

SOCI 222

Comparative Social Institutions

Session 7 – The Marriage Institution in Different African Societies

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2014/2015 – 2016/2017

Session Overview

- Marriage is an institution which is referred to as a cultural universal because it is found in all societies the world over. This session focuses on the marriage institution as it is practiced in some African societies

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic one – Defining marriage
- Topic two – Some marriage payments and their significance
- Topic two - The various marriage patterns
- Topic four - Major changes in the marriage institution



Reading List

- Brown, C. K. and Thakur, A. P. (1997) *Rural Sociology, A West African Reader 1: Kinship, Marriage and the Family*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press
- Goody, J. (1969) Normative Recollected and Actual Marriage Payment among the Lowilli, 1951-1966 in *Africa*, 39:54-61
- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and Change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology* Accra: Ghana Universities Press.
- Nukunya, G. K. (1999) *Kinship and Marriage among the Anlo Ewe*. London: Athlone Press

Topic One

DEFINING MARRIAGE



Defining marriage

- Marriage is the recognized institution for the establishment and maintenance of family all over the world
- It is also the institution through which kinship ties are both established and extended
- Marriage legitimizes sexual relations and reproduction in society
- It regulates one of the basic needs and desires of individuals in society (sexual needs)

Defining Marriage

- Despite its universality, there is no generally acceptable definition for marriage
- Lucy Mair in *“Notes and Queries in Anthropology”* defined marriage as “ a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognized as legitimate children of both parents”

Critical Issues from the definition

- The definition does not take care of same-sex marriages
- It ignores plural/polygamous marriages
- It creates the impression that child bearing is the only purpose for marriage
- It ignores biological paternity of the child as well as adoption
- It ignores the role of families i.e. marriage is not between individuals alone.

Defining marriage (continued)

- Nukunya (1962), provided a definition as “any union in which the couple has gone through all the procedures and rituals recognized in the society for such a purpose”
- To be legal, the marriage according to Nukunya, must pass through the laid down customary stages in a particular society
- There are three essential elements general to all societies namely:
 - The marriage payment;
 - The marriage ceremony;
 - The official handing over of the bride to the groom;
- In some societies, there is consummation of the union;

Mate Selection

- This involves the procedures and processes to investigate the background of the prospective partners
- Conditions and factors investigated include:
 - Criminal record of the partner and their family;
 - Issues of witchcraft, magic and sorcery;
 - Hereditary diseases like epilepsy, lunacy, leprosy;
 - Hardworking family and if they are quarrelsome.

Reasons for parental Influence in Mate Selection

- Assurance of security of the marriage
- Children born out of the marriage become kin relatives of the family
- To protect the interest of family members (who may be ignorant) from possible dangers
- Marriage leads to affinal relationships therefore the need to investigate

Marriage Prohibitions

- These are traditional laws and beliefs that require that certain categories of kin may not marry
- Rules of exogamy and endogamy among lineage and clan members are examples of marriage prohibitions
- Rules of child betrothal where a girl may be given into marriage at a young age is another example
- Incest taboo is another prohibition where close relatives are not allowed to have sexual intercourse

Topic two

SIGNIFICANCE OF MARRIAGE PAYMENTS AND SOME EXAMPLES



Marriage Payments

- It is either presentation or exchange of items between the two kin groups
- The practice differs from society to society since it is not standardized
- Traditionally, the payment is supposed to be a symbolic indication of the following:
 - Acknowledgement and respect to the bride's family for the investment made in the bride
 - To show the seriousness and determination of the groom to assume responsibility as a husband and father
 - To provide legal backing and collective support from the two sides of the family

Marriage Payments

- It legalizes the status of the children coming out of the marriage
- It also transfers the rights-in-genetricem and rights-in-uxorem to the man
- **Rights-in-genetricem** refers to the husband's rights over the reproductive services of his wife

This means that once the marriage payment is done, all children born to the woman regardless of their biological paternity are for the husband

- **Right-in-uxorem** refers to the husband's right over the domestic and sexual services of the wife

Once the marriage payment is done, the woman has an obligation to satisfy the man sexually, and perform chores.

