

Restoring the African Family: Inculturational Approach to Contemporary Family and Parenting Difficulties

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Abstract: The challenges facing family institution in the contemporary society are innumerable and diverse. Parenting children to become responsible persons has been doubted by some people due to the different factors encroaching the indispensable institution from different spheres be it social, political, religious, cultural and economic. In contrast, the traditional African society had an elaborate system through which responsible parenthood and family hood was ensured. In that society, young boys and girls were prepared step by step to be responsible men and women respectively. Any errant behavior at a given stage of development was handled appropriately by the relevant party to allow smooth transition into the next stage of life. The present study discusses how some of these African socio-religio cultural values on family and parenting can be harnessed within Christianity for a fruitful parenting even in a society where strange modes of parenting such as single parenting are taking root. Inculturation approach which is in vogue in African Theology is utilized with a view to explicating how Christianity can be lived within the African social, religious and cultural system. Drawing from an earlier study in one African community (Agikũyũ), the study inculturates its socio-religio cultural understanding of family and parenting with related theological and ecclesial instructions for a more fruitful parenting in the contemporary society.

Key Words: African, Family, Inculturation, Parenting, Theology

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Post-Vatican II teaching and documents not only inspired African authors but also greatly influenced the development of their theological reflections. Different terms have been coined to explain what the term and process of “adaptation” means as implied at the Vatican Council II. In Protestant circles the term “Indigenization” has been used until recently when theologians and anthropologists criticized it for its shortcomings. In the first place, adaptation was criticized for its “concordism and lack of scientific rigor.”[1] Indigenization was presented as a “nature metaphor, that is, of the soil, or taking root in the soil.”[2] This metaphor, however, which suggested a static view of nature and culture, posed the danger of understanding the term as merely past oriented and passive. In Catholic circles, the term “indigenization” continues to be used by some theologians together with the term inculturation. All these concepts and their explications are necessary to our study as they provide the necessary grounding to our understanding of the whole process of inculturation.

II. INCULTURATING AGĪKŪYŪ SOCIO-RELIGIO CULTURAL VALUES ON FAMILY AND PARENTING USING RELATED THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

A disinterested observer on the family set-up that traditionally characterized the Agikũyũ community notices drastic changes today. Due to the pressure of industrialization, urbanization, science and technology, modernity and secularization, we find that the stress is more on nuclear family at the expense of the extended family systems, whereby these families have social relationships that are inclusive and intimate. In the traditional extended families, mutual interpersonal relationships, solidarity, strong sense of belonging were highly encouraged. In such case, among the Agikũyũ, parenting was done communally even where one was a single parent. In any case, single parenthood such as widows and widowers in its strict sense did not exist among the Agikũyũ. Measures were laid down in form of customary laws so that a widow would be placed under the care of her dead husband’s younger brother and the entire clan (*mũhĩrĩga*) was concerned about her welfare and that of the children. A widower on the other hand, would remarry and the community participated in ensuring that this was done [3]. The family was thus extensive in the traditional Agikũyũ society and people cared for one another. They lived as a community; uplifting one another even in times of need. The community

for instance, in planting, weeding or harvesting seasons, helped the single parents in these activities for no pay. The contemporary society, has it differently. Everyone is left to carry his or her own cross.

Furthermore, due to economic hardships and social constraints, such as a high cost of living and housing, many families are cutting links with extended families and this has come with some real dangers. Extended family system has advantages as pointed out above and that is why some nuclear families have struggled and are struggling to maintain some interactions between them and their extended families [4]. To attend family functions especially funerals however, is not enough. There is need to cultivate mutual and constant relationship with the extended family. It is worth noting that in times of crises such as bereavement and family conflicts, the nuclear family relied on the extended family for financial, social, emotional and psychological support. Today however, some nuclear families are distancing themselves away from their extended families and rely on close emotional ties and economic stability, thus placing more emphasis on marital bond. This is not bad but the results of such an orientation has led to untold dangers for families so that issues such as infidelity among the marriage partners which could have been resolved amicably by the extended families have been left at the disposal of emotional ties thus leading to family breakages and divorces. In some extreme cases, it has led to the rampant cases of family murder, suicide, sexual abuses among others as can be witnessed through the mass media.

From the above therefore the Agĩkũyũ communal way of life, could be inculturated with the image of the Church as the “Family of God.” It would imply that the traditional Agĩkũyũ society way of living together as a family, helping each other, sharing together, resolving issues such as family issues communally and the high regard for one another would be reflected among the faithful. The single parents, would thus feel part of the community where their needs are met within the family with the assistance of the larger community. They would be encouraged to parent however, singly and even help others within the “Family of God” in different ways since in such a family, no one ought to go without necessities of life with all the positive values inherent in a God’s family.

