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Philosophy as a tool for decolonization

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ABSTRACT

We show in this paper that a number of studies have been carried out on cultural values with reference to the Yorùbá marriage system and that of the Western culture. Although previous studies have shown the differences between the Yorùbá marriage system and the Western marriage system, none has discussed the effect of colonization on the Yorùbá marriage system and the need for the redirection of our steps towards the Yorùbá cultural values and ideals. We argue that it is important, in view of the widespread venereal diseases, single parenting and juvenile pregnancies, among others, to revisit our cultural values so as to promote the ideals that are present in the Yorùbá marriage system as against what is obtainable and prevalent, not only among the westerners, but also among the contemporary Yorùbá people. We argue further that it has become imperative for the African man to think and look inward and emphasize the African philosophy in tackling moral challenges not only in Africa, but also in the world as a whole.

Keywords: philosophy, moral, marriage, Africa, west, Yorùbá, decolonization

1. INTRODUCTION

Andarh (1982: 4-5) observes that culture embraces all the material and non-material expression of a people as well as the process with which the expressions are communicated. According to Andarh (ibid), culture encompasses all the social, ethical, intellectual, scientific, artistic and technological expressions and processes of a people usually ethnically and /or nationally or supra-nationally related, and usually living in a geographically contiguous area,

what they pass on to their successors and how these are passed on. Hofstede (1980) also defines culture as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of a group from another, which is passed from generation to generation. Hofstede (ibid) argues further that culture is highly dynamic because each generation adds something of its own before passing it on. For Mulholland (1991), culture is a set of shared and enduring meaning values and beliefs that characterize national, ethnic or other groups and orient their behaviour. From the above definitions, it can be argued that culture is a way of life and value system that depicts the lifestyle, norms, standards, codes, ethics and traditions of a group of people. It is a group identity that distinguishes or differentiates one group from another. Another deduction from the definitions above is that each society/group has a culture of its own and it is derived through convention arrived at by the group consensus. The norms guide the standard of the group behaviour within and outside the group community and the norms play important roles in the group communal life. However, while we agree with Hofstede's (ibid) position that culture is changing all the time because each generation adds something to it before passing it down to another generation, it can be argued that in most cases, culture change or assimilation can be traced to external factors such as religion, trade and colonization. The three factors, as a result of culture contact, can lead to cultural change or cultural assimilation. From empirical evidence, cultural change and its antecedent challenges have made the philosophical concept of decolonization an interesting enterprise.

Furthermore, of interest to this philosophical exploration is a cultural change which came about as a result of culture contact. It is a known fact that a cultural change in Africa is majorly informed by colonialism. Two methods namely: principles of association and assimilation were adopted by the imperial lords. In the African society where the principle of assimilation is adopted, most especially the Francophone countries, African culture is seen as barbaric and must be jettisoned for the civilized culture of the West. On the other hand, where the principle of association is adopted, there are cultural interactions and interplay such that most of the value systems of the colonized regions have been rejected in preference for those of the Western world. The abandonment of the African cultural systems and values for the supposedly civilized culture of white colonialists has created challenges which inform the redirection of African philosophical thoughts to decolonization.

Wiredu (1974) argues that the contemporary African experience is marked by a certain intellectual anomaly which results in the cultural influx characterized by confused interplay between an indigenous cultural heritage and the foreign cultural legacy of a colonial origin. Marriage, which is our focus in this research and which is one of our cultural values, has been greatly influenced by western culture. Scholars like Oyènéyè (1993) have described a marriage as a union between a man and a woman or between a husband and his wife. Oyènéyè (ibid) submits that marriages have four forms which are monogamy, polygamy, polyandry and group marriages. In his study, he attempts a discussion of all types of marriages in Nigeria ranging from mutual, trial, ordinance, Christian, Muslim and customary marriages among Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá people. However, none has discussed the influence of colonization on customary marriage rites in Nigeria. This present paper is, therefore, informed by the need to look at the effects of colonialism on customary marriages in the Yorùbá setting and calls for critical philosophical thoughts of decolonization in the Yorùbá marriage systems which have been greatly influenced by the western culture.

The paper also calls for the redirection of our steps toward our cultural ideals and values vis-a-vis the Yorùbá marriage systems. But, as we progress, we will draw some excerpts from

Ifá Literary Corpus to buttress our position. It will be recalled that in Yorùbá culture, Ifá is regarded as the repository of the Yorùbá people's culture, history, tradition and values.

