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TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE SYSTEM AMONG THE YORUBÁ OF SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA: PANACEA FOR A STABLE HOME

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Abstract

This paper examines the role which Yorùbá traditional system of marriage plays in reducing cases of divorce (*dálémosú*) to the minimum if not totally eradicated. The paper focuses on the roles of the intermediary (*alárinà*), the oracle (*ifá/òrúnmilà*), and the parents (*òbí*) in ensuring a stable home. The paper observes that civilization and foreign ideas play a major role in the increasing rate of divorce in our present society. The paper concludes that as long as people ignore the roles of the intermediary (*Alárinà*), the oracle (*ifá/òrúnmilà*) and even the parents in marriage contract and as long as foreign cultures are allowed to dominate our highly cherished indigenous cultures, our society shall continue to experience divorce (*dálémosú*).

Keywords: Tradition, Marriage, Yorùbá, Divorce (*Dálémosú*).

1.1 Introduction

Marriage, no doubt, is one of the values cherished by the Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria. To them, a man commands respect and he is said to be responsible only when he is married and successfully takes care of his family. Such a person commands the people's respect. Today, however, the alarming rate at which married women pack out of their matrimonial homes to live permanently with their parents, (which the Yorùbá refer to as "*dálémosú*"), calls for serious concern. In most cases, children from such homes are denied adequate parental care, hence the tendency for such children to become nuisance to the society.

The traditional principle upon which the institution of marriage is founded is that the husband has the obligation to support a wife, and that a wife has the duty to support her husband to take care of the children. In the past, this meant that the husband has the duty to provide a safe house, and other necessities such as food and clothing for his household. A wife's obligation traditionally entailed maintaining the home. One of the attributes cherished in a man by the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria is to get married. To them, a married man is a 'responsible' person.

To the Yorùbá, marriage is a union not only of the two spouses but the two extended families to which they belong. Marriage is used as a proof that both spouses are good products and ambassadors of their families. By successfully going through demanding steps to the Yorùbá marriage, the spouses are a good reflection on the quality of character of their families.

A Yorùbá adage says '*àtigbéyàwó kò t'ẹ́jọ́, owó ọbẹ́ ló sòro*, meaning 'it is an easy thing to get married, but to provide food for the family is the difficult aspect'. This implies that when a man is married, he maintains a home (wife, children and even his parents). This gives him recognition in the society. This implies that marriage for the Yorùbá man or woman is a necessity. Fádipẹ (1991:65) notes:

For a man or a woman who has reached the age of marriage to remain single, is against the mores of the Yorùbá. Men get married even when they are sexually impotent in order to save either their faces or the faces of their immediate relatives, as well as to get one to look after their domestic establishment. There are a few cases of confirmed bachelors, men, who have reached middle age without getting married even though they are in position to do so. But they are a product of modern times with its individualism, and are most invariably Christians.

This implies that if a man is of marriage age and he refuses to get married, he is under looked, mocked and given different kinds of names such as: impotent (*òkóbó*), the horse in a book (*ẹşin inú iwé*), the toothless bulldog (*ajá tó lè gbó şugbón tí kò lè san*) and the likes and even ladies would be making jest of such a person. Therefore, as soon as a boy or a girl is approaching the marriage age, the parents begin to think of how to get him or her, a life partner (*adé orí*). This is the first step towards marriage in the Yorùbá tradition. It is called '*ifojúsóde*' and it is usually carried out by the groom-to-be parents.

By successfully going through the demanding steps to the Yorùbá marriage, the spouses have shown restraint as people who are well brought up, focused, enduring, reliable, disciplined and people ready for responsibilities of adulthood.

Another major reason behind marriage is because the Yorùbá people love kids so much. They attach so much importance to child-bearing after the wedding ceremony and count a marriage devoid of children as an unfruitful union. Hence, the sayings: '*ọmọ ní 'yì*' (a child is one's pride), '*ọmọ l'ẹyẹ*' (a child is one's beauty), '*ọmọ ní ìgbèyìn ọlà*' (a child is the end product of one's riches) and the likes. Although the trend has changed due to civilization, nevertheless, some aspects of this culture are unchanged, some still hold on to this act fully without repentance.

Quite a large number of marriages end up in divorce resulting in the wife leaving her husband's home to stay permanently with her parents. This is referred to as '*dálémosù*' among the Yorùbá. This situation is decried by the Yorùbá. However, if and when it happens, they have no option than to accept their daughter back into their domain because in the Yorùbá culture, marriage does not alienate a lady from her family. The blame has been severally put. Some blame the parents; some blame the couple, while others put the blame on civilization.

This paper examines the roles of Yorùbá traditional marriage system in maintaining a lasting family and avoiding what the Yorùbá call 'dálémosú', literally interpreted as divorce. Our emphasis is on the roles of the intermediary (*Alárinà*), the *ifa* oracle and the parents in the Yorùbá traditional marriage system. The discussion leads us to the conclusion that if these three stakeholders in the Yorùbá traditional marriage procedures are carefully and properly taken care of, such marriage is not likely to collapse.

2.1. Marriage: An overview

Marriage has been defined severally by writers and authors across the globe. A few of such definitions are the Merriam Webster's Dictionary which defines marriage as: "The state of being united as spouses in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law, the mutual relation of married persons: wedlock: the institution whereby individuals are joined in a marriage."

