ensures the continuity of the human race socializes offspring and offers husband and wife a very unique companionship. This special institution in the history of the human race has recently been witnessing an avalanche called divorce. Divorce results from the desire of couples to no longer live together for so many reasons.

A new way of thinking on this continent can halt the progression of this social cancer and that new frontier is Aristotle's definition of friendship as a second self. It would become a contradiction to have couple's divorce and stay away from each other because no one can stay away from himself or herself. Friends work for the good of the other because the other is nothing other than himself. What an Aristotelian page in the book of marriage!

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