Furthermore, from the image of the Church as “Family of God,” the members would not just coexist but form a community. They become ‘their brothers and sisters keepers.’ Each one feels responsible for the other one. That gives the members a sense of belonging because all feel they are important for the community. Parents including the single ones would feel encouraged, loved and find a place to feel at home in the Church. On the basis of African in general and Agĩkũyũ extended family model in particular, the image of the Church as “Family of God” would extend to mean the Church as the “Extended Family of God,” as championed by theologians such as Kiriswa [5]. The kind of mutual existence, assistance, acceptance and concern for one another inherent in Agĩkũyũ traditional society should not however, imply lack of a sense of responsibility on the side of the parents. This is because such would encourage dependence, a fact that is highly discouraged among the Agĩkũyũ. Emphasis here is on general concern for others especially at points where one has been overwhelmed by certain situations such as payment of school fees. It should be done for the common good of all in the society.

In addition, the Agĩkũyũ have great sense of social responsibility. The members of society have responsibility over self and of other members of the society. This should be inculturated with the Christian value of brotherhood and sisterhood as that upheld by the first Christian communities as read from the book of the Apostles. Christian reveals that this early community shared all things in common so that the community overruled the personal. The story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) is recorded to this effect to depict this central practice among the Apostles. Through such efforts members including parents would truly own Christian values preached and encouraged in the Church.

The Agĩkũyũ traditional society believed and instill in their youth and in all members of the society to live as a community. It encouraged hard work and self-dependence. This was taught and internalized by members from childhood and mostly, during the initiation of their youth. The youth grew into adulthood with these Agĩkũyũ communitarian values. They almost found no difficulty in living them as they became part of them [6]. The Church should make use of these values by carefully incorporating the initiation rites of the Agĩkũyũ traditional society with the Christian rites such as catechism. Such instructions would include the need of others and to appreciate the spirit of community.

On the other hand, the Agĩkũyũ hailed maturity of their members because it was a gate way to individual’s and community’s development. That is why circumcision for both boys and girls were highly upheld. It marked transition from childhood to adulthood imbued with respective responsibilities for each gender. The initiates were carefully trained such that after the very significant rite of passage, one could qualify to be a mother or a father. That is why an uncircumcised boy could not marry and would not bathe in the same river with the circumcised one [7]. They were banned from a number of activities and would be ridiculed by others in the community. Circumcision was thus an important rite of passage among the Agĩkũyũ and as Kenyatta points out, the educational aspect of it was given equal regard to the physical aspect. Hard work and independency was highly encouraged and the initiates were expected each to be able to take care of their *mbarĩ*

(families) when they got married [8]. The girls came out knowing the responsibilities expected of a mother and the boys came out of the seclusion period well equipped and ready for the responsibilities of a father. These are Christian values to be adopted and incorporated into the catechesis of the Church. The Church and other religious institutions should look keenly on the formation of catechumens (new converts) especially the youth. They need practical pastoral policies that properly see through the formation of this group to the faith that will guide to the building of an inculturated Church relevant to its members.

The youth in their catechism/formation classes, should be taught the value and ethics of work and be taught how to work for themselves and others as early as they begin their classes. Then on-going instruction on self-reliance needs to be part of the catechism programme. Properly instructed this way, they will be prepared to live an independent life as they grow. Such incorporation would go a long way in encouraging independency among the youth and relevant productivity thus relieving the parents some of the parenting challenges. Formed through such a holistic catechism, the youth would help their parents including the single parents to handle some of the parenting duties such as meeting some of their basic needs as clothing or even paying school fees for their siblings where possible. It is being emphasized here that the same values that were traditionally and culturally given and handed over to the youth in various ways among the Agĩkũyũ including the circumcision ceremonies should continue in the Church today through proper and careful inculturation with Christian message at its centre.

From the Old Testament we learn that, the mother's responsibility in parenting entailed imparting the rudiments of education especially the moral formation of the children when they were still young (Prov. 1:8; 6:20). She instructed the girls in duties of a future good wife and mother. The father's duty on the other hand, was to teach his sons the truth of religion and to give them a general education (Ex 10:2; 13:8, Deut. 4:9; 6:7). The use of the whip and the rod played their parts in the training, not merely to punish, but for the sake of education (Prov. 13:24; 2 Sam. 7:14). He furthermore was to transmit to his sons the traditions of the nation and the religious heritage, plus professional education. These parental duties were supplemented by other people such as the priests and teachers of the law who contributed to the education of the children as they continued to grow. No doubt these parental duties as found in the Old Testament have some similarities with the parental duties among the Agĩkũyũ. The duties and co-operation of the entire community in accomplishing them both among the Agĩkũyũ and in Christianity should be encouraged among Christians in the contemporary society who face parenting challenges.