Kathleen (1968:5) defines marriage thus:

Marriage is a relationship established between a woman and one or more other persons, which provides a child born to the woman under circumstances not prohibited by the rules of relationship, is accorded full birth-status rights common to normal members of his society or social stratum.

Westermarck (1936) defines marriage as a more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of the offspring. Anold (1960) opines that marriage constitutes the most important of the transitions from one social category to another, because, for at least one of the spouses it involves a change of family clan, village or tribe, and sometimes the newly married couple even establishes residence in a new house. Gbádégèşin (2017:721) asserts: "Marriage in the imagination of the Yorùbá can be defined as that which brings two consenting adults, male and female together in mutual agreement to live their lives together as long as they want."

From the few definitions above, one can describe marriage as the agreement of two persons of the opposing sex to become husband and wife. It is a bond of matrimony, conjugal union, and espousement and so on. It is a contract made in due form of law, by which a free man and a free woman reciprocally engage to live together during their life time.

Marriage can be seen as a contract, a status or as a combination of both. Where it is seen as a contract, the refusal or inability of one spouse to perform the obligations stipulated in the contract may constitute a ground for divorce for the other spouse.

2.2 The Yorùbá traditional marriage system

Traditional marriage is a marriage conducted according to the native law and customs of the people. Gbádégeşin (2017:723) asserts, "Yorùbá system of marriage is primarily exogamous". meaning that incest is forbidden and prohibited. In traditional Yorùbá setup, marriage institution is founded on the principle that the husband has the duty of acting as a support to the wife, while the wife serves as a support to her husband. In the past, it was the duty of the husband to provide for the family in terms of feeding, clothing, safety and the likes, while the wife was saddled with the responsibility of maintaining the home.

The wedding ceremony is always a glamorous affair depending on how wealthy either or the two families involved are. Food is always surplus with palm wine. Music is always in excess and fun fair will fill the atmosphere both in the man's house and in the lady's house. Yorùbá courtship and marriage must be understood in the context of the impact of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods.

The family is the most sacred and significant institution to the Yorùbá, who are child-centered, ruled by the elderly and controlled by adults. The family is an effective unit of political control, religious affiliation, resource allocation and assurance of safety. It is also the most effective agent of socialization. The family teaches the first lesson in discipline, personal gratitude and affection.

The traditional Yorùbá marriage is an occasion to alleviate the drudgery of normal life and is greatly anticipated by friends and well-wishers. Though a serious affair, it is full of playfulness, rich contemporary Nigerian music, graceful colours and sumptuous meals. Weddings are occasions to show best outfits, handbags, jewelry and even dancing styles.

Yorùbá traditional wedding can come in two different forms. In the olden days, it is the parents who secured wives for their male children. As soon as a father who has a male child sees that his son is around five years of age, he will begin to look out for the family from which he can get a good girl who will be wife to his son and by the time he has gotten a family from which he cites a girl who can be the wife to his son, he will make known his intention to the parents of the girl and start acting like an in-law to the girl's parents and family.

At times, some parents make requests right from pregnancy stage that if a particular woman whom they like, gives birth to the pregnancy she is carrying, they will like to marry the child for their son if the baby happens to be a girl. This stage is referred to as '*ifojúsóde*', which simply means searching for the right person.

The other form is when a young man who is of marriage age sees a lady he likes, he does not go directly to meet the lady himself but instead, he uses another person referred to as an

intermediary (*Alárinà*), who mediates between him and the lady he likes. The mediator does all the necessary undercover work for this young man by stylishly introducing him to the lady (in the boy's absence) and appraising some good qualities in him just to stir up the interest of this boy in the heart of the lady. It is pertinent to note here that the intermediary (man or woman) used to be a neutral person to ensure there is no foul play.

Registry/court wedding is alien to Yorùbá culture. The duty of the intermediary, (*Alárinà*) commences after the boy or his parents have discovered a girl they liked. The major assignment of the intermediary (*Alárinà*) was to investigate into the family of the lady. The aim was to find out, the kind of person they are, the kind of history they have written, what the family is known for, and other enquiries. He would try to provide answers to these questions and many others. This is partly because according to the Yorùbá *'omọ burúkú dún ún fẹ̀ sùgbón àna burúkú ló sòro ó ní'* meaning 'it is easier (better) to marry a bad child, it is however worse to have a bad in-law'. Whatever results the intermediary brings (positive or negative), determines the final decision of the parents. If the parents are advised against contacting the marriage, they sparingly do otherwise. It is pertinent to note that the intermediary (*Alárinà*) was usually a neutral person who has no blood or any other form of relationship with either of the families. Therefore, the fear of partisan or foul play is removed. The intermediary neither charges money nor takes any ransom.

By the time the intermediary would have brought the lady and the boy into contact with each other and they are already in love, he withdraws, leaving other assignments to the parents. This is why the Yorùbá say *'b'ójú bá k'ojú, Alárinà a yèba'* meaning 'when the spouses know each other, the intermediary withdraws'. The thorough investigation embarked upon by the intermediary ensures that the spouses have made the right choice and the possibility of an everlasting union is very high. This implies that such action was to prevent the possibility of divorce.

As earlier mentioned, neither the parents nor the spouses disregarded the pronouncement of the '*Alárinà*'. If no negative information is found about the two families, then they can proceed to the next stage which is known as 'Parental investigation.' Parental investigation is basically concerned with consultation with some deities like *Ifá* or *Òrúnmìlà* to know whether the marital union of their children will be blissful or not. We would come back to this later in our discussion.

