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FAMILY IN AFRICA: OPPORTUNITIES AN CHALLENGES. OPENING REMARKS

A b s t r a c t. As we start our short debate about family life in Africa which is quite a broad topic, allow me to make some observations that will facilitate further input and discussion. First, in our discussion we can use the definition of an African family as *a group of people held together by blood ties*[1]. Then, my presentation will oscillate around three areas of family: the cultural aspect of families in Africa followed by the social aspect. Finally I want to point out the fact that the whole concept of family in Africa is undergoing a tremendous change. Needless to say, each area of debate creates opportunities and challenges.

Key words: family, african's family, family in Africa.

1. THE CULTURAL ASPECT OF A FAMILY IN AFRICA

As we discuss the issue of African family from the cultural point of view it is important to note that Africa is culturally diverse. Therefore there is not a single African culture, but many cultures, that exist in each African state[2]. While they have many commonalities, they also differ and therefore cannot be branded as one African culture. While having this in mind, for the purpose of this conference we will use the term "African culture" meaning some

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[1] A. T a r i m o, *Applied Ethics and africa's Social Reconstruction*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers 2005, p. 163.

[2] J. M b i t i, *Introduction to African Religion*, Nairobi, Kampala: East African Educational Publishers ltd. 1992, p. 3-5.

common features (traditions, perspectives, rites) are shared by most traditional cultures in Africa.

As we discuss the issue of culture, it is important to select the definition could serve our discussion best. While there are many definitions of culture, I would like to quote one of the earliest and very popular in anthropology: a definition by Edward Tylor: "culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"[3]. The above definition, widely used in social sciences was then analysed and applied by other sociologists. They perceive culture as a lived and creative experience for individuals as well as body of artifacts, texts and objects. What is commonly shared among those definitions is that they are somehow static or passive – they made people receive the culture as a part of inheritance from the past and present generation. They understand culture as *all in human society that is socially rather than biologically transmitted*. While the above mentioned definitions are important and valuable, for today's discussion I would like to propose another, more dynamic approach towards culture whose author is one of Tangaza faculty staff members, Prof. Omoka Wanakayi. According to Wanakayi culture "is a variety of tactics and their socially agreed upon methods of use"[4].

The latter definition of culture is more dynamic than the previous ones – it acknowledges the fact that people adapt their traditions to current environment. The cultural change therefore is not an external threat to culture but an inherent component of any culture. Bearing in mind this assumption and the definition provided by Wanakayi we can establish and explain the tremendous cultural change that is happening to the institution of African family.

African family plays an enormous role in the cultural whirlpool of today's world. Its importance can be emphasized by the fact that family in Africa is the custodian of tradition and African culture[5]. With a few isolated cases it is only sub Saharan African social institution that managed to preserve the continuity between the past, present and the future (unlike the institution of African state)[6]. The continuity between the past, present and the future is the

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[3] E. T y l o r, *Primitive Culture*, New York: J.P. Putnam's Sons 1920, p. 1.

[4] O. W a n a k a y i, *Research Theory and Culture* 2010, Retrieved from: http://shalomconflictcenter.org/images/Prof_Omoka_CULTURE_ARTICLE.pdf (accessed 11.02.2014).

[5] A. O r o b a t o r, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 2008, p. 5.

[6] T a r i m o, *Applied Ethics and Africa's Social Reconstruction*, p. 88-90.

African family biggest strength and opportunity at the same time. Since more and more people in Africa are trying to go back to their traditional values there is no better place than an African family that preserved them.

However, there are many factors that have been affecting and weakening the African family. Some of them are happening now (rapid urbanization), others belong to the past, yet we still feel their negative impact. As for the latter we can mention slavery and slave trade with the cultural burden that is felt even in the present day, and the oppressive and exploiting colonial state.

2. SOCIAL ASPECT

Family as a social entity relates with other social constructs such as state institutions. Ideally, state should protect and support the family, however due to many factors, African states are not able to exercise their roles of being protectors and supporters of families. In addition it is important to mention that many African states are still struggling with the inheritance steaming from the oppressive nature of colonial states. Colonialists, after destroying traditional social structures established their rule with the aim of exploiting the land and local population[7]. To maximize the use of land and other natural resources and to maximize the exploitation of the local population were the two aims of colonial states in Africa. In Kenya for example freedom of movement was limited and the native population was assigned to carry out several activities that aimed at maximizing the profit of the colonial metropolis[8].

Thus the colonial state and all its institutions were oriented on how to maximize profits to metropolis, while neglecting the colony and its population[9]. Of course such structures could not support the family and in fact many social problems that challenge African families nowadays, originated in the time of colonial occupation. However, the real danger lies in fact that

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[7] B.J. B e r m a n & J.M. L o n s d a l e, *Crises of Accumulation, Coercion and the Colonial State: The Development of the Labor Control System in Kenya. 1919-1929*, "Canadian Journal of African Studies", 14((1980), No 1, p. 85.

[8] Ibid., p. 86.

[9] C.M. B. U t e t e, *Africa and Former Colonial Powers*, in O.J.C. O j o, D.K. O r w a, & C.M.B. Utete (Eds.), *African International Relations*, London–New York–Lagos: Longman 1985, p. 109.

many states in Africa are yet to abandon this negative colonial inheritance –
inheritance of being profit oriented structure at the expense of neglecting the
local population especially in the periphery[10].