2. MARRIAGE IN YORÙBÁ TRADITIONAL THOUGHTS

Among the Yorùbá of the South-western Nigeria, marriage is a contract between a man and a woman as well as the families of the would-be couple for the purpose of living together as one family and procreation. For instance, Ìkòtún (2017) submits that the concept of marriage is not restricted to the nuclear family alone but to the extended family or families also. This is the reason why one can address the wife of a relation as 'someone's wife' or as 'my wife.' The importance of marriage is exemplified in *Ifá Ògúndábèdè* which says:

*Ogbón ni mo gbón
Tí kò jẹ́ kí n jẹ́ ilá
Òràn ni mo mò
Tí kò jẹ́ kí n jẹ́ ikàn
Tèmi bá òràn
Tó mọ́ fún –un pèlú
Okò aje ní í mú mi í lọ
A dífá fún Òrúnmìlà ó n sunkún
Pé òun ò lóbìnrin
Ó dífá fún Òrúnmìlà
Ifá n sáwo lọ sílùú Ìwó
Ìyà kan iyà kàn tí mo jẹ́ lóde Ìwó ní í jẹ́ iyàwó*

TRANSLATION

*It is the wisdom which I possess
That cautions me against taking okra soup
It is the knowledge with which I am endowed
That prevents me from eating garden eggs
The combination of my possession of wisdom
and knowledge
Leads me to a prosperous venture.
Ifá divination was cast for Òrúnmìlà
Who would continue lamenting over his state of
bachelorhood
Ifá divination was also cast for Òrúnmìlà
The custodian of Ifá oracle was on divination
expedition to Ìwó Land
The series of hardships I encountered in Ìwó
Land
Were known as a wife*

Marriage is considered to be an important social institution which confers on the married man or woman prestige in the Yorùbá society. When a man or a woman reaches a marriageable age, both of them will begin to appear neater and their parents will, at this period, begin to be on the look-out for the choice of partners for their children. This phenomenon is called 'ifojúsódé.' The parties in the proposed marriage, by tradition, are not expected to have a direct dialogue unless with the assistance of an intermediary called 'Alárinà.' The 'alárinà' or the intermediary is responsible for facilitating love and understanding between the intending couple. The *Ifá Ọ̀sẹ̀ Bàrà*, recited below, underscores the role of 'Alárinà' in the Yorùbá marriage culture.

Ọ̀sẹ̀ gàn- án
Ọ̀bàrà gàn-án
A difá fún Ọ̀rúnmìlà
Nígba tí n lọ rèé fẹ̀mọ ní Mògún
Wón ní kó fi Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà ẹ̀ Alárinà rẹ̀
Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà ní í ẹ̀soní gbòwọ̀ Awo
Njé wón pè mí ní Mògún
Èwo ni mo ẹ̀
Wón tún pè mí ní Mògbòn
Èwo ni mo ẹ̀
E bá mi dúpẹ̀ lówọ̀ Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà
Ọ̀un ní í ẹ̀soní gbòwọ̀ Awo

TRANSLATION

Ọ̀sẹ̀, the mighty
Ọ̀bàrà the valiant
Ifá divination was cast for Ọ̀rúnmìlà
When he was to take a bride in Mògún
He was counselled to employ the services of Èṣù
(god of confusion) as his mediator
Èṣù, the helper of Ifá oracle
Behold, I was summoned to Mògún
What have I done (to warrant the emergency
summons?)
I was again hurriedly summoned to Mògún
What was my offence?
Let someone appreciate Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà on my behalf
The unflinching supporter of Ifá oracle

The word 'gbòwọ̀' in line (12) is the same as 'Alárinà' in line (5). The role of 'Alárinà' is successful when the intending wife has accepted to marry the intending husband. The next stage is 'Ìsíhùn' (meaning the beginning of direct conversations). After 'Ìsíhùn,' the boy and the girl can meet regularly for conversations that can lead and take care of their marital life. At this point, the 'Alárinà' (intermediary) is expected to have stepped aside to allow the two parties to now meet regularly. After all, the Yorùbá people say, "Táya bá mojú ọ̀kọ̀ tán,

alárinà a yèba" (When the two lovers have agreed to marry each other, the intermediary will step aside).