In the Yorùbá tradition, *ifá*, the oracle believed to be in charge of man's choice of destiny in heaven is consulted for direction on anything they wanted to do or any project they planned to embark on. The oracle is regarded as the custodian of man's destiny on earth. It is believed that every man knelt down before *Olódùmarè* to choose his or her destiny while *Òrúnmìlà*, (one of the primordial divinities) is believed to be the witness on the day of man's choice of destiny. Hence they referred him as *Elérif' ipín*.

Yorùbá believe that whatever destiny a man chose from heaven, is what he achieves on earth. Hence, the saying 'ipín ò gbébo, àyànmọ̀ ò gbòògùn, b'áa ti wá'yé wáá rí, bẹ̀ẹ̀ náà làá rí' meaning 'there is no going back on whatever destiny individuals chose from heaven'.

Today however, there are cases where parents do not have a say in their son's or daughter's marriage talk less of the involvement of an intermediary. The blame for this has been put severally. While some attribute it to the domination of foreign religion over traditional religions, others blame it on civilization and the promotion of foreign culture at the expense of traditional culture. Whichever is applicable, this situation, no doubt, is having devastating effects on the stability of many homes.

To prevent such happening, the Yorùbá will always consult the *Ifá* oracle before they embark on anything they desire to do and whatever the oracle says was final. If the deity approves of their relationship, they can now move to the next stage which is 'Giving consent', that is, agreeing to give their children to one another in marriage.

Yorùbá, like other cultures has its own requirements concerning the people who can marry one another. For instance, like most cultures of the world, the Yorùbá forbid marriage to one's child or grandchild, parent or grandparent, uncle or aunt, niece or nephew, including legitimate relatives and relatives of half-blood such as a half-brother, who has the same father but a different mother. Others prohibit marriage to a first cousin, in-law, stepparent or stepchild, the Yorùbá inclusive. The Yorùbá believe that flouting these rules can lead to a case of divorce.

Marriage among the Yorùbá undergo three different stages namely: the **introduction**, known as *mọ̀ mí n mọ̀ ọ̀*, literally meaning 'knowing one another formally'. When the two parents come to know each other, this involves few members of both families, **the engagement stage** known as *imàna* meaning 'knowing our in-laws' when the groom parents pay dowry and other financial and material demands. A larger crowd is involved. At this point, the man would be covenanting on the gifts he has to bring. This shows that he (the man), would take care of the woman.

These include *owó ori* (dowry), *owó isígá* (to open the packaged gifts brought by the bridegroom), *owó ikànlẹ̀kùn* (fees meant for unveiling the entrance), *owó ijókòò iyàwó* (given to elders in the groom's family), *owó isíjù iyàwó* (unveiling the bride's face), *owó Bàbá gbó* (for asking for the father's consent), *owó iyá gbó* (to ask for the mother's consent), *owó omọ ilẹ̀ lẹ̀kùnrin* (for all male children of the bride's family), *owó omọ ilẹ̀ lobinrin* (for all female children born into the bride's family), *owó iyàwó ilẹ̀* (for all women married into the bride's family), *owó ijókó àgbà* (reserved for elders in the bride's family), *owó alága ijókó* (reserved for the Master of

Ceremony) and others as may be demanded by the bride's family. Note that this demand varies from one family to another.

The third stage is **the marriage proper** which is accompanied with elaborate funfair. The bride dirge (*ẹkún iyàwó*), is an interesting part of the programme. At this stage, the bride would visit her family members chanting the family's praise poetry (*oríkì idílẹ́/iran*). They in-turn pray for the bride and give her both financial and material gifts. The belief in the efficacy of such prayers is very high.



Today however, the situation has changed. Yorùbá marriage forms have been influenced by Christian and Muslim marriage practices. In contemporary Yorùbá society, the modernized Yorùbá cling tenaciously to this outer form as a proof of loyalty to the original culture. Gbádéḡeṣin (2017: 727-728) observes:

Christian marriage ceremony is far more financially excessive in its display of wealth, especially by those who can afford it. Whereas the traditional Yorùbá wedding ceremony involved the use of extensively embroidered, locally woven fabric *òfi*, *agbádá dàńsíki* for the couple's attire, the Christian wedding ceremony involves buying suit for the husband and his best man, a wedding gown (usually white) with a veil for the bride and a specially made gown for the maid of honour.

What Gbádéḡeṣin is saying here is that socialization or civilization as one may wish to call it, has brought unprecedented changes to the marriage procedures in most African countries like Nigeria. This does not exclude the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria. Today, parents hardly have a say in their children marriages. Young people, males and females alike, now marry through chats on Whatsapp, Facebook, and the likes. Consultation with the oracle is seen as idolatry and so the voice of the oracle is disregarded, the groom's parents and family opinions are not respected. The result is likely to be divorce as we shall see later in this work.

2.3 Divorce in marriage

Divorce can be defined as termination or dissolution of marriage by dissolving the bonds of matrimony between married couples under the law of the people. This should not be mistaken for annulment which declares a marriage null and void. Divorce can be described as the cancelling or re-organizing of the legal duties and responsibilities of a marriage, thus, dissolving the bonds of matrimony between a married couple under the rule of law of the particular country or state.