Typical Examples of Marriage Payments

- Among the **Ashanti**, the key processes involved are knocking, thanksgiving gift and head wine (tiri nsa) and the main payment
- In terms of cash payment, the amount is determined by the social class of the bride
- Bride from royal families: cash payment of 8 pounds, commoners: 10 shillings and for slaves: 7 shillings
- This is in addition to some drinks and cloth
- Half of the items go to the father and the remaining half goes to the mother's brother

Typical Examples of Marriage Payments

- Among the **Anlo Ewe**, there are two types of payments - “tabianu” and “sronu”;
- “Tabianu” is payment done when the man’s proposal is accepted and the “sronu” is marriage payment proper
- “Tabianu”: 12 bottles of assorted drinks and cash
- “Sronu”: drinks, kente cloth, wax print and cash

Typical examples of marriage payments

- Among the **Gonja**, minimum amount 13 shillings, 12 kola supplemented by courting and greeting gift to the bride to be and the parents.

Typical examples of marriage payments

- Among the **Lowili**, 350 cowrie shells is paid to legalize the union
- 3 cows, 1 goat and 20,000 cowrie shells should be paid during the life time of the marriage
- If such payments are not forthcoming the bride's father persuades her to return home until the husband meets his obligation;

Typical examples of marriage payments

- Among the **Ga**, payment of drinks and cash are done in stages
- The prominent payment is “weku daa” (drinks for the relatives) which is the most important payment which legalizes the marriage

Typical examples of marriage payments

- Among the **Lobedu tribe of Transvaal South Africa**, the bride wealth is between 5-10 cows
- A sister's bride wealth is used by the brother to marry a woman and this establishes a **special cattle-linked relationship** between a brother and sister
- As a result, a **cattle-linked** sister's son often marries a **cattle-linked** brother's daughter
- The sister thus controls the brother's house and prevents the brother disciplining the wife
- The woman takes a share in the brother's property at his death and settles disputes in the brother's house

Topic Three

FORMS AND PATTERNS OF MARRIAGE



Forms and patterns of marriage

- **Monogamous marriage:** comprises a husband and a wife
- **Polygamous marriage:** refers to all types of multiple marriages namely polygyny and polyandry
 - **Polygynous marriage** comprises a husband and two or more wives;
 - **Polyandrous marriage** consists of a wife and two or more husbands;

Forms and patterns of marriage

- Polygyny exists in many African societies because it provides access to a larger pool of family labour for economic activities
- **Sororal polygyny** is a type of polygynous marriage where a husband or man marries two or more sisters at the same time
- The Zulu of South Africa approve of sororal polygyny where a woman will urge her husband to marry her younger sister without the jealousy of a stranger co-wife
- The Zulu say that '*the love of sisters overcomes the jealousy of polygyny*';

Forms and patterns of marriage

- However, the Lozi of Zambia reject sororal polygyny and it is considered very bad to marry even a cousin of your wife while she is alive
- The Lozi say, ***‘the jealousy of polygyny spoils the love of sisters and will break up their family’***
- According to the Lozi, sisters must not be put in the position of competing for a man’s favour or their children competing for inheritance
- If sororal polygyny occurs among the Lozi it must lead to divorce

Forms and patterns of marriage

- **Fraternal polyandry** is a type of polyandrous marriage where a woman marries two or more brothers at the same time
- This type of marriage is common among Eastern Asian societies found in Pakistan, India, (Todas) etc.;

Forms and patterns of marriage

- In Ghana, three major types of marriage are permitted by law namely:
 - **Customary marriage** which are specific to particular traditions and cultural areas with unlimited polygyny;
 - **Islamic marriage** which have some provisions and practices similar with limited polygyny of four wives;
 - **Marriage by ordinance** which is registered with state agencies and coincides with Christian marriage and monogamous.

Topic four

SOME CHANGES IN THE MARRIAGE INSTITUTION



Changes in the Marriage Institution

- Reduced polygyny and increasing monogamy
- Residence is also more neolocal
- Remaining single or co-habiting have become alternative lifestyles
- Urbanisation has led to a wider marriage market and a reduction in investigations of potential spouses
- Marriage payments also involve more elaborate and modern consumer goods

Sample Question

- Can you think of some more changes that have occurred in the marriage institution over the years? How different or similar are these changes when compared across different societies?

References

- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology*. Accra: Ghana University Press. Chapter on marriage and family (page 41-54)