Informal education among the Agĩkũyũ was imparted through stories, legends, proverbs and riddles, apprenticeships among other ways. 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 [9]. Furthermore, because of love and communion of sharing responsibility, Agĩkũyũ parents took up the bringing up of children mutually assisted by their close relatives and the larger community.

A parent could reprimand and even discipline any mischievous child as he or she could his or her own child. All these people came into the aid of the family because of understanding the noble work that a family has for holistic upbringing of children. Today however, parenting has been left to the immediate biological parents alone whether single as is the case with the widowed single parents or in collaboration as husband and wife for those in marriage. Hardly does any member of the community consider it their responsibility to be involved in correcting somebody else's child. This is due to individualism and nuclear family system where such correction would be considered by some parents as interference in one's family affairs; no wonder the present challenges in parenting. The convergence of biblical instruction and mode of parenting with the traditional Agĩkũyũ familyhood and parenting should be encouraged even more among the faithful in the Church. This should be included more so within the image of the Church as "Family of God" and an extended family for our case. It will help in addressing some of the parenting challenges such as unruly behavior among the children.

The Synod of Bishops from Africa proposed the image of Church as "Family of God" which was Africa's response to Vatican Council II's movement from the institutional emphasis of the Church to the communal model. The Synod was further convinced that the Church as "Family of God" cannot reach its full potential unless it is broken into communities which are small enough to permit close human relations. These communities would be the best and most effective means of forming Christians. This led the Synod to come up with the whole idea of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as privileged places where the laity members of the Church can learn to take up responsibilities in the Church. It is at this level that lay ministries can develop according to the gifts of the members and in response to the needs of the people in a given community [10].

In the traditional Agĩkũyũ society, people lived in small communities within which the real events of life took place. In these communities people could interact by exchanging services that in various ways

complement one another. A member of the community could go and borrow salt from another member who may not necessarily be of the same family. The other member could borrow something else from him or her. These people may not necessarily be of the same *mbari* or *mũhĩrĩga*; they could be just neighbors. The individual member in the living community felt inseparably bound to a community and its life through his or her clan. Such communal solidarity provides for its members a link of mystical brotherhood with all the community [11]. Such communality and solidarity promoted material and moral support among the members of the community. Individualism and exclusion of others were inconceivable among the Agĩkũyũ. This intense spirit of solidarity and community should be inculturated with the Church's teaching on SCCs. SCCs should help build up a spirit of community that builds the communality of the traditional Agĩkũyũ society. They should offer a new life experience of Christian community, which substitutes the older lineage, or family community that has been eroded by the contemporary individualistic and competitive society.

Agĩkũyũ philosophy of *mwaki* should be reflected in SCCs. A Small Christian Community is called by Agĩkũyũ (*mwaki*) thus situating it in its Christian and cultural heritage. *Mwaki* means fire and when used for a community, it means the people "warming up together." (Interview, June 2014). It is the gathering around the evening fire for a celebration. Church life should be based on these communities in which everyday life and work take place. In these communities, people, including the parents, youth and children, should experience real interpersonal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working. Consequently, they will overcome some of the family and parenting problems such as discrimination and isolation, identity, among others.

The SCCs should not be just prayer groups resembling Church services, but communities where people share and interact, and learn to dialogue together. This would encourage communal way of life and thus help in addressing some of the challenges faced by the members. In our case, through *miaki* (SCCs) familial and parenting challenges could be addressed by the members of the respective *mwaki* while those that require the attention of the Church leadership, would be forwarded by the leader of the *mwaki* to the relevant Church leader. In this way, they would feel part of the "Family of God" and the *mwaki* and would become active members of the Church since they would find a place to belong even among the faithful. As Kalilombe observes, SCCs should be concerned with the daily life of the faithful taken not only as a spiritual undertaking, but also as a total life commitment within and outside the Church [12].

The SCC should be inculturated into Agĩkũyũ (African) worldview so that they become a revival of the traditional Agĩkũyũ community where each person would contribute to the welfare of the family within the community. Consequently, members feel their social and personal needs are met. As Kenya Episcopal Conference (KEC) portends, SCCs cannot happen without families. By establishing SCC, the Synod and other Church leaders appeal to each Catholic family in town or in the rural areas to identify itself in one of the SCC near them. In this way the SCC will be a witness to others, as the first Christians were of how we "love and care for each other." (KEC 1986: 160)

Another critical item that stands out in the Agĩkũyũ socio-religio cultural system is that 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. A family was considered incomplete without children. Children were a sign of security and continuity to the family, clan and society. They are considered as a blessing to the couple upon marrying and thus the popular saying, 'they have been blessed with many children by God.' [13] 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. That 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. They were also regarded as belonging to the community so that a child could live with a relative without any difficulty unlike today. It is because the Agĩkũyũ upheld communitarian approach to life that was pursued for the common good of all.