In the Yorùbá culture, there is no provision for divorce except in an unavoidable situation. Divorce is ridiculous and the marriage procedures do not give room for it. So, once a woman is married to a man, she becomes the man's 'property' for life. Today however, the situation has changed completely. The sources of the change has been traced to: the new conflict in human

interaction that cannot be explained by Yorùbá tradition and secondly, the permanent effect of contact with the Western World expressed in such institutions as law, marriage, religion, education and public health services.

Since there is no permanent condition, divorce may be necessary at times, and it may even help to preserve and repair a marriage, especially when the reasons for divorce are not the most serious ones. Nevertheless, constraints can also serve the purpose of keeping us from jumping ship when leaks appear in our marriages. Keeshaw, discussing how she and her husband, Dung were able to halt their path to divorce says:

In a way, I don't think I've ever wanted to divorce. I'd say one of the biggest goals of my life, watching my parents' (failed marriage) was to build a good marriage, so a lot of that had to do with me saying that this is really important.

(from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divorce>). 27/3/2018.

Divorce actually protects and highlights the moral boundaries around marriage. There are circumstances and behaviours that clearly violate those boundaries. Individuals have the right to try to protect the moral boundaries of marriage to preserve the integrity and even sacred nature of such an important institution as marriage.

There is no doubt the fact that among the Yorùbá, marriage forms have been influenced by Christian and Muslim marriage practices in all the three phases even as the steps to Yorùbá marriage project a decidedly traditional outer form. Traditional Yorùbá courtship and marriage must be understood in the context of the impact of the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods.

Today, the procedure for divorce is like that of any other tribe. If they are legally married, they go to the court to seek dissolution of the marriage, but where they did not get married legally, the woman packs out of the man's house.

3.1 Why divorce?

Reasons for divorce have been put variously ranging from sexual incapability, lack of independence for one or both spouses to a personality clash and the likes. However, this may depend on the angle from which people see marriage. For instance, where marriage is seen as a contract, the refusal or inability of one spouse to perform the obligations stipulated in the contract may constitute a ground for divorce.

In the modern society, some people hold the view that marriage is just a game of chance, but a lot of research has identified various factors that are associated with a higher risk for divorce. It is observed that the risk level of divorce is higher in some people than others. Nevertheless, the following factors can be said to be responsible for divorce cases in our society today.

1. The spouse age:

It is observed that people who marry at tender age are open to higher risk of divorce. This is because maturity is very essential to issues concerning marriage. A matured person is likely to make better marriage decisions and handle the challenges of marriage than those who marry at teenager age. In the Yorùbá traditional society, the boy or the girl enter into marriage contract at much matured age of between twenty and twenty-five. Today, spouses contract marriage at the age of seventeen. Such people forget that maturity plays vital roles in marriage.

2. Virginity intact:

Related to this is the importance the Yorùbá attach to virginity intact of a lady. At her ripe age, the female child is exposed to close monitoring by the mother. The mother monitors her dealings with the male counterparts within the community. The mother monitors her regular monthly menstrual periods. She is also educated on the dangers of losing her virginity before marriage. Today, losing one's virginity before marriage is the order of the day. However, experience has shown that the end result in most cases is disastrous for the couple. Akínjógbin (2009:17) writes:

....Nítorí ìdí èyí, èbí kòòkan máa n tiraka láti rí i pé ọmọ tiwọn kò kẹrẹ. Òbí tí ó bá kọ ọmọ tirẹ dáadaa tí ọmọ sì gba ẹkọ yóó gba iyi láàrin àwùjọ. Èyí tí wọn kò bá kọ tàbí tí kò gba ẹkọ ní wọn n pè ní àbíkọ tàbí àkògà irú wọn a sì máa kó itijú bá ara wọn àti ẹbí wọn.

....for this reason, each family tries to ensure that their children are not found wanting. The family that trains her children and the children yield training are respected in the society. Those who are either not trained or fail to yield training subject themselves and their family to ridicule.

In Fálétí's written play entitled *Wọn rò pé wèrè ni*, the importance of virginity intact for a lady is clearly shown. In the play, Àyọká is said to be a virgin and this is what qualifies her for the money ritual which Ládépò is asked to make. She represents pureness. Ládépò and Àwáwù, his wife are just discussing how to get a virgin for the ritual when Àyọká enters to deliver her father's message to Ládépò as she usually does. Soon after Àyọká leaves, Àwáwù faces her husband and says:

Bí'fà bá wọlé tọni, bá ò bá mò íjẹ, fàa-faa nifà í lọ.....Ó dára! O ò wí pé o ò sẹgbé mò tẹlẹ, ohun tí wọn ní k'ó o mú wá lo sọ p'ó ò rí. Nnkan t'á a n wá lọ sí Àpàrà, a bá a ní párá. Kí ló tún kù?... Ó ti wọlé ọkọ ni tàbí kífẹ wúndiá? (o.i.60).

If you have an opportunity at your door step and you cannot seize it, such opportunity eludes you....It is alright! You do not say you are not interested in the membership of the group; the problem is how to get what you are asked to provide.

What we travel to 'Àpàrà' to get, we find it on our roof (pàrá). What else?.... Is she married or she is not a virgin? (p.60).