Still on *Alárinà* (intermediary), the Yorùbá culture also allows the parents of the would-be groom to be the *Alárinà*. In this case, the parents of the would-be groom are the ones that normally search for a wife for their son. The would-be bride may be the daughter of their friends, acquaintance or a lady in the environment with good pedigree. There have also been instances where a friend would hand over his daughter to his friend for the purpose of marriage. The friend who has been given a lady can as well marry the lady or hand over the lady to his son for marriage. The essence of this is to make the love between the two friends stronger and more enduring. There have also been a few occasions where members of an association or a group have forcefully abducted ladies and handed them over to their colleagues who are of age, but have not yet married. In this case, the friends would overpower the ladies such that their friends would have the opportunity of making love to the ladies. Some of these attempts have ended up making such men and women to become husbands and wives, while some did not yield positive results. But, this system is no longer in practice

However, after the work of *Alárinà* (intermediary), the two can only meet in the presence of a third party. The essence of this is to guide against any temptation that can lead to immorality. This culture of guarding against immorality is the responsibility of everybody in the society to keep watch over the would-be couples and that has made marriages in the Yorùbá traditional society to be honourable, because, as a rule, the prospective bride is expected to still remain virgin till the nuptial knot is tied. The boy has the responsibility of informing his parents that he has seen a lady that he wants to marry. At least, two members of the prospective groom's family will then go to the prospective bride's parents for the purpose of making a formal request to marry their daughter. This is known as 'itọrọ.' An occasion where the two families will meet and make the marriage proposal known to everyone is referred to as '*idána*.' (engagement). During '*idána*,' (engagement), the prospective groom's parents/family would carry cultural items such as powdered corn (*àádùn*), bitter kola (*orógbó*), alligator pepper (*ataare*), yams (*iṣu*), kolanut (*obi*) and hot drinks to their prospective in-laws' house as symbolic items for saying the marriage prayers. In Yorùbá culture, '*idána*' (engagement) is a symbolic form of an expression of appreciation by the groom's family to the family of the bride. This symbolic demonstration of appreciation is vividly captured in an *Ifá* corpus titled *IfáÈjì-Ogbè* which says:

Ifá ní fúfufú
Ajàna –an kìrìkìrì gbọnin
Ìran igún ní í jẹbọ
Ni kì í kẹlẹbọ kú àná
Ìran àkàlà ní í jẹbọ
Ni ń kẹlẹbọ kú ù jẹta
O kú àná ni èrè oore òní
Yinni yinni kẹni ó le sẹ mí –ìn
Àwọn ni ó sẹfá fún Ọrúnmilà
Baba ó gbé òòsà relé àna
Yòò dúpẹ àná yòò gbọrẹ òní bọ
Ifá mo dúpẹ mo gbọrẹ
Èyàn tó bá dúpẹ àná

*Yòò gbọrẹ òní bọ
Ifá mo dúpẹ́ mo gbọrẹ*

TRANSLATION

*Ifa says fífufú
Ajàna –an kìrìkìrì gbọnin
It is the descendant of the vulture that consumes
sacrifices
Without expressing appreciation to the provider
(of the sacrifice) the second day
It is the descendant of ostrich that devours
rituals
Without thanking the provider the third day
The expression of gratitude is the reward of
another good gesture
For, it is one good turn that deserves another
They prepared Ifá divination for Òrúnmilà,
Who would carry a deity to his in-laws' house
He would express the good gesture of yesterday
and, in return, be rewarded with more blessings
today
Ifá oracle, I express gratitude and receive more
blessings
Whoever appreciates yesterday's good gesture
Will be richly rewarded the next day
Ifá oracle, I express appreciation
And receive more blessings*

Still on *idána* (engagement), the payment of '*owó ori*' (bride price) which is not fixed and which varies from one locality to the other is also an important element of Yorùbá marriage. In the Traditional Yorùbá culture, the only thing that qualifies a man to be regarded as a husband is the full payment of the bride price. Both the engagement and bride price are important to the consummation of relationship. The next stage is the bride's preparation (*ìpalẹ̀mọ̀*) to leave her parents' house for her groom's house. At this juncture, it is the duty of the intending husband to provide for all her needs such as money, clothes and other essential materials that will make the marriage colourful. The actual marriage will then come up. One other interesting aspect of the marriage is the parting song or wedding chant that is called *ẹ̀kún iyàwó* among some Yorùbá sub-ethnic groups and *ràrà* among some others. The bridal chant is done by the bride and her friends to celebrate the nuptial night as well as appreciate the role played by the bride's parents in nurturing her to maturity.

Similarly, the nuptial night is another significant phase in the lives of both the bride and the groom. For the bride, it is a night when she is expected to prove her virginity to her groom. The issue of virginity is an age-long tradition in Yorùbá land. It used to be venerated and, any lady who so carelessly had lost her virginity before the nuptial night used to face public scorn and disgrace which might even lead the hapless bride to commit suicide.

