

A Socio- Religious Perspective of Late Marriage and Stigmatization of Single Adults and its Impact on the Church in Nigeria

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Abstract

Late marriage among adult youths is one of the challenges in the church in Nigeria. It affects the image of the church and the spiritual growth of the people concerned. Many of the youths marry at late thirties to late forties. Late marriage here refers to situations when a person who has reached the state of maturity in every facet of life that is; mentally, spiritually, financially and physically is not married probably as a result of unavailability of spouse or some other factors. Although there are a few who deliberately choose to delay their marriage probably because of academic, career or ministerial pursuit but majority of those who are having late marriage are not prepared for it. They have their life planned out only to find it difficult to settle into blissful home. Many of those with delay marriage are being mocked by their relatives and peers; many times they are seen as people with peculiar problem. The church also treated them sometime as people who have spiritual problem or are not spiritual enough to pray through and get answer in the area of marriage. Sometimes their case is termed demonic and they are stigmatized. This attitude discouraged many adult singles, particularly the females, and made them feel not welcome in the Church. The loneliness and the temptation the matured singles face in their various offices are beyond imagination: the harassment of bosses, insult from colleagues and ungodly proposals from ridiculous quarters coupled with fellow Christians teasing them that 'how is *bro*?' when it is obvious that the fellow is not into any relationship is like putting salt in a sore. The paper attempts to examine the causes of late marriage, the socio-religious perspective of marriage among the Yoruba, stigmatization of female single adults and the impact of these on the Church, using the descriptive and socio-historical approach. Findings showed that many go into marriage to satisfy social and religious expectations not necessarily because it was the best thing for them as at the time they married. It becomes necessary to re-orientate the youths on the need to make necessary preparations before marriage and see marriage as a gift from God. Most important is the fact that late marriage or no marriage at all does not make one less human or less intelligent.

Keywords: socio-religious, late marriage, stigmatization, single adults, church

1. Introduction

The definition of marriage varies according to different cultures but it is usually an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual, is acknowledged. Marriage is a mutual, exclusive, life-long, one-flesh union between a husband and wife characterized by faithfulness. Marriage has been defined as a legally sanctioned union between any two consenting adults of opposite gender, regardless of their race. Marriage is the ultimate human connection in which two people commit themselves fully and faithfully to each other in a lifelong journey of deep sharing, mutual respect and growing intimacy. When the commitment is total, clear and unreserved, partners are encouraged freely and openly to share their inner struggles and fears as well as their joys and triumphs.

Marriage can be recognized by a state, an organization, a religious authority, a tribal group, a local community or peers. It is often viewed as a contract. Civil marriage is the legal concept of marriage as a governmental institution irrespective of religious affiliation, in accordance with marriage laws of the jurisdiction. Forced marriages are illegal in some jurisdictions. Christian marriage is defined as:

a divinely sanctioned union between a believing man and a believing woman for the fulfilment of their mutual love, for mutual support, for shared happiness, and for

the procreation and rearing of children who will in turn become Christians (Clark, 1947).

Marriage is the right atmosphere to engage in sexual relations and to build a family life and the church teaches that God Himself is the author of the sacred institution of marriage, which is His way of showing love for those He created. Holy Matrimony is another name for sacramental marriage. Marriage is intended to be a faithful, exclusive, lifelong union of a man and a woman. Committing themselves completely to each other, a Christian husband and wife strive to sanctify each other, bring children into the world, and educate them in the Christian way of life. Man and woman, although created differently from each other, complement each other in marriage. According to God's design, this union lasts until dissolved by the death of one of the partners. Christians variously regard marriage as a sacrament, a contract, a sacred institution, or a covenant.

Marriage is a calling which takes a great deal of energy and devotion. Husbands and wives are called to live together, not only physically, but on every level of life. Economically, socially, recreationally in matters of faith and lifestyle, they are to keep faith with each other. Since each person is unique, with his or her own difference, like and dislikes, it takes a great deal of sensitivity, commitment and work to develop a way of being together which is not only enriching for them as a couple but also individually. When husbands and wives respect, accept and understand each other as persons in their own rights, rather than as people who can meet respective needs, they are able to form a way of being together, a way of affirming and being affirmed, of yielding to and receiving from. There is no room for threats and manipulations. When each of the partners feels accepted and understood, they can safely open up more and more of themselves to each other and deepen their sharing.