The fact that Àyòkà is still a virgin makes her a source of pride and joy to her parents and even to her community as a whole. It also makes people like Àwáwù jealous of her. In the same vein, maintaining one's virginity is believed to ensure the efficacy of medicines or charms. As earlier pointed out, virginity intact is one of the qualities the Yorùbá cherish in a new bride. Its loss before marriage is greeted with insults, disgrace and shame. Therefore, all parents want their daughters to maintain their virginities before marriage. In the Yorùbá culture, losing one's virginity before marriage is enough reason for divorce. The gift sent to the bride's family after the first sexual affairs between new couple where the bride is found to be virginity intact (full keg of palm wine and full packet of matches, signifying the fullness of the bride) testify to this. It is unfortunate that today, maintaining one's virginity before marriage is seen as 'an uncivilized act'.

3. Level of education:

Researchers have revealed that people with higher level of education have a lower chance of divorce. This implies that investing in education is a good way to build a foundation for a better marriage. However, experience has shown that this may not be so in all cases. In fact, some people believe that high level of education is a threat to ladies to uphold their marriage. The higher their level of education, the higher the possibility to divorce. Experience has shown that most highly educated ladies turn to be fanatical feminists who do not believe they should be under the control of any man. They equate themselves with their husbands.

4. Cohabiting before marriage:

Spouses who live together before marriage are exposed to a higher chance of divorce. However, this idea goes against the common belief that it is a good way to get to know each other better and prepare for marriage. We would like to state here that living together, though may be a way to get to know each other better, but other things about living together do not help, and even hurt your chance for a successful marriage. Some researchers are of the view that living together may hinder building a strong commitment to each other and the importance of marriage. It is also possible to live together and still not understand one another. This largely depends on the environment and the mode of life both spouse live. In Yorùbá tradition, a would-be wife didn't look into the spouse's eye talk less of living together in the same room. In contemporary society, such action is seen as 'uncivilized'.

5. Premarital childbearing and pregnancy:

The general opinion is that this is likely to increase the likelihood of future divorce. Investigations have revealed that in America, over one-third of children are born to parents who are

not married and a few of such parents eventually marry but most of them will separate before the child is of school age. This also has to do with lack of respect for the importance of virginity intact which the Yorùbá highly valued. Experience has shown that most marriages conducted under this condition eventually flop and result in divorce. However, in Yorùbá traditional practice, such practice was totally unethical and unacceptable. It soils the family name and no family would want this to happen to them.

6. **Less income:**

There is no doubt that having at least a modest income can help couples avoid stresses that can lead to divorce. If the couple's income cannot cater for the need of the family, especially among the Yorùbá who operate on extended family system, the couple may not be able to cope financially. If and when this happens, there is the possibility that it may result into divorce.

In the past, this problem was not well pronounced. Although the Yorùbá operate the polygamous family system, its purpose and operation differ from what operates in the contemporary Yorùbá society. Today, polygamy represents rivalry; backsliding, backbiting, witch hunting, treachery and the likes, which can lead to marriage divorce. It is worthy of note that in the past, money was not the ultimate. Parents' wishes override all other things and the fact that parents would have made enough findings before giving their consent would ensure the parents' support even if and whenever the daughter had any matrimonial problem.

7. **Parent's divorce:**

If a spouse experiences his or her parent's divorce, that may double his or her risk for divorce. Some people need to work even harder to make good marriage choices and to keep their marriage strong and happy. This kind of situation hardly happens in the past. Couples hardly divorce no matter how terrible the situation may be. However, when this happens, there is the tendency that the offspring of such marriage imbibes the same spirit. This is in line with the Yorùbá saying: *'òwú iyá gbòn ni ọmọ yóó ran'* meaning 'the child weaves the cotton spinned by the mother'.

8. **Insecurity:**

If one feels unsecured about himself or herself, he or she is more likely to become unhappy in his/her marriage. Today, quite a large number of the women feel unsecured for one reason or the other. This is not the case among the Yorùbá in the past. Despite the fact that they operate the polygamous system, their women are highly protected and secured.

9. **Period/Length of courtship:**

Yorùbá tradition respects long time courtship. The belief is that it allows for clear understanding of one another. In the past, the wife-to-be hardly looks at her spouse in the face no

matter the age difference. Today however, many brides do not respect their in-law's family members. The idea that parents and family members should not interfere in the couple's affairs is alien to the Yorùbá and this can threaten the survival of the home. In the Yorùbá tradition, when a lady marries a man, she marries the entire family of the man. As earlier stated, this is because in their tradition, marriage does not alienate the man or woman from his or her family. There is also the belief that no matter how versed the couple may be, they still need the experience of the elders to survive. This is in line with the Yorùbá saying: "*b'òṃọ̀dẹ̀ bá láṣọ̀ bí àgbà, kò lẹ̀ ní àkísà bí àgbà*", which literally means: 'no matter the experience of a teenager, it cannot be compared with that of the adult'.

Other reasons for divorce range from sexual harassment, incapability, lack of independence for one or both spouses, disability, desertion, domestic violence, alcoholism, emotional and physical abuse, workaholic, mid-life crisis, witchcraft, to mention a few. For instance, if a woman is suspected to be a witch, this may push the husband to divorce her. In a situation where the husband decides not to divorce, his family can take such decision on his behalf.

Whatever the case may be, researchers have identified the most common reasons people give for divorce as lack of commitment, too much argument, infidelity, marrying too young, unrealistic expectations, lack of equality in the relationship, lack of preparation for marriage and abuse.

