



IMPACT OF CIVILISATION ON YORUBA MARRIAGE SYSTEM IN THE NEW NORMAL

Adegbodun, Olumide Zacchaeus

Corresponding Author- adegbodun@gmail.com /oluadegbodun@gmail.com
08033994435/08022773344

Department of Yoruba, Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo

Abstract

Civilisation has continued to influence social institutions across the world, reshaping cultural values and traditional practices. Among the Yoruba people of south western Nigeria, the marriage institution has experienced significant transformation as a result of modernisation, Western education, religion, globalisation, and contemporary social realities described as the "new normal." Traditionally, Yoruba marriage is a communal and culturally regulated institution rooted in family involvement, moral discipline, and ritual observance. This study examines the impact of civilisation on the Yoruba marriage system, highlighting areas of continuity, transformation, and cultural erosion. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, the study relies on secondary data sourced from academic literature and cultural texts. Findings reveal that while civilisation has introduced positive changes such as gender equity, legal protection, and improved communication between spouses, it has also contributed to the decline of traditional marriage rites, weakening of extended family roles, and erosion of indigenous values. The study concludes that civilisation has produced both beneficial and adverse effects on Yoruba marriage practices and recommends a balanced integration of modern influences with essential cultural traditions to sustain the institution in the new normal.

Keywords: Civilisation, Yoruba culture, marriage system, modernisation, new normal

Introduction

Marriage is a universal social institution that provides the structural foundation for family life, social organisation, and cultural continuity in human societies. Beyond its biological function of procreation, marriage

regulates social relationships, moral conduct, inheritance, and the transmission of values from one generation to another. Among the Yoruba people of south western Nigeria, marriage occupies a central position in communal life and is intricately linked to

kinship, religion, economy, and social identity. It is not viewed as a private affair between two individuals but as a collective responsibility involving extended families, lineages, and the wider community. As such, Yoruba marriage traditions have historically been governed by well-defined customs, rituals, and moral expectations that ensure social cohesion and stability.

The concept of civilisation, often associated with Western education, religion, urbanisation, technological advancement, and globalisation, has profoundly reshaped traditional African societies. While civilisation has introduced positive developments such as formal education, improved healthcare, legal protection, and increased awareness of individual rights, it has also disrupted indigenous cultural systems. In many African societies, including that of the Yoruba, the encounter with civilisation has generated tensions between inherited traditions and modern values. These tensions are particularly evident in the institution of marriage, where long-established customs are increasingly questioned, modified, or abandoned in response to contemporary social realities. Within the Yoruba cultural context, the influence of civilisation has produced what may be described as a “new normal” in marital practices. This new normal reflects shifting attitudes toward family structure, gender roles, marital obligations, and cultural authority. Economic pressures, urban living, formal education, and exposure to global ideologies have altered perceptions of marriage, leading to increased emphasis on individual choice, romantic love, and legal recognition of marital unions.

Consequently, many traditional rites and practices that once defined Yoruba marriage are gradually losing their relevance or are being adapted to fit modern expectations.

Two notable traditional practices significantly affected by civilisation are polygamy and wife inheritance. Polygamy was historically an accepted and regulated form of marriage among the Yoruba, serving important social, economic, and demographic functions. It facilitated large family units, strengthened kinship networks, and provided social security within the community. However, the spread of Christianity and Islam, the introduction of statutory marriage laws, changing economic realities, and evolving gender consciousness have contributed to a growing preference for monogamy. As a result, polygamy is increasingly contested and, in some contexts, regarded as incompatible with modern life.

Wife inheritance, on the other hand, was traditionally practised as a mechanism for social welfare and lineage preservation. The practice ensured that widows and their children remained under the protection of the deceased husband’s family, thereby preventing social and economic vulnerability. In contemporary society, however, wife inheritance has become one of the most controversial aspects of Yoruba marriage customs. Modern legal frameworks, human rights discourses, and increased advocacy for women’s autonomy have challenged the moral and cultural legitimacy of the practice, leading to its decline or transformation in many communities.

This study, therefore, seeks to critically examine the impact of civilisation on the Yoruba marriage system, with particular emphasis on the changing meanings and practices of polygamy and wife inheritance within the context of the new normal. By analysing these transformations, the study contributes to on-going scholarly discussions on cultural continuity and change, and it highlights the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in shaping contemporary Yoruba marital relationships.