Another aspect, mentioned earlier is the emergence and rapid development
of large urban setups in Africa. African families, usually living in rural areas
are facing the process of rapid, often uncontrolled urbanization. Transition
from homogeneous rural community to a multinational and multicultural
urban setup has a tremendous impact on the family and its members[11].
Cultural and social norms that helped to organize social life of indigenous
communities are no longer respected in large urban setups in Africa. This of
course gives rise to different phenomena that were not tollerated before (and
the person who would have committed them was as much afraid of social
ostracism as facing the retributive justice). We are talking here about various
criminal activities, or prostitution, or drunkenness among many.

What is also very interesting is that this transition is still ongoing phe-
nomenon and as such it could be an interesting area for an empirical re-
search. Here we can use the comparison of seemingly similar experience of
many European originated rural communities that were transferred to big
urban settlements in America. The work of Florian Znaniecki, a well known
American sociologist of Polish origin described in depth the social processes
and changes of behavior that occurred while European peasants moved to lar-
ge urban set-ups in USA[12]. While the historical American experience bears
many similarities to the current African one, there are also many different
aspects of this transition (for example the distance, intermeshing of cultures,
absence of colonialism).

3. AFRICAN FAMILY
IN THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

As it was already pointed out in the previous section, African family is
undergoing a tremendous change. Old traditions, rites, cultural norms are

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[10] T a r i m o, *Applied Ethics and Africa's Social Reconstruction*, p. 90.

[11] J. M u g a m b i & M. G e t u i, *Religions in Eastern Arica under Globalization*,
Nairobi: Acton Publishers 2004, p. 22.

[12] W. T h o m a s, & F. Z n a n i e c k i, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*,
Urbana–Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1996, p. 107-109.

being abandoned or transformed and have gained a new meaning. Needless to say this impacted Africa tremendously. We have to note and address those changes; otherwise we will discuss the model of family that rather belongs to the museum of anthropology than the contemporary family model that exists now! Of course, this changes are not neutral to the model of an African family – while some have positive effects, other are very destructive and thus dangerous to the very existence of African families. Interestingly, some phenomena have both – negative and positive aspects.

There are many components that constitute the transition; some of them are about the changing roles of men, women and children in the family. While comparing the traditional family setup we can see the process of emancipation of women, and embrace the culture of human rights especially when it comes to youth and children. While this process certainly carries a lot of positive connotations at the same time it can be very negative – for example we can mention here the emancipation of young generations among the traditional pastoralist communities in Northern Kenya and as a result of this escalation of conflict between different ethnic communities, as the armed youngsters do not respect peace agreements made by their elders (or fathers and uncles so to speak).

While the young people acquire bigger positions in the society we need to mention another very important process that transforms the family model – namely the change in the understanding of a child. While the age of maturity in Western (and thus through international law – also adopted in Africa) occurs at the age of 18 years, in African traditional setup, the change from childhood to maturity was happening in the earlier years. Thus, the law (the legal norm) clashes with culture (cultural norms). Issues such as child domestic workers, au pair, looking after the animals, or early marriages are examples of such incompatibilities in transition. As much as the old cultural norms are not helpful, they were set to protect members of the community, and thus should not be understood as something that is harmful by nature. It is necessary then for the state institutions and civil society organizations to use awareness among other ways to address those incompatibilities rather than rely on the oppressive apparatus (retributive justice) alone.

As the above components of the transition are mixed in a way that they carry both negative and positive impacts, there are some that are only destructive, and very dangerous to the family. There is the AIDS pandemic resulting in a big number of orphans, social upheavals like wars, uprisings, interethnic clashes and other manifestations of civil unrest that lead to in-

crease of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, sexual liberation and hedonistic approaches to sexuality that lead to the rise in extra marital affairs, Lastly, human trafficking – a modern day slavery. Each from the mentioned components is a product of transition and contributes to transition at the same time. Each one of them is also very destructive and poses a serious challenge to the family in Africa.

CONCLUSION

As a family in Africa is the greatest link between the past and present, it is a great starting point for a generational transformation and better future for the whole society. However, the family as a link is also under duress as it tries to adjust to new socio-economic and political environments in Africa. While we should consider and address the challenges to the African family we can hope that it will find its way through the social, economic and political turbulences and continue to fulfill its value of promoting the humanity in Africa.

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RODZINA ARYKAŃSKA: SZANSE I ZAGROŻENIA
UWAGI WSTĘPNE

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Niniejszy artykuł opiera się na definicji rodziny afrykańskiej jako *grupy ludzi powiązanych więzami krwi*. Autor koncentruje się wokół trzech aspektów funkcjonowania rodziny w Afryce: aspektu kulturowego i społecznego, a także zmiany, jakim obecnie podlega pojęcie rodziny afrykańskiej. Oczywiste wydaje się stwierdzenie, że w zakresie każdego z wymienionych wyżej aspektów pojawiają się specyficzne szanse i wyzwania dla rodzin afrykańskich.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, rodzina afrykańska, rodzina w Afryce.