Christian sources reveal that children are gifts and blessings from God. They are highly regarded and are expected to obey their parents as well. As explicated at the Vatican Council II, children should contribute in their own way to the sanctification of their parents as active members of the family. They should respond with gratitude and respect to what their parents do for them and should help them in their difficulties and loneliness of old age (GS, no. 48). The instruction of the Church on the value for children should be incorporated well with Agĩkũyũ value and love for children and life in general. This would go a long way in helping the parents in some parenting responsibilities some of which have overwhelmed them. In so doing issues such as street children or orphans shall be addressed without necessarily appealing to NGOs as articulated by most of the respondents interviewed. It should not, however, imply usurping the role of the responsible parents but is meant to preserve life that is highly valued among the Agĩkũyũ. In addition, families generally would feel the need to preserve life by taking care of other children other than their own. The childless families some of whom are

widowed would, for instance, adopt children and take care of them. As John Paul II teaches, such is a vocation for such families.

Another critical item we have learn from the Agĩkũyũ is that in the traditional Agĩkũyũ society, single fathers and mothers did not experience isolation and loneliness as they do today. In the strict sense, there were no widows or widowers. When a man died, his family and the entire clan (*mũhĩrĩga*) cared for the widow. In such a case, his younger brother or close relative would take care of her and her children. He was expected to provide for her sexual, physical and procreative needs. Such levirate union was not considered marriage; not even polygamy. The substitute husband was meant to safeguard the widow and her children and protect his deceased brother's homestead. As such, the widow did not suffer from loss of identity or loss of status as is the case today. She was considered part of her husband's family and her in-laws treated her as their child. The levirate union in the traditional Agĩkũyũ society was thus meant to ensure that the deceased's *mbarĩ* (family), continued to grow and develop despite his death. Kirwen further adds that levirate custom arises out of a social system, which ensures that each and every marriage maintains its identity and achieves its goals even in the face of physical death [14].

Physical death therefore did not curtail the continuity of the deceased's *mbarĩ*. Its purpose is thus to continue the marriage of the widow and bring her family to full fruition in the name of her deceased husband. The widow therefore would bear children with the substitute husband depending on her own decision and especially when she was of the childbearing age. The children born out of such a union however, do not belong to the surrogate husband but to the deceased husband; they are considered his heirs and thus would inherit his property (Interview, June 2014). The widow is not in any case, the surrogate husband's wife since her original marriage is regarded as continuing in existence. On the other hand, the widowed single fathers, in the traditional Agĩkũyũ society would remarry. Polygamy was commonly practiced and therefore it was rare for one to remain a widower as is the case today. The community participated in ensuring that he remarries no matter his age. The deceased's family would even suggest to the widower that he remarries the deceased's sister or cousin. This was done especially out of love for children and the widower.

The aspect of loving and caring for the widowed single mothers and fathers among the Agĩkũyũ stands out clearly and thus should be preserved even within Christianity. The dead husband's brothers and his family generally can take care of the widow and her children, although under Christianity, they can no longer cater for her sexual and procreative needs as it will be considered polygamy or adultery. She should remain a valued and respected member of the dead husband's family. If the family is unable or neglects and abuses her in anyway, the Church family which is the "Family of God" should take up the role. The same applies to other single parents who should be taken care of by their respective families and where neglect and suffering is detected the "Family of God" should come in handy. The elderly Widowed Single Fathers who may not remarry should be well taken care of.

Christian values of brotherhood and sisterhood should be highly inculturated with Agĩkũyũ traditional customs that ensured love and care for parents and children. As mentioned earlier on, levirate union may not be applicable in contemporary Christian society but the values behind such a practice could be inculturated within Christian marriage. This should not be taken to mean unlawful mixture (syncretism) within Christianity but unearthing the Agĩkũyũ socio-religio cultural values that are necessary and relevant for the empowerment of parents with finality to equipping them to become better parents within the realm of the "Family of God."

III. CONCLUSION

In general, the Agĩkũyũ family set up, customary laws and traditions, reveal a value system that the Church and families in contemporary society can appeal to even as modernity takes grip on our society today. It is a challenge to the Church in general to rediscover these values and apply them, for the integral development of Her members especially contemporary parents who are struggling with the ordeal of family-hood and parenting. African society therefore has indispensable values which can go an extra mile in addressing contemporary familial and parenting challenges. Inculturation should be encouraged and harnessed within religion as it is a way through which true religion can be lived and practiced by Africans.

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