Commitment according to Scott Stanley of the University of Denver is having a long-term view of the marriage which helps us not get overwhelmed by the problems and challenges day to day. According to him, it helps us to keep our eyes focused on the valued prize - a healthy, stable marriage, and work to get there.

We want to agree with Stanley's assertion because it takes two people to agree to be one. Except one is committed to his or her marriage oaths, situations will arise that could make someone to wish to opt out of marriage life. However, it is one thing to be committed: it is another to continue experiencing a bad taste of marriage life.

4.1 Effects of divorce

The consequences of divorce are many and varied. It is pertinent to note here that the children are the mostly affected. However, these effects are transferred to the larger society. In any divorced family, the parent-child relationship, which is very important to the child's upbringing, will be adversely affected. One should remember that the training of the child is the joint responsibility of the parents and the entire society. It however, begins at home. Parents form the

foundation and wherever this is lacking, the child faces the risk of being a drop out. This practice is common in our contemporary society unlike in the past when it was minimal.

Another notable effect of divorce is that financial support for the family is lost most times. The adult may be obligated to obtain additional work to maintain financial stability. This most often leads to a negative relationship between the parents and the child. The relationship may suffer due to lack of attention towards the child, as well as minimal parental supervision (Miller, 2003).

Psychologically, children from divorced homes are affected. This includes greater unhappiness, less satisfaction with life, weaker sense of personal control, anxiety, depression and greater use of mental health services. Amato et al (2001:900-921) assert that:

Children of divorced parents are also more likely to experience conflict in their own marriages and are more likely to experience divorce themselves. They are also more likely to be involved in short-term cohabiting in relationship which often dissolves before marriage.

Similarly, Arkes, Jeremy opines that Children began to be affected 2-4 years before the separation of divorce even occurs. This time is more detrimental for children than the actual divorce or separation.

Children from divorced homes mostly experience unhappiness; they are less satisfied with life situation, they have weaker sense of personal control, depression of all forms, non-sense of belonging and the like. They are also more likely to experience conflict in their own marriages, invariably; they are likely to experience divorce themselves. Apart from these, they are likely to be involved in short-term cohabiting relationship which often dissolves before marriage.

According to Nicholas Wall, former President of the Family Division of the British High Court, people think that post-separation parenting is easy-in fact, it is exceedingly difficult. He opines that the more intelligent the parents, the more intractable the dispute. He writes:

There is nothing worse for most children, than for their parents to denigrate each other. Separating parents rarely behave reasonably, although, they always believe that they are doing so, and that the other party is behaving unreasonably. (BBC News, 21/09/2010)

It should be noted here also that children are dependent on their parents even from the womb. Their only hope for survival is the mother who they expect to nourish them. The parents own the responsibility to care for their children's needs when they are born into the world and as they grow up. They expect that their parents should be capable of solving all emerging problems. However, divorce can shatter all these hopes of being fully secured under the parents.

It is also pertinent to note that the way children are affected by divorce varies. For instance, while a child below age three is not likely to know what is happening and they grow up with the

familiarity of their separated parents and would not be exposed to the parents' situation, the case is different for children of school age and above. For instance, a teenager going through puberty on top of divorce can feel like the end of the world has come.

Wolchik et al (2002) observe that children who have experienced a divorce have lower academic achievement than children from non-divorced families. This view is in line with Rodgers et al's (2001) view that children from divorced families may be less likely to attend college resulting in the discontinuation of their academic career. Children of divorced parents also achieve lower levels of socio-economic status, income, and wealth accumulation than children of continuously married parents.

Nonetheless, the followings are identified as part of spouse's actions that have negative effects on their children:

- It is detrimental for spouses to put their children in the middle of conflict. This includes actions such as asking children to carry messages between the parents.
- Grilling children about the other parent's activities and putting the other parent down in front of the children.
- Brain washing the child to cease their relationship with the other parent.
- Telling the children that the other parent does not love them.
- Teaching the child to cease their relationship with the other parent.
- Teaching the child to call another adult by a parental name in effort to replace the other parent
- Limiting communication between the child and the other parent, and
- Limiting quality time between the child and the other parent.

Finally, if evidence reveals that a parent is actively alienating the child from their other parent, their case for custody can be severely damaged. This implies that poorly managed conflict between parents increases children's risk of behaviour problems, depression, substance, abuse and dependence, poor social skills and poor academic performance.

5.1 Yorùbá traditional marriage system and divorce

As earlier explained, apart from the fact that Yorùbá parents do not wish their daughters a divorce, the procedure for getting a boy or girl married in Yorùbá culture does not give room for divorce either. To them, it is the worst thing that can happen to a married woman. It is an insult on the lady's family and a source of ridicule not only to the lady but to the entire family.

We have also mentioned the importance of the role of parents in the boy's/girl's marriage. The idea of the parents investigating into the family they want to marry, gives them complete

information about the family. No parent would like to marry from a 'bad' family. The reason behind such investigation is to secure a blissful future for their son or daughter.

The Yorùbá belief in the role of *ifá* oracle (*òrúnmìlà*) comes to play here. *Ifá* (*òrúnmìlà*) is believed to be one of the primordial divinities who partook in the creation work of the Creator (*Élédàà*). According to the belief, every man choose his/her destiny from heaven, *òrúnmìlà* was the divinity in charge of man's choice of destiny. *Òrúnmìlà* knows everything concerning what the life of a man would be. The belief is that *Òrúnmìlà* is the one who witnessed man's choice of destiny (*ẹlẹrìi ipín*). The oracle is referred to as *Akéré finú sọgbón, akọnilóràn bí iyèkan ẹni* meaning 'the tiny one with plenty of wisdom, the one who teaches like one's relation'. There is the belief that '*ifá*' does not tell lies. Hence they would not disobey whatever the oracle says.