If the groom found his bride chaste on the nuptial night, he would send a full-packet of matches and a full keg of undiluted palm-wine to the parents of the bride to symbolise that their daughter was pure and chaste. The news of the bride's virginity will also spread among members of the two families and serve as evidence of good moral upbringing on the part of the bride's parents. It will also serve as a good precedent which the younger ones must emulate. But, if the situation is otherwise, the lady may become a subject of ridicule and may lead to frequent disagreements between the couple. In Yorùbá tradition, one of the major reasons for marriage is procreation. For, marriage is considered successful when the wife gives birth to a child between nine months and a year after wedlock. However, if there is no evidence of pregnancy or child birth after a period of time, the two families will become worried and start to look for ways of addressing the situation. The steps enumerated above and the involvement of the families of both would-be husband and wife have made marriages among the Yorùbá people to withstand the test of time and survive for as long as both parties are alive, though, this does not mean that we do not have some marriages that collapse along the line.

3. MARRIAGE IN THE WESTERN THOUGHT

The Western conception of marriage symbolizes a love relationship between two people: the intending bride and groom, with the exception of other people. Often times, the marriage journey may start with a mere friendship, then it gets to a point at which the would-be groom will propose to the would-be wife and if she agrees to the proposal, they will both enter into a period of courtship which will finally culminate in marriage. Very often, the proposal is made at a small family and/or friend get-together party where the intending groom officially proposes to the would-be bride in the presence of everyone with the presentation of an engagement ring, sometimes kneeling down before the girl and making a request with the statement, "Please, marry me." Once both parties have agreed to get married, invitations are served to friends and family members including the parents. In some cases, the marriage can still go on even when the parents of either party refuse to give their consent if there is a reason for them to express their disapproval. Most marriages in the Western culture are contracted in Court and when the marriage can no longer work, either of the parties can approach the Court for the dissolution of the marriage union. At the wedding ceremony which is often conducted at the local Marriage Registry, a Marriage Certificate is issued to the couple legally authorizing them to live together as husband and wife. Dispute resolution in Western climes is usually done by the couple themselves or by engaging the service of a marriage counsellor. Child-bearing or procreation is never considered as a condition for marriage as far as the modern system of Western marriage is concerned.

4. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF YORÙBÁ AND WESTERN CONCEPTION OF MARRIAGE

Wiredu (1974, 1980) argues that the contemporary African experience is marked by a certain intellectual anomaly. The African today, as a rule, lives in a cultural flux characterised by a confused interplay between an indigenous cultural heritage and a foreign cultural legacy

of a colonial origin. I will like to submit here that marriage in the Yorùbá conception of it has been largely influenced by the Western culture. Nowadays, the concept of 'Alarina' (intermediary) between the intended couple at the early stage of their courtship is not seriously pronounced or emphasized as it was the case in the past. This is because some of the couples who are now husbands and wives must have either met when they were in school, at their places of work, at parties or social functions and, lately, on social media. But in the past, before the introduction of the school system, most girls remained with their parents and were usually monitored, and this prevented wayward movements on the part of the girls. It also discouraged promiscuity among the boys and girls of marriage age.

Another important aspect of Yorùbá marriage worthy of note is the value placed on chastity or virginity. It is the ability of a girl to keep her virginity till the marriage and this is a sensitive aspect of marriage. But in today's Yorùbá marriage, virginity is no longer considered important to the girl getting married. In many cases, a girl would have lost her virginity before reaching the age of eighteen. This is usually due to the advent of Western civilization which encourages both boys and girls to relate. A lady may choose to have multiple lovers without necessarily having it in mind to get married to any of the lovers. Young boys or girls who are interested in each other speak directly to each other. The boy or girl may have known each other only a month or two and decide to consummate their relationship. All these acts are borrowed from the western conception of marriage.

In Yorùbá culture also, marriage is a holistic thing where the bride is 'marrying' the family and not the husband alone. Likewise, the bride has certain obligations to her in-laws. She must respect them, love them and take good care of them anytime they come around. In the western culture of marriage, the couple are on their own and there is no serious kind of relationship with the extended family or families. Most marriages in Africa today reflect the 'me and my husband' syndrome and this is traceable to the western marriage system that came upon the African thought system through colonialism. In most cases, the bride has no respect or obligation to her in-laws. Perhaps, this position of 'me and my husband' can be said to be encouraged by the Christian doctrine which says "the man will leave his parents and be joined with his wife and they will no longer be two, but one" (see Genesis 2:24).