In Africa, marriage is a sacred union. This is because it solidifies relationship that enriches communities and nations by bringing forth new life and new hope. Marriage is that cultural process which ushers in new life. It is a cherished and most celebrated rite since the dawn of African civilization. Traditionally, throughout Africa, the principal purpose of marriage was for the raising of children. Sex for fun had no place in the life of the community. Sexual intercourse is expected to take place only within marriage therefore sex is seen as the most important factor in marriage (Omoyajowo, 2001: 133). But marriage in Africa is not a human right in that it does not need licenses or certificates. It is a privilege afforded by communities, between man and woman for those who meet the criteria. African weddings are spiritual and social and involve the combination of two lives, two families, and even two communities. An Africa proverb says "a man without a wife is like a vase without flowers." A good marriage compliments each other, and makes both parties better. Marriage is a journey through life which enhances and enriches entire communities. Lack of marriage is the death of a nation and a people.

In Nigeria, marriage involves not only interpersonal relations but also in the final analysis inter community relations. The fertility of the bride and bridegroom are considered seriously. It is the central requirement in marriage. Ultimately, people marry because God made man to do so. Each person is only half of a whole. Without the other half, a person never feels whole. One's spouse not only challenges the fellow to be a better human being, but also complements. A man and a woman create a positive energy which leads to fulfilment in all areas of their lives both in the physical and the spiritual. It is seen as a spiritual bonding.

2. Reasons for Marriage

It is believed in many African societies that from the very beginning of human life, God commanded or taught people to get married and bear children. Therefore marriage is looked upon as a sacred duty which every normal person must perform and failure to do so means in effect stopping the flow of life through the individual and hence, the diminishing of mankind upon the earth. Anything that deliberately goes towards the destruction or obstruction of human life is regarded as wicked and evil. Therefore anybody who, under normal conditions, refuses to get married, is committing a major offence in the eyes of society and people will be against him (Mbiti, 1991:104). The obligation to get married is the only means of human survival in the views of Africans, through marriage the effects of death are reduced and neutralized. While death continues to demolish life, marriage and childbearing keep ahead of it replacing and replenishing the human race. He concludes that through marriage and childbearing, human life preserved, propagated and perpetuated (Mbiti, 1991:106).

Consequently, a lot of people marry to have children or in a hope that they will carry on the family name. Marriage is the holy and legitimate way to bring children into this world. Children are the guarantee that the generations will continue. Although in today's society, it is no longer necessary for people to get married just because a baby is on the way. The stigma once attached to an unmarried pregnant woman has lessened although not gone completely in all societies. Still, there are some couples who feel that having children after they are married is the right way to progress with their relationship. Likewise, a young person may see getting married as a way out of the parent's home.

Marriage also serves as the primary economic unit. In primitive societies, able bodied adult will hunt and gather food and then feed the rest of the family. A partner earns money to support the others. According to Stark (1998:364):

Only in modern times have most people married for love. In the olden days most married for money and labour. It was an economic arrangement between families. How much land or wealth did the man have? How much dowry would the bride bring to her spouse? Emotional attachment was of no importance to parents in arranging marriages and neither the bride nor the groom expected emotional fulfilment from marriage.

This is portrayed in this saying; “Rich is the man whose wife is dead and horse alive” (Stark, 1998: 364). From the very beginning of the Christian church, marriage law and theology have been a major matter. The foundation of the tradition of Christian marriage has been the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul. Christians often marry for religious reasons ranging from following the biblical injunction for a “man to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one”. Christians believe that marriage is a gift from God, one that should not be taken for granted. It is the right atmosphere to engage in sexual relations and to build a family life and the church also teaches that God Himself is the author of the sacred institution of marriage, which is His way of showing love for those He created.