Because '*ifá*' knows everything about man's destiny, the Yorùbá would not do anything without due consultation with '*ifá*' through an '*ifá*' priest. This includes the choice of a future partner, starting a new project, embarking on a new business. Even before a new born baby is named; they consult the oracle for guidance.

It is pertinent to note here that no parent or ward disobeyed the voice of the oracle as it is believed to be the voice of the Creator on earth. The oracle is believed to be an intermediary between man and his Creator. Therefore, for a marriage to last, they consult the oracle for clear direction. If the oracle prescribes a sacrifice to be made, they do so without hesitation.

It is unfortunate that today, things have changed. The introduction of foreign religions and the attendant civilization have drastically reduced this belief. Boys and girls now jump into the conclusion of marriage without any consultation even with the parents, let alone of the oracle which the new religions (Christianity and Islam) refer to as 'an idol'. Evidence however, abounds that this attitude is having devastating effects on the marriage life of many couples, hence the increase in the number of cases of divorce.

As earlier mentioned, it is not only the parents that investigate the other family, they also employ the services of a mediator/intermediary called "*Alárinà*", who is a neutral person who is in no way related to both families. He/she carries out his investigations without sentiment and he/she does not leave any stone unturned until a proper investigation is conducted. The outcome of the investigation determines whether the marriage will be conducted or not.

The intermediary/mediator is the one to find out what kind of persons are they in the family under investigation? What is their history like? What are they known for, good or bad? How do they treat their wives/husbands? Do they have any common ailment they are known for? and the likes. After the '*Alárinà*' has got a positive answer to all these questions, he arranges for the spouses to see themselves. The Yorùbá say: '*bí ojú bá kojú, Alárinà á yèba*', meaning 'after the

spouses have been brought together face to face, the intermediary withdraws.' It is only when this happens that the 'Alárinà' withdraws.

There is no doubt that this kind of investigation ensures that a spouse does not choose from a 'wrong' family more so when neither the parents nor the child would ignore the voice of the oracle or the result from the findings of the intermediary (*Alárinà*).

Today, most spouses do not believe in such consultations which the new religions they adopt describe as 'idol worship'. Aside the fact that they do not give room for investigation, they also do not give room for a reasonable period of courtship which would have allowed them to make some findings themselves. We have seen and we have heard of cases where the spouse courts for less than three months and the next thing is to get married. Experience has shown that most of such marriages end in divorce.

Another aspect of the Yorùbá tradition that can uphold a marriage is the issue of a lady being virginity intact before marriage. Yorùbá custom provides for representatives of the bride's family (usually two housewives) to accompany the bride to her husband's house. They are the ones to bring the result of the virginity test resulting from the first sexual intercourse between the couple to the notice of the wife's family.

Any lady who passed the test and even her family were presented with special gifts. They also sent the blood-stained cloth of the 'ibálé' (virginity test), a full keg of palm wine, a full case of matches, all indicating the fullness of the lady to the family. This is celebrated with elaborate fun fare. On the other hand, a lady who is found not to be virginal intact brings insult and disgrace to her family. They are given bad names and this may result into divorce.

The case is different today. Couples to be, live together long before marriage. In this situation, the lady is tempted to lose her virginity. This accounts for why today, virginity intact means lack of civilization. Most men give this as a condition for marrying a lady, whereas in the past, it is enough reason to seek for divorce. The husband's family can insist they do not approve of such a lady. Hence, they can put pressure on the man to seek for divorce.

Further still, in the Yorùbá culture and tradition, a woman is married not only to her husband, but also to the entire husband's family. She is under obligation to respect every member of her husband's family including the extended family. The tradition makes it mandatory for the woman to respect any child born within the husband's family before she came into the family. No wonder, she finds a nick name such as: 'idí ilèkè', (bottom of beads), 'ojú lóge' (the face is the beauty), 'ibàdí àrán' (bottom which 'àrán' cloth fits), 'awéléwà' (the tiny but beautiful), 'òpéléngé' (the slender one), 'kòkòrò' (insect) for somebody who can dance very well, and many others for a female child, while the male is given names such as: 'ọkọ iyàwó' (husband of the bride), 'eyín afẹ

(ceremonial teeth), *'eyínménugún'* (the teeth make the mouth straight), and a host of others. Most of the nick names are based on the physical appearance of the person so nick named.

There is no doubt the fact that this system, apart from maintaining the tradition of the people, it accords the wife the love and respect of her husband's family members which will no doubt ensure a lasting and successful marriage. The situation today where a wife feels because she is older than the person to be respected or because she feels that method is archaic, obsolete, old-fashioned or uncivilized, is likely to increase the rate of divorce in our society. This will certainly increase the number of broken homes, the effects of which are disastrous for the society.

The Yorùbá say *'kí a se é bí wón tí í se é, kí ó baà lè rí bí tii rí'*, meaning 'we should do it the way it is normally done so that the result will be as it used to be.' In the Yorùbá tradition, the family has greater influence on the marriage of their siblings. A situation where a wife would perceive her husband's family as intruders or pokenosers and she react negatively to the tradition may eventually lead to divorce.