Conceptualising Marriage

Different scholars have worked on English on marriage system in the Yoruba society. Such scholars include Ogunbowale (1966), Fadipe (1910), Daramola & Jeje (1975), Daramola (1971), Adroje (1980), Arema (2005), Ladele et al. (2000), Abimbóla (2006), Adeoye (2013) and Olujinmi (2015). They are of the opinion that marriage is not a new thing; it is something that everyone is familiar with. Hence, not all of them bother to give definition of the term marriage. In our own view, apart from being a popular culture in Yoruba society, marriage is a sacred relationship that brings about intimacy between a man and a woman. Ajibade (2009) in Otalipo (2015:133) opines that:

Marriage is the cultural and symbolic event that gives meaning to people's experiences. Among the Yoruba, marriage is unique and

gamuts of practices associated with it as interpretative.

The foregoing implies that marriage is a social symbolic phenomenon that gives meaningful thought to human thinking. Among the Yoruba, marriage is unique and all things connected to it are significant. Living with or without parents has impact on the younger generation. Adults contemplating marriage should have received fundamental lessons about it from their parents, guardians, and acquaintances. These lessons may be based on the positive or negative experiences of such individuals in order to prevent the younger generation from falling into potential pitfalls.

Bolarinwa (2014:212) foregrounds the complexity and quintessentiality of marriage. According to him,

Marriage is a complex affair with economic social and religious aspects which often overlap so firmly that they could not be separated from one another.

In his own submission, Fakunle (1992:2) observes that:

Marriage involves joining two different personalities together. The

union of two personalities that are different in many respects, each stepping into the very existence of the other.

This also has so do with experience and covenant. Makinde (2012:58) also corroborates this by saying that “marriage is the outcome of love, common aptitude and association”. This is in line with Fadeyiye’s (2005:54) position that "marriage refers to the relationship between a man and a woman who have become husband and wife”. So many things are associated with marriage, but we believe that it is a deep experience with deep thoughts. We shall cap it all here with Adesina's submission (2014:195) that "oro igbeyawo ki i se ohun ti eniyan n se fun igba die ti o si n yera fun, irin-ajo titi di ojo iku ni” (Marriage in not something to do for a while, it is a lifetime journey.)

Noticeable Effects of Civilisation within the Yorúba Society

It is noticed that changes in time and season generally have impact on Yoruba marriage system in the present time. We can say that this is not limited to marriage system alone. It cuts across every aspect of living. Fayemi (2012:115), when writing on civilisation in Nigeria, admits that:

With Olaju, we can explore the many possible ways of seeing the Nigerian

reality. For the most part, people see a tailing, chaotic place that is corrupt and decaying. Often they was a failure of leadership. Thus choice of reality is mostly designed to disempower and paralyse the ability of the Nigerian people to dream new possibilities

This article on Yoruba marriage system addresses such issues as polygamy, wife inheritance, couple living apart, use of wedding ring, certificate and oaths, keeping the secret of a man who cannot perform his primary assignment with the wife, dressing, marriage dirges, matter of ceremonies, learning praise chants from elderly women in the family and the preliminary aspects of marriage ceremony.

In as much as the only thing that is permanent is life is change, it means Yoruba marriage it not an exception. Ajayi (2001:127) explains that life is ever evolving, particularly in the existence of human beings. As detrimental cultures typically decline, beneficial ones concurrently evolve. When multiple cultures

converge, they will exchange knowledge and insights. The activities of foreign missionaries who brought Christianity and Islam had some impacts on the cultural realities of the aboriginal, including marriage institution. Some of the way through which civilisation brought about changes into marriage in Yoruba society are discussed below:

Preparation before Marriage

According to Bolarinwa (2014), Fakunle (1992) and Makinde (2012), marriage is like an ocean whose depth no one can determine. In fact, it is often referred to as 'black market'. The Yoruba people believe that anyone who gets into wrong marriage will suffer its consequences. This is why they normally do some findings before marriage for their children through proper introduction, enquiry about the family, and consultation with Ifa (Adeoye, 1981; Daramola, 1978). They do all these in order not to marry wrongly, to show that they are a product of good parental upbringing, and to know whether both of would-be couple match each other spiritually. However, in this time of new normal, the foregoing seems to have become a thing of the past as parents no longer engage in searching for spouses for their children. Instead young ones interested in marrying each other do the proposal on their own and get married even in some instances without making any spiritual consultation.

Polygamy

Yoruba people see their wives as part of their property. This is one of the reasons why they engage in polygamy in order to show that they are wealthy. Besides, some

men marry more than one wife so that the wives and children could help them with farming and other professions they do. It is also observed that the religion of some people permits them to have more than one wife. There are, however, those whose religion does not support polygamy but wilfully engage in it though secretly. As a matter of fact, polygamy is dangerous for the family and personal life of polygamists. For instance, some of them are dying prematurely as they engage in secret relationships. Besides, some can contract chronic diseases that can cut short their lives or affect their health. The supposed rationale behind this is the type of wedding being practised nowadays whereby would-be couple will give ring and certificate to each other. These symbolic items are meant to prevent extra-marital affairs. Similarly, would-be couple makes an oath in the presence of many people. Going against such oath is responsible for the problem most of them are facing in life. Some wives will see the rings and certificate as a weapon to do as they like in their marriage. Their thought is that once the ring is put into their fingers, no one can remove it. The Yoruba say "a ki i ti kóotu bo ki à se ore" (We cannot come back from the court and still be friends). There are marriage laws against adultery and other marriage-related offences. Jegede (2020) alludes to an instance where a respondent committed adultery and the petitioner found it intolerable to live with the respondent. What the writer is saying here is that if a couple observes that they can no longer live together in peace, the next step is divorce. Some may even want the spouse to go to

jail. All these are not common in Yoruba marriage in the past.