3. The Social Relevance of Marriage

Marriage provides for new social relationships to be established between the families and relatives involved (Mbiti, 1991:111). It puts the individual and his family on the social, religious and physical map of his community. Everyone recognizes that the individual is a full person when he or she is married and has children. In the words of Mbiti, marriage is one experience, without which a person is not considered to be complete, ‘perfect’, and truly a man or a woman. It makes a person really ‘somebody’. Without marriage a person is only a human being minus in the African view of man (Mbiti, 1991:112). A man and a woman create a positive energy which leads to fulfilment in all areas of their lives both in the physical and the spiritual. “Communication, intimacy and companionship are three of the big draws to a permanent relationship” (Hecht, 2012: 1). The warmth of knowing that someone cares and will be there to listen is a common pull to settle down and marry. Furthermore, people marry to get company that they would not get if they were single. Nobody wants to return to an empty home, which is what happens if one is not married. More so, marriage provides a safe avenue for sex, a way to guarantee regular access to sex. It serves as remedial way of preventing immorality and leads to the formation of a warm family relationship.

It is within a Christian home with both a mother and a father that children have the best opportunity to thrive. It is within the covenant of marriage that unconditional love can be experienced. A boyfriend or girlfriend can fake love to gain free sex, but when the marriage covenant is viewed as it should be it is unconditional (Fish, 2006:3).

Marriage creates room to care for others. It gives a sense of emotional security and personal worth. People tend to expect this from spouses and children. Being lonely could also play a huge factor in someone wanting to get married; some see it as a way of having a life- long companion or they fear having to grow old alone. To some extent, marriage confirms adult status. When one is not married especially in Africa, one is regarded as inexperienced and irresponsible. Marriage brings respect, self esteem and honour. Married women receive more attention and respect in their places of work and Church compared to unmarried ones.

Marriage offers companionship, faithful sexual partner, dependability, love, sharing mutual interests, pooling economic resources, social approval for “settling down” and becoming a part of something larger than self. In the present day, some people marry to satisfy emotional needs and there are people who marry for financial benefits.

Marry someone rich and you never have to worry about financial problems ever again. The man or woman will take good care of you, new car, caviar, seven star.... the famous lyrics a bit and make them a bit more contemporary. You never have to lift your little finger, and the price you pay for this luxurious living is largely physical, but seemingly, a good bargain (Kulkarni, 2010:2).

4. Causes of Late Marriage

Late marriage refers to a situation when a person who has reach the state of maturity in every facet of life (mentally, spiritually, financially and physically) is not married probably as a result of unavailability of spouse or some other factors. The problem of choosing “the right person” to marry can cause intense struggle and no little confusion in a young man and woman’s mind. This question of “the right one” comes particularly strongly

to those Christians who do not believe in divorce and who want to marry once. Many look at the unhappy marriages that exist all around them and wonder whether they can expect any better. They observed seemingly mismatched couples and worry about making the wrong choice. They witness abusive relationships and fear becoming victims of a poor choice.

Many youths do make mistake in selecting life partner and some of their mistakes are tragic. Very often, however, such mistakes are not the result of not finding the right person but result from other causes. Some adults routinely make the mistake of looking for and praying for the right person to come along while giving little or no attention to themselves being the right person for others. Some do not have good interpersonal relationship with people in their places of work or in the church. Some find it difficult to make some sacrifices, self-denial, that is necessary to keep friends and sustain relationships. Others do not give enough attention to their outward appearance and dressing.

Another reason for delay in marriage of some is because they have become so emotionally attached to their parents and find it difficult to break the home ties. There is the issue of career development and educational attainment which has become a major determinant in deciding when to marry. Delaying marriage, that is, pushing the age of marriage into the late thirties and higher is now an increasing trend in the society as a result of opportunity for career development especially among women. Also women liberation movements have created the awareness that there are so many things that can give a woman fulfilment other than marriage. The need for women to get involved in politics, decision – making and leadership at all levels both in the home, society, and the church as being campaigned by women liberationists has distracted a number of women from thinking or planning for marriage early. Meanwhile, some women see the inequality in the treatment of genders especially in African homes intolerable and decide to remain single.

Again most churches teach that God's intention must be sought for in marriage. Getting God's leading becomes the major prerequisite in knowing who to marry. Every expectant youth pray to God for His leading but many do not really understand how God leads and some have limited God's leading to vision, prophesy and dreams alone. So they wait endlessly to see vision or dream about the right man. This has caused a lot of confusion and delay for so many. Some men felt it is not easy to cope with woman and still please God hence they are reluctant to go into marriage.