5. THE NEED FOR THE CONCEPT OF DECOLONIZATION

Here comes the challenge of conceptual decolonization. It is argued that the West should not condemn African philosophy but must allow Africans to develop their own philosophy. Africans borrow ideas from the West; likewise the West can borrow ideas from the Africans. The concept of marriage in the African conception of it can be used as a tool to decolonize the Africans from the Western colonialism. Wiredu (ibid) argues "the simple recipe for decolonization for the African is, to try to think them though in your own African language and on the basis of the results, review the intelligibility of the associated problems or the plausible of the apparent solutions that have tempted you when you have pondered them in some metropolitan language." In essence, what the Africans should be advocating for is an African philosophy with a strong Africa orientation that is rooted in African cultural and historical experience down the ages. This does not, however, mean discarding completely all that is Western for African's current situation makes it necessary that African should sift out the West that which is relevant to current Africa realities. This, however, is not as a result of

Bodunrin's (1990) admonition of learning from the feet of "Western Master" but rather the fact that Western philosophy derives significant stimulus and input from ancient Egyptian philosophy. It is when viewed from this perspective that Irele's (1998) point about Africa having a claim upon Western civilization as well as considerable stake in it becomes very instructive. Thus, Africa philosophy, in drawing from the corpus of Western philosophy occasionally, is merely benefiting from the investment of their ancestors. A partial assimilation from the Western philosophy of that which is relevant to contemporary African situation and a heavy reliance on African experience will eliminate the current poverty in the discipline and prepare it for the challenge of the Twenty-first century.

In the African conception of marriage, a bride who is found to have kept her virginity is a cause of much happiness to her husband, parents and relatives. A piece of white cloth stained with blood, as a token of virginity, will be sent to her parents, accompanied with a huge sum of money and a hen to make a sacrifice to the head of the bride and the whole day will be given to merriment in the bridegroom's compound. The emphasis placed on chastity has no doubt helped to reduce the spread of venereal diseases, juvenile pregnancies and single parenting, among other vices. But nowadays, with the imposition of the Western thought system on our African thought system, virginity has become a thing of the past for the fact that promiscuity and unbridled sex has become the order of the day. The result of this imported system includes uncontrollable venereal diseases, unwanted pregnancies and, in some cases, single parenting.

It is not the case that there are no virgins in the west but the kind of honour given to any lady found to be a virgin after her wedding in African thought system is greater than that of the west. In the western conception of marriage, a certificate of marriage is issued to the couple which legalizes the marriage and before divorce can take place, they will need to approach the Court to seek a dissolution of the marriage. But in the African conception of marriage, a couple may decide to divorce each other without necessarily seeking the permission of the Court. It must be noted that marriage in the African context is a relationship between two families and before a divorce will take place, both groom and bride's families must have tried every means to prevent the dissolution of the marriage. But when all pleas fail, divorce will be inevitable. The only ground that can prompt a divorce is the issue of infidelity. There are many thinkers who still agree fully with Marx that philosophy has a role to play in the society.

The modern European philosopher may immediately point out the continuity in European culture and experience, arguing strongly that the essential elements of the European past are indeed still operative in the modern area. That the European of today has learnt to fly jets or operate sophisticated machines does not mean a break with their traditional heritage. Even when one admits a gap between the European past and present and thus sees the modern European philosopher reflecting on the experience of his ancestors rather than on his own experience, the case of the African philosopher is different. His sin is that he is not reflecting on the past, that is, his own culture. This is because the Africans believe that there is nothing handed down, at least not in written form, for him to reflect upon and this is where our problem comes from not trusting our own philosophy. Comparing the Western and African traditional concepts of marriage, it can be argued that there are a lot of things to hold on to in the African marriage than in the Western marriage. If we critically examine the issue of virginity and the kind of honour given to a lady in the African thought system that is found to

have not defiled herself before her wedding day, we will see that this still needs to be adhered to strictly.

6. CONCLUSIONS

We have shown in this paper that a number of studies have been carried out on cultural values with reference to the Yorùbá marriage system and that of the Western culture. Although, previous studies have shown the differences between the Yorùbá marriage system and the Western marriage system, none has discussed the effect of colonization on the Yorùbá marriage system and the need for the redirection of our steps towards the Yorùbá cultural values and ideals. We have shown that it is important, in view of widespread venereal diseases, single parenting, juvenile pregnancies, among others, to revisit our cultural values so as to promote the ideals that are present in the Yorùbá marriage system as against what is obtainable and prevalent, not only among the westerners; but also among the contemporary Yorùbá people. Marriage in the traditional thought system has more value to be adhered to than marriage in the western traditional thoughts. Philosophy should reject dogmatism and be ready to stand on its feet. Although the West have colonized us economically, politically and religiously, it is obvious that the Western way of thinking is grossly inadequate in its ability to solve the African problems, thus, it has become urgently necessary for the African man to think and look inward and emphasize the African philosophy in tackling moral challenges, not only in Africa, but also in the world as a whole.

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