Wife Inheritance/ Levirate Marriage

Wife inheritance was traditionally practised as a mechanism for social welfare and lineage preservation. The practice ensured that widows and their children remained under the protection of the deceased husband's family, thereby preventing social and economic vulnerability. This may not be unconnected with the attitude of the wife. Hence, they would want her to remain with them so as to be taken care of and her children when her husband is no more. They will make arrangements with someone in the family to inherit such woman. The reality in contemporary society does not allow such as everyone has their responsibilities. They may not even remember the children that the deceased left behind. Such women may be forced to live elsewhere or become religiously destitute.

Single Parents

This is part of the points made by Bolarinwa (2014) as one of those factors contributing to betrayal in marriage. The Yoruba say "Ibi ti a fi iyo sin i se omi si" (Where we put salt is where it will become water). "Igbin ki ire ajó ki ofi ikarahun ré sile" (A snail does not go to a journey and leaves its shell behind). The contrary is the case in this present time. Husband may be living in Nigeria while his wife will be abroad in the present dispensation. It may be due to the nature of their job. Someone who is not at home is the one whose goat produces only male offspring. This is causing serious problems with negative impact on marriage in the new normal. It is the responsibility of the

husband and wife to train children. However, this obligation cannot be fulfilled if the couple does not live together. Secondly, love is not an insect; it flies, most especially when the couple stays apart. That can allow outsiders to have their way to ruin the real covenant.

Impotence

According to Fadipe (1970), Yoruba people used to get wife for someone who was impotent (Okobo) to cover his impotence and to ensure that such a man had someone that would inherit his property or so that his name would not be effaced. The current circumstances no longer permit such behaviour; if a strong and competent individual fails to adequately care for his wife, some individuals are prepared to usurp the role, especially in the case of an impotent husband. The issue of shame is no longer prevalent; individuals experiencing impotence no longer remain silent about their condition. Such an individual will disclose their experiences to seek a resolution. Moreover, traditional herb vendors proliferate, utilising public address systems across the town to promote remedies such as "Ale Gbangba." "Ajase poki poki". These advertisements are intended for clients who are bold enough to patronise them.

Marriage Dirges

This is one of the popular Yoruba oral literary productions. It is for ladies that are about to get married to pray and to receive blessings, to praise their parents and guardians. They discuss their acquaintances. All of these are now obsolete. Oladipo (2015) confirms that masters of ceremonies have supplanted the traditional role of brides

in public speaking within Yorùbá society, where lineage praise poetry and moral teachings from elderly ladies are no longer prevalent as they once were. All these actions exert their influence on society.

Blood Test

This has replaced consultation of lfa in the present time. The bride and groom will visit hospital to do blood test. If they are not compatible, they will look elsewhere to make their choice (Adeoye, 2013). This was imported from other cultures, though not every couple is doing so. Some will still insist to go ahead with the belief that there is nothing impossible for God. Some will just impregnate each other without serious arrangements. If we look at the issue of marriage from a philosophical point of view, it is beyond blood test. Many homes and families are in need of help (possibly, divine one).

Songs

Another observation is the use of songs during marriage ceremony. In the recent time, Yoruba traditional songs are no more appreciated. People now prefer recent music in vogues in churches and mosques. For example:

Lead: Dance away your sorrow, Oko Iyawo

Chorus: Fa aya re mora o, ayé o ni ya yin.

Also, we notice that there is use of modern things in the materials for engagement such as Bible/ Quran, wine, instead of indigenous drinks, kettle for ablution, rosary, as well as rings. What we think is responsible for that is the effect of Christianity and Islam on the indigenous religion. Most wedding programmes are laden with religious slogans like "Allahu Akbar". Praise God, etc.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that civilisation has produced both constructive and disruptive effects on the Yoruba marriage system in the new normal. While modernisation has introduced beneficial reforms such as gender equity and legal protection, it has also weakened traditional values, rituals, and communal bonds that once defined Yoruba marital life. The study concludes that cultural sustainability requires a balanced integration of modern influences with essential indigenous practices rather than the total abandonment of tradition.

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