In addition to the above, adultery may cause divorce. In the Yorùbá tradition, the saying: *'a kii mọ ọkọ ọmọ kí a tún mọ àlè rẹ'*, meaning 'you do not know a lady's husband at the same time, know her concubine', is paramount in their belief. Yorùbá depict adultery and they illustrate this in several of their oral literature. For example in the Yorùbá folk story entitled *'àgbò gbewé mi jẹ'* meaning 'sheep take my leaf and eat', an adulterous woman who had sex with another man when the husband was away for a while was taken to the family's shrine to swear and because she was guilty, she was destroyed there at the shrine.

The Yorùbá say *'báyíí ní a n se ní ilée wa, èèwọ ibòmíran ní'*, which literally means 'what is acceptable in one family is forbidden in another family'. It will be a wise decision for a wife to cooperate and uphold the tradition of her husband's family. This is one of the areas where the roles of *'Alárinà'* (intermediary/mediator) functions very well. The *'alárinà'* would have given the wife this knowledge even before she goes into marriage.

Age is another factor that encourages divorce. The Yorùbá are known to embrace the practice of polygamy. This is a marriage practice which includes more than two partners. In the present day society, boys and girls marry at tender age and because they lack experience, their marriage crashes within a very short time. Most spouses of nowadays undergo church or mosque wedding where parents are openly warned not to interfere in their activities. Many women capitalise on this and deny the husband's parents, access to their domains. This action most times boomerangs and they are ejected from their matrimonial homes.

Another area of interest is the influence of foreign religions on the tradition of the Yorùbá people in general. Ògúnṣínà (1995:299), using Ládélé's *Ìgbà ló dé*, explains how the introduction of colonial rule has eroded the powers of the king. He writes:

The colonial masters have seized power from him and he lived in morbid fear of the "Ajélè". He is often filled with a deep sense of uncertainty and insecurity. Whenever the "Ajélè" visits "Ògbojò", there is always one problem or the other.

This is just one of the examples that the negative incursion of colonialism has thrown the entire Yorùbá traditional politics into disrepute. Adéyemí (2008:118) also agrees that there has been a conspicuous drift from moral accountability to moral degeneration in the Yorùbá society traceable to colonialism, modernization, western philosophy and life-style.

In like manner, Akínjógbin, (2009:20-24) asserts that the influx of foreigners from different parts of the world to Yorùbá land punctured her ethical principles. New religions, new system of education and politics, new trade and professions different from those of the pre-colonial era has emerged. This implies that the advent of foreigners marks the beginning of a new orientation not only in politics, economic and social life, but also in the ethical principles of the people. Following Longnore, Awóniyi (1975:365) writes: "If a man does away with his traditional way of living, and throws away his good customs, he had better first make certain that he has something of value to replace them."

It is doubtful however, if Africans in general and the Yorùbá society in particular are conscious of this fact. Sadly today, we have lost almost all the good customs but it is doubtful if the ones we have acquired to replace them have the proper value. Ògúndèjì and Àkàngbé (2009:5) state:

Though there could not but be some changes and modifications to the traditional systems in the modern context, the changes and modifications should be guided so that the good aspects of it that has to do with the sole existence of the Yorùbá as a people will not be eroded.

From the above, it is evident that culture plays a vital role in the achievements of a people or a nation. A people that dump her culture for a foreign one are not likely to have headway in the areas of politics, economy and social advancement. This implies that no nation can prosper on false pretense. Bánjò (2009:135) opines: "Indiscriminate cultural borrowing may produce deleterious effects and the degree of impersonality which results from lack of diverse cultures may subtly encourage disloyalty to one's own culture, when little is done to reinforce that culture."

Going by this assertions, it is evident that the cases of '*dálémosu*' (divorce) is a self-inflicted injury on the society, especially among the Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria. The

Yorùbá culture does not give room for divorce and except we imbibe the idea of promoting the indigenous culture, couples may continue to experience matrimonial problems.

5.2 Conclusion and recommendations

The focus of this paper is to examine the roles the Yorùbá traditional marriage system could play in reducing the rate of divorce in our society. The paper examines the procedure for getting married in the Yorùbá cultural setting. This procedure if jealously followed will ensure a long lasting and stable home.

The paper recommends that people should not discard their tradition more so if we realize that one of the effects of divorce is broken home and most children from broken homes become nuisance to the society. This is why it is necessary to do everything possible to prevent the occurrence of divorce in our various families.

The paper also recommends that all stakeholders in the issues of marriage, the spouses, the parents, diviners, the intermediary (*alárinà*), whose roles are very important in ensuring a lasting marriage deal, should be allowed to play their parts. We should stop allowing colonialism and its attendant civilization to control our ways of living because the effects are devastating most times. This is not to say that we should not borrow from other cultures because no culture is static, but not at the detriment of our own culture.

Divorce as a 'disease' is detrimental to the development of any society and it is having its toll on the growth and development of our society because as earlier stated, most children from divorced families end up being a nuisance (menace) to the society. It is certain that as long as we allow colonization to dominate our ways of life, the society will be breeding thugs, hoodlums, school drop outs and the like.

The roles of the intermediary (*Alárinà*) in the Yorùbá traditional marriage system, which ensures that both families are reliable and responsible, go a long way in ensuring a stable and lasting relationship between spouses and their families.

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