The dysfunctional home life in which some young people are reared; Some past sad experiences with the opposite sex which many have had; unpleasant childhood experiences such as rape or child abuse; most of the times create fear in them and make it difficult for them to make friendship with opposite gender. There are some who never want to be burdened by any man or woman. They felt they own their lives and should maintain a status quo. "Singleness is an attractive option for such people for they do not want anyone depending heavily on them and also do not want to depend highly on anyone" {Schaefer, n.d:367}. Singleness offer certain freedoms that married couples may not enjoy. It also gives room for self sufficiency and change. Economic conditions in society that require greater numbers of women to work outside the home are creating new roles. As this has taken place women have increasingly entered the labour force and have discovered the benefits of having their own pay checks. "Women today are much more economically independent than they were in the past, so they do not need marriage as much to survive" (Constance, 2004: 4).

However there are some who are willing to get married but are having unexplained difficulty getting someone to marry. This is sometimes described as a spiritual problem. It is believed that such people have been cursed, maybe by man or spirits, for one reason or the other. Some are believed to have relationships with some invisible personalities (spiritual husbands or spiritual wives) and may not be able to get married in the physical realm until such relationships are broken through prayers and special deliverance sessions.

Again many people as a result of several disappointments sealed up their minds towards marriage. Broken courtship affected some people and it leads them to unplanned late marriage. Some are busy searching for a perfect partner. They are afraid of making wrong choices since divorce is not permitted in Christian faith. Some are delayed out of necessity. The structural changes in the economy have limited the options of many working class young people. Oladele (2012), a man of thirty four years lamented that marriage is not yet possible for him since he has no stable job to cater for his family. For him, the determinant factor to when he is to marry is availability of a stable and lucrative job. Schaefer (n.d: 367) observes that "one unmistakable pattern in mate selection is that the process appears to be taking longer today than in the past. A variety of factors, including concerns about financial security and personal independence has contributed to this delay in marriage."

Some fear the responsibilities that accompany marriage. For a young man, it means he must assume the responsibilities of caring for and providing for a wife and possibly children. For a woman, it means caring for

home and rearing children. Some as a result of the old wives tales about the dangers and difficulties of childbirth are frightened by the prospect of having children and therefore avoid marriage. Also commitment scares some people. While plenty are willing to live with their partners they do not feel able to walk down the aisle. Joining the list are those who had made fun of their youthful time due to lust and pride. They never believe that time wait for no man. Single life is very appealing lust to a lot of people, being married would rob them of this.

“Many single do not marry because they are in a geographical area where there is little opportunity to meet compatible mates. Singles sisters who attend small churches where there are not enough men, and are not willing to disobey God by marrying an unbeliever may face the possibility of living single life for a long time” (McDonald, 1994: 259). But the situation can also be difficult in a large church where there are many men and women to date. This is because female often outnumbered male. This makes the competition for husbands very stiff, so some young women will be unlucky to get husbands among the men.

Personal standard is another hindrance to early marriage. Some Christians set standards for themselves concerning who to marry. These standards when not achieved prevent many from getting the right spouse in time. There are some whose lateness is as a result of bad attitude. Pride, stubbornness, laziness and extravagant living are some of the bad attitudes that hinder some Christians from getting a good life partner they can settle with.

Over- spirituality is another factor of late marriage. Some Christians are over spiritual and consider love and marriage as sins. They are too zealous for the kingdom sake that they forget about settling down for marriage and by the time pressure started coming from various quarters such as: the church, family and peers, they would realize that they are already late. In addition to this, is what can be referred to as “canopy ministry.” This is a situation whereby a brother or sister pretends as if he is in courtship with a sister, giving everybody a wrong impression about the kind of relationship that exists between them. The brother will not propose to the sister but give her the impression that he is interested in her. The sister on her part will be enjoying the relationship, thinking she is into a relationship or that the brother will soon propose. This may go on for a long time while other men are being prevented from proposing to the sister due to the presence of the ‘canopy brother.’ This was viewed by Pastor Mrs. Ayo-Ola (2012) as a hindrance to early marriage for many sisters.

5. Stigmatization and Other Problems Associated with Late Marriage

In Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba, people tend to give respect to married people than those that are not. Married people are seen and treated as responsible people while the unmarried adults are viewed as either unserious or as having some problems. It is generally believed that it is abnormal for a man or a woman to still be single at thirty-five or worse still forty and above. People attribute their excesses in any area or their shortcomings to their being single. The younger ones who are married try as much as possible to avoid them; some older ones treat them with disgust while some always pity them. The situation is worse for the female single adults than the male. Even in the church setting, the manner of approaching the married ones is quite different from that of the unmarried ones irrespective of age. Inferiority complex is another challenge the matured singles face. In relating with their mates who are married, some feel inferior and tend to give unnecessary meaning to every occurrence. They experience self- pity and try to keep to themselves. There is also the tendency of being disrespected by the younger ones. Unmarried persons are also faced with the problem of discomfort of having to cope with friends who desire them to be married. The desire to see singles married is part of the cultural pressure that results from the high esteem given to the state of matrimony. Most time the pressures from friends are nothing but embarrassment to the single person.

Another problem unmarried adults sometimes faced in the church is in relating with couples. Many unmarried women have been harassed of illicit relationships by some wives who felt they are having intimate relationships with their husbands. Some of these single adults are given public disgrace while some are not trusted by the wives. This hurt innocent women who are just trying to develop godly relationships with the families. In so doing, many of the single adults have been limited in exercising their gifts and showing love to others in the church. This to them is to avoid being misunderstood.

As people age and want to marry, the double standard favours men. Aging women are often seen as “over the hill’ whereas aging men are often described as mature and distinguished. When a woman delayed marriage until she is thirty five, she must know that she is competing with women who are much younger. Older men most of the time prefers to marry younger women who they will be able to control than single adult women who are mostly financially independent and may not be so submissive. There is also a greater tendency, as one grows older to become choosier. Some women and some men as the case may be might discover they have fewer choices of marital partners because the most desirable people are already married.

Meanwhile Spencer viewed it that single women over thirty are brighter, better educated, healthier and happier than single men over thirty. Bachelors are worse off than spinsters in every way except salary. As long as women try to marry men better than themselves, the best women (on any scale that matters) will be precisely those who will lose out on the marriage market and enter the career market. There are as many gifted women as gifted men, but the men do not mind and some even prefer marrying their inferiors, but women are reared to prefer a man they can look up to. A single adult confronts the inaccurate view that he or she is always lonely, is a workaholic and is immature. These stereotypes help support the traditional assumption that to be truly happy and fulfilled, a person must get married and raise a family.

There is also the problem of risks of infertility and other pregnancy problems. Female age is very important in consideration of probability for conception. There is a slow decline in pregnancy rates when women are in the early thirties. This decline is more substantial at their late thirties and early forties. Few women over forty five years are still fertile. Most couples are devastated by infertility. For many women, becoming infertile is comparable to a large crisis, and she may have feelings of being a failure when she cannot conceive. To some women who delay marriage, infertility is not a concern because they plan to remain childless.

According to Putnam (2001) "delay in marriage also has social implications for the broader society. There will be decline in population, and political and social support." Starting from the church, the effect of this is seen. When there are many people experiencing delay in marriage in a church, there is likely to be low rate of population in the church.

6. Conclusion

Late marriage has its benefits; it gives one more time to serve God, provides more financial security, reduces divorce and gives freedom. However, late marriage means lateness in enjoying the benefits of marriage. This can cause depression, loneliness, problem of sexual temptation, tendency of infertility and reduction of population and stigmatization. There is need provide teaching on the advantages of good interpersonal relationship between the sexes, to improve on the teaching on marriage and make it more frequent, educate the youths about importance of singleness and how to handle it. Likewise the singles need to see their singleness as a gift from God. Both married and single are gifts from God. One is not morally better than the other, and both are valuable to accomplishing God's purpose. Sometimes, it is better to marry late than to rush into marriage without adequate preparation. There should be a special group for the singles where they will feel belonged and also be able to address their common needs in the church. Matured youths should not be in the same group with younger youths in the church. Counselling for single adults and special programmes that address their peculiar situation and afford them the opportunity of interacting with their age groups from different social background will go a long way in helping them to cope with their singleness without feeling awkward. There is need for a re-orientation among the youths to change their view about late marriage, emphasise the importance of adequate financial, spiritual, psychological and career development before marriage, the fact that late marriage or no marriage at all does not make one less human or less intelligent and that stigmatization of single adults will only polarise the society and do more damage to peaceful co-existence and hinder true fellowship among Christians.

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